



New York Stories: Danny Meyer (3/5/20)

00:00:26 Alice M. Greenwald: Good evening, everyone. My name is Alice Greenwald, and I'm president and C.E.O. of the 9/11 Memorial & Museum, and it is my distinct pleasure to welcome you this evening to a very special public program, the latest in our "New York Stories" series. As always, I'm delighted to see our museum members here with us.

00:00:47 Tonight, we are thrilled to be joined by celebrated restaurateur and longtime friend of the museum Danny Meyer. Born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri, Danny grew up in a family that relished-- no surprise here-- great food and hospitality. Thanks to his father's travel business, Danny spent much of his childhood visiting, and eating in, far-off places, sowing the seeds for his future passion. In 1985, at the age of 27, Danny opened his first restaurant, the amazing Union Square Cafe, launching what would become a lifelong career in hospitality.

00:01:28 More than three decades later, Danny's Union Square Hospitality Group comprises some of New York's most beloved and most acclaimed restaurants, including Shake Shack, Gramercy Tavern, The Modern, Manhatta, and many more. I have to add that we had the great good fortune to hold our annual staff celebration for the Memorial & Museum event this year at Manhatta. And we did that in January, and I just have to say the food, the views 60 floors up, the hospitality, were truly extraordinary. And if you have yet to go, I highly recommend it, and Danny did not pay me for that endorsement.

(laughter)

- 00:02:13 Alice M. Greenwald: In addition to catering and event services, Union Square Hospitality Group also offers operational consulting and food service solutions for public and private institutions-- including, of course, the food and beverage service right here in our own museum café, just outside the doors of this auditorium.
- 00:02:32 Under Danny's leadership, the company is renowned not only for its acclaimed restaurants, but also for its distinctive and celebrated culture of enlightened hospitality. This guiding principle of prioritizing employees has shaped USG's ongoing evolution from a small group of restaurants into a multi-faceted hospitality organization.
- 00:02:56 Together, Danny and USHG restaurants have been awarded three Michelin stars and an unprecedented 28 James Beard Awards, including Outstanding Restaurateur and Who's Who to Food and Beverage in America. The company, I think, even as importantly, also commits itself to caring for the communities in which it works. It supports local hunger relief initiatives, such as Share Our Strength and City Harvest, as well civic organizations and efforts to maintain and beautify the urban environment.
- 00:03:32 Tonight, we are privileged to have Danny here to share his own 9/11 story as both a New York City resident and business owner, and to reflect on the impact 9/11 has had on this city, as well as the hospitality industry itself. So with that, and without further ado, please join me in welcoming Danny Meyer in conversation with our executive vice president and deputy director for museum programs, Cliff Chanin.
- (applause)
- 00:04:05 Clifford Chanin: I've never said this before the beginning of a program. I'm already having a good time and we haven't even started yet.
- (laughter)

Clifford Chanin: So thank you. Um, thank you, everybody for being here. Thank you, Alice. In our "New York Stories" programs over the years-- Danny, you're now joining the ranks of Henry Kissinger and Joe Torre...

Danny Meyer (imitating Kissinger): I'm very glad about that.

Clifford Chanin: ...and Sonia Sotomayor, and, um, Bernie Williams, and Preet Bharara. So you are in very distinguished company and we're thrilled to have you.

(Meyer speaks indistinctly)

Clifford Chanin: I'm sorry?

00:04:37

Danny Meyer: You've been at every one, so...

Clifford Chanin: I've been at every one. They can't get rid of me somehow. They keep trying, but here I am. Now, the one question I think everybody wants to know the answer to is, how often do you eat out at night?

(laughter)

Danny Meyer: Usually only once a night, but...

(laughter)

Danny Meyer: You'd be surprised, when I travel, I can often fit in about three restaurants, because I'm trying to... I don't ever like to waste an

opportunity to learn, and that's how I learn about people. I don't think that's what you were asking, but... How many nights a week, is that what you meant?

Clifford Chanin: Well, both, actually, yeah.

00L05:09

Danny Meyer: All right, you got your answer.

(laughter)

Clifford Chanin: And I'm very curious, because it is noted in your biography when you talk about it, that your experience of food and hospitality began very, very young. You had the opportunity to travel. But I wanted to know if there was a particular experience that at whatever early age was especially memorable for you and set you on the course that you would later follow. Was it a meal? Was it a restaurant experience? Was it a trip? Was there something specific?

00:05:39

Danny Meyer: Well, it was every meal. It literally was every meal. There was a point when I could remember every meal of my entire life, whether it was at home, or at restaurants in St. Louis-- and the food was usually not that great. But it didn't matter, because I just liked it. I liked... I liked the way we were treated, and that, without even knowing it, had a lot to do with my interest in hospitality. Especially, I think, after moving to New York in my 20s, and what I found really fascinating was, the food was way better here, but the people weren't as nice.

(laughter)

00:06:13

Danny Meyer: And, no, it was almost as if the restaurants that charged the most money, and that were hardest to get into, were the ones that treated you the worst. It didn't make sense to me, and that led to Union Square Cafe. But I'd say that the travel, to this day, and always was when

I was a kid, was an opportunity to learn about people and places based on how they ate.

00:06:35 And sometimes that was in restaurants, sometimes it was going to outdoor markets, sometimes it was going to, you know, a park café in Paris, which actually was in my mind before Shake Shack, was, why didn't we have that kind of thing in New York City? But I think the first time that I really just etched a food memory that you're asking about was at the age of seven, when my whole family...

00:07:04 My dad was a travel agent and was in the travel business, and we took a trip to Paris. I was seven years old, and I remember the smell of the baguette. I remember the taste of the mustard, the taste of the quiche Lorraine, the fraises des bois, the crème fraîche, all these things that... We certainly didn't have anything like that in St. Louis.

00:07:28 And, you know, the... What I really remember more than anything is how exciting it is to discover something for the first time. Not just food-- anything. And it's not that great things aren't... Sometimes they get better over time. But, um, the first time you get to try a food and you associate it with a place... And back then, place was everything. 'Cause if you loved the butter from Normandy, you couldn't get that in America-- you couldn't get it in St. Louis, probably couldn't get it in America. So you had to go to that place to get those things.

00:08:03 And, and then I also remember being 12, and going to, to Rome for the first time, to Italy, for my birthday. And... That meal-- six courses of pasta and... flavors I had never had are... You know, the waiters passing trays of antipasto, and, you know, roast zucchini and eggplant and... salami. Mm! Good stuff.

(laughter)

Clifford Chanin: Yeah, yeah, yeah, no, it's, it's, um... And it seems to have obviously stuck with you.

Danny Meyer: Yup.

00:08:36

Clifford Chanin: Are you...

(laughter)

Danny Meyer: That's for sure.

Clifford Chanin: See, that, you... you can't get away with that. I'm looking at you here, so... But, but is that always in your mind, those initial experience, those formative experiences? Is that what you think shaped how you went about creating the restaurants that you did?

Danny Meyer: I'm not done yet.

Clifford Chanin: More food.

Danny Meyer: So let's keep it in the present tense.

Clifford Chanin: Yeah.

00:08:58

Danny Meyer: I do... I do think that, um... What I've always loved doing is to go into my own taste memory bank, and taste memory is completely connected to emotional memory. Because who you were with, what you were feeling, where you were, has so much to do with the taste itself. You've all heard the expression, "A hot dog always tastes better at the ballpark," and, you know, you know, there's some white wine that you

had on the beautiful sea coast of Italy, and it was the most romantic dinner of all time. And you buy the same bottle here in New York, it's not all that good, really.

(laughter)

00:09:39

Danny Meyer: So what I like to do is to go through my memory-- my emotional and taste memory-- and every now and then, you know, I think innovation isn't about inventing anything. It's about connecting dots so that you've got all this stuff here and in here, and you just find the right moment to connect that with what's going on right now. Um... and that's... there's only one restaurant that I-- I think, I'll have to think about this-- but I think I've only opened one restaurant in my entire career where it didn't actually connect to my own taste memories.

00:10:18

Clifford Chanin: Which one was that?

Danny Meyer: And that was a restaurant that we opened in 1998 called Tabla, which I loved. It was... it was around for about 12 years or so.

Clifford Chanin: It was a wonderful restaurant.

Danny Meyer: It was, and that restaurant, that was the year where we had the opportunity to open two restaurants side-by-side. One was 11 Madison Park. And next door was Tabla. And 11 Madison was the one that I really could see, even though I didn't see it the right way, at the beginning. We had to open two restaurants because there was a dividing wall, which was in a landmark building-- couldn't take the wall down. And so we needed an idea for the second restaurant.

00:11:00

And at that time, our chef at Union Square Cafe, whose name is Michael Romano, had fallen in love with-- for really, for the previous three years-- everything Indian. He had become vegetarian. He was using Indian spices

in at least half the dishes at Union Square Cafe. He had a guru. He had an Indian girlfriend. And all of a sudden, I'm looking at our, you know, too-big wine cellar at Union Square Cafe, and none of our wines went with his food anymore.

(Chanin laughs)

00:11:33

Danny Meyer: And I said, "Michael, we have to kind of, like, extract the Indian flavors, but let's do a restaurant..." But that was his memories, and his taste, and I got excited about it, because I've loved Indian food myself. But I didn't like how I felt after eating in Indian restaurants in New York. And so we just challenged it and we said, "Well, whoever wrote the rule that just 'cause you're using those spices, you have to use cream and butter, and... You don't. And who said, whoever wrote the rule you can't use Greenmarket ingredients with that? And whoever wrote the rule that the music has to be a certain style, and you can't have great cocktails, and the wine list can't be amazing?" And all of a sudden, Tabla happened. But that was the one that did not come from my personal experience.

00:12:24

Clifford Chanin: And each one-- and many of us here have been to many of them...

Danny Meyer: But I do-- I'm sorry, I wasn't gonna go here, but...

Clifford Chanin: Please.

Danny Meyer: The one part that did come from my personal experience, because I think the day that I actually decided to talk to Michael about doing this restaurant-- and this was before we had met our chef Floyd Cardoz, who is from Goa-- um, was a day that I took my then-four-year-old daughter, who's now opened an ice cream store in New York, but she was four, and I took her to a Young People's Concert at the, at the Met Museum.

00:13:05 And there was a tabla drum player, and I hadn't heard much table music in my life. And he's playing the tabla, and he's teaching the kids what they are and how they work, and they're very, very musical. And as he's explaining the table drums, he does two things: He brings out a clarinetist to play with him, and the clarinetist starts playing jazz, while he's playing the table drums.

00:13:35 So it's the first time I had ever heard that musical drum in the context of American music. And then he started playing some Beatles songs that used the tabla drum. And I went... (snaps fingers) that's it. We want to, I want to do culinarily what he was doing musically, which is to pair American and Western flavors and sounds and, you know, restaurant style, with those flavors and that became Tabla.

00:14:05 Clifford Chanin: Well, it was, I remember very well sitting at the bar and having various meals or snacks there, and it was exactly that. It was exactly that. But it felt authentic, and it also felt like a mix of things that... that were a wonderful combination.

Danny Meyer: But that's an example of what I'm saying, is that the idea, the memory, has to find the spark in the context. So Madison Square Park provided the context, first for a hot dog cart, and then for digging in and saying, you know, when I was 16 and I got my driver's license in St. Louis, what did we do? We got out of the house. And where do you go? You don't go to the library, even though you say you went to the library.

(laughter)

00:14:43 Danny Meyer: You would find a parking lot and the park... the best parking lots were the ones connected to burger joints, or frozen custard, milkshake joints, where you could find your friends. And so New York doesn't have a driving culture. We don't have parking lots, but we have parks. And so that context provided the spark to go into my taste memory and say, "I loved frozen custard. I loved smashed burgers. I loved crinkle-cut fries. Why not do that and try to do it even better?" Even better than I remembered it, and that's the goal.

00:15:17 Clifford Chanin: And so that became Shake Shack.

Danny Meyer: That became Shake Shack.

Clifford Chanin: Now, you know, you are from St. Louis, you're a Midwesterner. As a New Yorker, perhaps, I'm allowed to say you have a certain Midwestern style still, after all these years here.

Danny Meyer: Aw, shucks.

(laughter)

00:15:33 Clifford Chanin: But you've become a New Yorker. And, and what is that like to combine those two things? You're obviously here. You've built your business here. You committed to the city, and we'll talk about that moment of crisis, when the commitment was really manifested so clearly. But what does that mix in you, do you think?

Danny Meyer: Well, I think, um... I think if I were-- I won't do this right now, so don't worry-- but if I were to ask this crowd to raise your hand if you were not born in New York City, I bet we'd see a lot of hands go up. And I think-- see, a lot of people nodding. Let's have some fun. Raise your hand...

(laughter)

00:16:08 Danny Meyer: Look, so I'm no... I'm nothing special in here whatsoever. And I think what is special is New York. New York is an amazing human experiment. First of all, no one's... no one lives here by accident. It's too damn expensive and too damn...

(laughter)

Danny Meyer: It's just challenging. So you're here because there's something that you self-selected into about this mix of humanity and sights and sounds, and smells and... and different cultures coming together who, who live very closely to one another. You know, we don't have supermarkets the size of Texas, or, you know, other... we do everything like this, and people obviously like that. So I don't really think I'm that special.

00:16:55

Someone once told me that you truly become a New Yorker when you give up the notion of moving back to where you really came from. And it probably took me... I didn't intend to live here for more than a year. In fact, the first, first night I was here was the night John Lennon was assassinated. And that one night made me say, "Maybe you shouldn't even be here for a whole year." And I got mugged my first year. This was 1981. My apartment was broken into at least three times, just like everyone in this room back in those days.

Clifford Chanin: Yeah.

Danny Meyer: Can you believe people would break into a car to get a cassette tape recorder?

(laughter)

00:17:35

Danny Meyer: You can have it-- I don't want it, um... So look, I, I think that, as I said earlier, it did feel different coming east back in those days, just 'cause I hadn't lived here before, and New York was not a very friendly place back then. It... all the things I just told you were... It just wasn't safe. It didn't feel safe. It didn't feel friendly.

00:18:03 That would provide the opportunity for a place like Union Square Cafe. Um... because the really, really good restaurants, "le" this, "la" that, "il" this, that's what they all-- all the good restaurants started with that. They just weren't that nice to you. The food was pretty good, but they just weren't that nice.

00:18:26 And so... I got a stinging review within, like, the second year Union Square Cafe opened. To this day, I'll-- actually, two stinging reviews. In one, I got a dot, which was one less than zero stars.

(laughter)

Danny Meyer: From a... from a restaurant newsletter saying the, "the otherwise"-- I've etched to my mind...

(laughter)

Danny Meyer: "The otherwise affable young owner can't keep his hands out of his hair, and the only good thing about that is that he's not the cook making all that mediocre food."

(laughter)

00:19:05 Danny Meyer: So that was one, and then the other one was, there was a... a short-lived magazine, happily, called "Seven Days." Does anyone remember "Seven Days"?

Clifford Chanin: I do, I remember "Seven Days."

Danny Meyer: And they had a column called "The Restaurant Rotator," and the, the rotator was a woman who rotated through the restaurants of New York.

00:19:26 And she... she said that, um... The food was pretty good by this point. I think we were two years old, three years old, so the food was pretty good. But the waiters... "The owner has assembled a cast of 'Stepford Wives' to be the waiters and waitresses." And I didn't even know what that meant, because I hadn't seen the film or read the book. Um... And basically, she was saying that, that it was fake, that being nice to you was fake.

00:19:57 And I found that deeply hurtful, because everyone was just... We were hiring nice people who were just being themselves. But that was so different for New York that they assumed something must be wrong with it.

Clifford Chanin (laughing): Yes...

(laughter)

Clifford Chanin: That makes a lot of sense to me, as a native New Yorker, but, you know, it... Whatever the difficulties at the beginning, Union Square Cafe in its original incarnation, and then in its new incarnation, became an institution here. It became a New York institution. So whatever it took, you got to a point where the New Yorkers were coming there as their place... Particularly the publishing industry in those days, for lunch, in particular, was-- that was the Union Square Cafe.

00:20:36 Danny Meyer: Yeah, that was great. It was, you know, the first ten years of my career, I had only one restaurant. So those were my formative years, and I was at the front door every single day, and it truly... I wanted to make it the most inclusive club that any restaurant had ever been.

00:20:55 So yeah, it was true that on any given lunch, everyone at the bar was someone who was there almost every day. In the dining room, at least 40% of the guests were there every single day, on their very table. And, you know, it would be fun when you'd have two people who'd claim the same table on the same day.

(Chanin laughs)

00:21:19 Danny Meyer: But it was great-- it was great. And you're right, it was the publishing industry, and the publishing industry is great, 'cause all they did was entertain. The agents entertained the publishers. The publishers entertained the authors. They also entertain the media. Everybody was, was just eating there constantly, and I had so much fun figuring out how to seat the dining room in a way that you would have a, um... a "per chance" meeting with someone in your industry.

00:21:52 So if I knew there were three food writers, they would mysteriously run into each other at Union Square, and they would then all go, "This is where all the food people eat." Or, "This is where all the...", you know, "the novelists eat. This is where all the poets eat." We got that refined, and this was before we had things like OpenTable or Resy.

00:22:12 Clifford Chanin: Fantastic. Well, we come then, to, you know, the moment of, you know, greatest ordeal for New Yorkers-- September 11. And, uh, it starts as a personal story for you, but then it becomes an industry, a citywide story for you. But go back to the day, if you would, and where you were, what you were doing. And let's begin with your awareness of the attack as it happened.

00:22:38 Danny Meyer: So, um... Yeah, at this... At this point, we had, um... We had four kids, and the oldest one was six. And then we had a couple that... twins who were almost four, and then a little baby after that. And 9/11... uh... was... Well, I think we all remember... The night before was the most pouring rain you can ever imagine. And the reason I remember that is, I had been at my great-uncle's funeral in Chicago, and a four-hour

delay getting back because everything was—the terminals were all shut down.

00:23:29 It was like a monsoon. And then, of course, 9/11 was the most gorgeous morning ever. And I remember very well, this was the first day of nursery school for my daughter. And, uh, I was taking her to, to nursery school, where she would spend an hour and a half for that first day. And as we're walking down Fifth Avenue-- Fifth Avenue and 12th Street was her nursery school-- um, I heard a really, really, really loud airplane. Of course, my mind just said, "That's a loud airplane, isn't it?" Actually, I said that out loud to my daughter, and we went upstairs-- that was it-- we went upstairs.

00:24:12 20 minutes later, I left. Um, she was good, and I went to the Citibank to get some money out of the ATM. And as I'm at the ATM, I hear a woman run in and say, "Oh, my gosh, a little plane just hit the World Trade Center." And still, my mind didn't make a connection that that thing I heard 20 minutes earlier was plane number one. And when I leapt to go look out the window, I could see that, yes, a plane had hit the World Trade Center, but I assumed it was the plane that the woman just said. I didn't know there were two.

00:24:59 And at this point, I certainly didn't think it was terrorism. Just didn't occur to me, because we had... We had actually had something in Midtown at... with a little, you know, baby private plane. So I try to call home on my cell phone to ask, tell my wife to look out the window-- she was with two of our kids-- and couldn't get through. There was nothing doing. And then I tried a payphone, and it wasn't working.

00:25:30 So at this point, I decided just to... Instead of going to work, I would just go home. So I ran home, and as I got home, on the TV was CNN, and a plane has just hit the Pentagon. And I go, "Shit, this is..." I finally got it. And that was the first time I learned that there had been two planes. And that was the first time I put two and two together. And my wife said, "You should really go get Gretchen at school at this point."

- 00:26:08 So I run back down through Union Square, through the Greenmarket... No-- yeah, there was a Greenmarket on that morning. And, uh... as... And I'm on my way to 12th Street, and as I'm in Union Square, I see the whole World Trade Center collapsing. And I run to the school. All the kids have now been sent home. They told me where my daughter was. She was at someone's home on Seventh Avenue.
- 00:26:40 So now I run to Seventh Avenue. The ambulances are already screaming up and down Seventh Avenue, and get my daughter. We see the second one come down. And then I just held her as tightly as I could, and I wasn't thinking about anything. We saw people on the street who we knew, and everybody was in a, just complete daze. And the first thing I did without thinking about it was, I went to, with my daughter, to Union Square Cafe, because I next wanted to check on our team there.
- 00:27:14 And what I saw blew my mind. Without any instructions from anybody, the team there had gone into action, and they had already made the right decision, which is, "We are going to close for business, but be open for the community." And they were making sandwiches in the dining room to just give to people. And at, um... I went back home, took our daughter home. Everybody was safe at home. You could just see all this awful stuff, which would, of course, be the next eight to 12 weeks that you would smell it, even.
- 00:27:59 Um, and then I started going around our restaurants, and I go back to Union Square Cafe. It's now, um, 11:30, or noon, and what I saw next really blew my mind. There was the now late New York Met Rusty Staub. Some of you remember Rusty. And Rusty had his head on our bar.
- 00:28:24 It turned out that his apartment was down in Battery Park City, or Tribeca, right down there. He was all white. And for some reason, he was one of the hundreds and hundreds of people who just trekked uptown, and Union Square Cafe was the place he wanted to go. He somehow just homed right in on Union Square Cafe.

00:28:48 And so he was one of the people that sought comfort there. We had people coming there who had planned to have lunch together. Um, and we saw a reunion that, where people thought the other one had died, because they'd come from Downtown, and we saw all this stuff. Then I worked my way up to, um, Gramercy Tavern, and then... 11 Madison Park also blew my mind, because that team-- again, zero instruction from me-- had done the right thing. They had already been in touch with the Armory on Lexington and...

00:29:23 Clifford Chanin: 23rd Street.

Danny Meyer: 25th.

Clifford Chanin: Yeah, 25th.

Danny Meyer: Which was the makeshift center for families to try to reunite with, just to see if... if their loved ones were alive. And our chef and general manager had already started talking to the Armory about setting up a makeshift kitchen in the basement of the Armory to feed these families. And can you imagine what that was like? And then we started to, uh, call other restaurateurs. And at that time, I was the chair of the restaurant committee for New York-- for N.Y.C. and Company.

00:30:04 And, um, we got together. We got our entire restaurant community together and started finding ways to, to see if we could send food to the first responders down here.

Clifford Chanin: I wanted-- and I'll ask more about that-- but there's an observation you make somewhere in the material I read about your pride in the culture of your company asserting itself, as you say, without any instruction. But somehow, people understood what they should do in the context of where they worked, and presumably, what you would have led them to want to do.

00:30:39 Danny Meyer: I think that's true. And I'm really proud about that, because I think cultures express themselves even when no one's looking. And, and that's exactly what happened. It was a, it was a horrible, horrible time. Everybody here knows that. It was scary. You didn't know if it was gonna happen again.

00:30:59 Um... We hadn't caught the bad guys. Um, we couldn't, we couldn't fathom how human beings could fly into buildings before that happened. That's why when I... You know, when I heard an airplane-- which I now know was screaming right down Fifth Avenue, not very high above my head-- I didn't look up and I didn't imagine what was about to happen, because human beings don't do that.

00:31:27 And then, of course, after that, New Yorkers were afraid to go out to eat. And if they weren't afraid, they didn't think it was right, because we were all in mourning, and it didn't feel right to go out and celebrate. And we had a big, uh, restaurant-wide effort, working with the city. As matter of fact, um... N.Y.C. and Company did a spectacular job at that point of connecting the city, because our economy was about to just completely disintegrate.

00:32:06 Um... it just was. Waiters... Back in those days, there were, uh... Now we don't have tipping in our restaurants, but back then, we did, and they weren't making any money, and they couldn't make money. It was terrible.

Clifford Chanin: Can you, can you sort of-- quantify is the wrong word-- but can you describe sort of what the fear was, or the impact of that frozen period of time when people were not going out? I mean, what were you thinking within the restaurant industry about how you were going to get out of this?

00:32:38 Danny Meyer: Well, what we did was, we'd... We, um... The first thing we had to do was address the emotional notion that you were doing something wrong to eat out. And we basically said that if... If you don't

spend time with people you love going out, you will have let the, the terrorists win.

00:33:02 'Cause that's what they wanted to do, was to disrupt life as we know it. And that the people who died,uh, won't come back to life because you stayed home. And that loving each other and being with each other as human beings-- being with each other is why restaurants exist.

00:33:20 And restaurants... The word "hospitality" is based on hope, the opposite of fear. And so we had to deal with that emotional issue first. And then we also had to make the economic case that the most patriotic thing you could do and the most civic thing you could do would be to somehow catalyzesome type of an uptick in the economy here, because it wasn't gonna do anyone any good to, to see New York go out of business.

00:33:49 And we were then trying to cascade our message to other cities. "Please have your meeting here. Please show us that... that you support this city." And, uh, you know, New York was never closer than it was in those days. Um, in fact, Union Square Park became a makeshift meeting place for vigils. And every night, people would be there with candles and reading poetry. And really a beautiful thing.

Clifford Chanin: What was it like running a restaurant so close to that scene? Were there interactions between people from there coming into the restaurant? Were you doing anything as a restaurant for what was going on at Union Square?

00:34:32 Danny Meyer: No, it didn't... It kind of didn't feel appropriate, because, I mean, some people, after they were done with whoever they wanted to see there, might come to the bar. But it just, it felt like that... That was a sacred thing happening and it wasn't for us to try to commercialize it in any... in any way. But, um... I think the next thing we did which was really important, and I'm thinking about it because-- coronavirus is certainly very different than 9/11-- but I'm starting to see the city...

00:35:05 You know, that was one hit where instantly, everybody was down and out. This is like this... Well, we're not here to talk about coronavirus, but, um, what we did do, though, at that point was, we had an emergency restaurant week. And... restaurant "two-week." And we wanted to create a, um... an economic incentive for New Yorkers to come back to eat.

00:35:32 And in a show of strength that, you know, these 150 restaurants in New York are all going to... You know, I, I have no idea what the price was. But it was low enough for lunch and dinner that, uh, it was us saying, "And we want this so badly, we're gonna give you the food for the next two weeks," basically. And that really was like CPR. And that really, really helped a lot.

00:36:02 Clifford Chanin: I wonder if-- given, of course, the emphasis on hospitality that you spoke of earlier, and, of course, the need for places to be safe-- are there any particular memories you have of that immediate period afterwards, when you're bringing people back into the restaurants, what they were looking for from a restaurant at that point, and memories of particular things that happened?

00:36:23 Danny Meyer: They wanted to be with each other. We had a... an annual event to raise money for Share Our Strength, to fight hunger. And back in those days, we would always do it at Gramercy Tavern. And it was always in, um, in October. And it was about three weeks after the event. And I'll never... You know, a lot of people said, "You shouldn't do it. It's not a good idea." And we said, "No, we need to do it. Kids are not any less hungry because 9/11 happened. And wouldn't it be a nice moment to bring people together?"

00:37:00 And, and it was, and everybody who came that night, there was a warmth and hugging. And because I don't think I've ever seen 200 people come together in New York City before that who had been cooped up in their apartments. And this was before delivery.

(laughter)

Danny Meyer: And, and cooped up, cooped away from their friends. And so what restaurants really did do-- and I think they do it... It's the best thing about restaurants, really, is, it brings people together to be with people.

00:37:34

Clifford Chanin: What did it do to your team to have gone through this circumstance together, to have served, as they did, on their own initiative? What did that leave in the restaurant culture that followed?

Danny Meyer: It, uh, I think the biggest thing it left is... First of all, I think the people felt very, um... The sense you get when you give from your heart is a good feeling. It's the greatest gift you can give yourself, in a way. But I really think the, the legacy was that our industry... You know, we're pretty competitive.

00:38:10

And... Everybody really... I, I think chefs came together, and managers came together, and wine people came together, and restaurateurs came together, and we realized that, um, we, we are a fabric, and we need each other. Even though, even though we may feel like a competitive industry, I think our industry showed that, um, we really were one, and that felt good. And I think that has lasted all these years later.

00:38:45

Clifford Chanin: And of course, I mean, we tell some of these stories in the museum, the extraordinary efforts that different restaurants made-- many of them located, really, down here-- to provide, for months at a time, support for the people who are working the pile and so on and so forth. I mean, it seems to me, just having watched this over these years now, that there really is a legacy of this service that people in your business are quite proud of.

00:39:09

Danny Meyer: It's true, and it goes on even way beyond New York. You know, there are heroic efforts when there have been massive hurricanes, and you see World Central Kitchen-- José Andrés, and so many other chefs. It's... it's almost like these moments call us to do what we do,

which is, you may think of us as cooks and bartenders, but truly, I think we are merchants of the heart.

00:39:40 Clifford Chanin: It is a defining characteristic of 9/11 that people wanted to do what they could do the best they could do it, whatever that was. And you were describing this for your industry. You mentioned Restaurant Week as a sort of turning point. Was that the moment that things turned around and you began to get confidence that things would be okay?

00:40:00 Danny Meyer: Yes, it was, because... Remember, there was a combination of fear and... fear of... I think New Yorkers got over the fear... They didn't get over the fear of flying quite so soon. But there they were at home, and they got over the fear of going out. What they, what took longer, though, was the emotional fear of having fun. "I shouldn't be seen." You know, the expression we would hear is "dancing on the graves." And that, that expression would get used over and over by people.

00:40:34 Clifford Chanin: Yeah. You know, the restaurant industry has changed so dramatically in this time, and you're really describing a low point for restaurants, for the tourism industry-- for the economy of New York, in fact. And yet, almost 20 years later, we are at a time where restaurants are helping define food policy, they are reflecting changes in the culture in relation to food. I mean, how has that evolved in your mind? And what has happened to bring restaurants to the forefront of the way we think about food-- consuming it, producing it, and so on?

00:41:10 Danny Meyer: Well, the public. The public and the media, and the producers and the restaurants all need each other. And... um... You know, it's, it's very, very interesting. When, when I opened Union Square Cafe in 1985, I had been cooking in France and Italy before that. And in fact, when I was in Bordeaux, I was living on the couch of the chef, and we started every morning going to the farmers' market.

- 00:41:41 It wasn't called a farmers' market, it was just called a market, and everything was obviously local-- the cheese, the leeks, the épinards, you know, the spinach, the... the ducks. Every single thing they sold there was local, and seasonal, and you didn't make a big deal out of it. And you didn't put on your menu what market it was. You did it because that's how the tradition was.
- 00:42:09 And in 1985, you started—or actually the early '80s-- you started seeing this self-conscious expression of local and seasonal as, as if it was an outlier, because in America, it really was. As a matter of fact, the great restaurants in New York, the fancy ones, distinguished themselves by being able to deliver you raspberries in January and asparagus in December.
- 00:42:40 You know, things that we would just never do today because they're not local. You can't possibly grow raspberries in January in New York. And, um, and I was... I was much more interested in using the Greenmarket, because-- in fact, that's why I put Union Square Cafe there, because it felt like the natural, right thing to do. And we didn't spend a lot of our time listing the names of all the farms and the growers. We just used them. So that's kind of where this all started for me.
- 00:43:15 And what I started to realize was that there was a political movement growing with it, and that, you know, your politics were very aligned with how you ate and what you ate. And that, that is, if anything, more so today. Your politics are how you cook, and what do you cook with, and where did you buy it from? And that's even more so today. And I think that's a good thing.
- 00:43:42 I think that... speaking of food-- it's not really food policy-- but we didn't have any idea what a peanut allergy was in 1985. It's not really funny. It just, it's, it's kind of, we have to understand, why is that? We didn't, I never heard of celiac disease. I didn't know what gluten-free was. I didn't know what a dietary restriction or a preference was. We just served food. And that has changed dramatically. That's obviously changed dramatically in all these years. And we, you know, we try everything we can to be as accommodating about that.

- 00:44:22 So with respect to food policy, um... You know, when Union Square Café opened, organic really meant the ugliest, most expensive vegetable in the supermarket. And it was, like, who would eat that? And why would they pay that for that thing right there? And that has become commonplace today. I think that the way people looked at how vegetables were grown, and what the environmental impact wasn't that big of a deal back then.
- 00:44:58 It's a very big deal, and it should be a big deal. The way animals are raised, the way... Which fish are caught, which fish are left back. Which fish do you actually serve? We were, didn't have anything called a dock-to-dish program back then, as we do right now. And I think that where we now are is, is... The next step after food policy is people policy.
- 00:45:21 And I think that's really where the focus is, where it should be right now, which is, "All right, we've taken care of the plants and the animals. What about the people? And what about the people who work in restaurants, who produce the food, who serve the food?" And it's very, very, um...It's, it's, it's one of the most important things, and, and it's harder than ever.
- 00:45:42 Because even if your heart is in the right place, the margins of restaurants, both because of real estate and, and everything-- insurance, food costs, health insurance, retirement plans, if your restaurant happens to have a family leave policy-- it costs a lot of money. And meanwhile, with 26,000 restaurants in the city, um, the downward pressure on your pricing ability is great. So it's a, it's a fascinating time to be in this business, especially now.
- 00:46:18 You don't have to go to a restaurant to get good food. So when I started Union Square Cafe, and even Gramercy Tavern, ten years after that, if you wanted... if you wanted lunch, you either brought it from home or you went out. Today, 80% of the people eat at their desk, and the food they can get at their desk isn't that bad. You get a good salad from almost anywhere delivered to you, never even have to leave, if you don't want to.

00:46:44

Clifford Chanin: The world has changed. Now, Danny has a, a dinner, I suppose. So, we're gonna turn it open for some questions a little earlier than we usually do, because the program will end a little earlier than it usually does, so...

Danny Meyer: I have two restaurants I have to go to after this.

(laughter)

Danny Meyer: Just two.

Clifford Chanin: Two dinners, two restaurants. All right, so raise your hands, and wait for a microphone to arrive at your door. Much as a salad would at your desk. You're turning it back to me? There we go, right here.

00:47:19

Audience Member: Hey, great talk, thank you. You said you mentioned you waited ten years before you opened up your second restaurant, your second project. When were you ready for that?

Danny Meyer: Well, I really wasn't ready for it.

(laughter)

Danny Meyer: And I'm not trying to be funny at all. I was not ready for it. In fact, that was the hardest... That was amongst the hardest leaps in my entire career, going from one to two, because I really cared about every single detail.

00:47:48

And for ten years, I was the guy. I was... I was at the front door, I knew every name, every... I was working with the chef every morning on the specials, and the wording of the specials, and typing out the specials.

Looking at every wine of the wine lists, every line of the wine lists, and making sure the wines were in the right order. Pricing was exactly right.

00:48:13 And now, all of a sudden, there were two. And wherever I went, I wasn't at the other one, and it was, it wasn't very good. But the, the moment where I said, "I want to do this," was actually at a, um, a "Food & Wine" conference in Colorado that "Food & Wine" magazine used to put on. They still do, actually. But I used to, I was there, probably, like, 20, 28 years, I would go to that, that conference.

00:48:47 And a young chef whose food I loved, with whom I had done some stuff for Share Our Strength, came up to me, and he said, "My restaurant is about to close, and there's no one I'd rather work with than you, next." And that was a young chef by the name of Tom Colicchio. And, uh... It was almost as if, um... Sandy Koufax said, "I want to pitch on your team."

(laughter)

00:49:23 Danny Meyer: "Sure, that sounds like a good idea." So that was the thing... And, um, and that became Gramercy Tavern. And I never, I don't think I ever would have done it had it not been for, for that moment, 'cause I just really, really loved his cooking. And even before he was "Top Chef," he was a top chef.

00:49:44 And one of the things I learned through the process of Gramercy Tavern-- and I think it's, it's true to this day-- is that the best restaurants we've opened are the... or whatever restaurant, the best... The best years of that restaurant are when the leaders are all people who feel like they have something to prove. And he needed to prove that... that it was a fluke that his restaurant, Mondrian, had gone out of business. It was the recession that followed the Gulf War that put that restaurant out of business. He needed to prove that he was not a failure.

00:50:28 I needed to prove that Union Square Café was not a fluke. I felt like an impostor. And I needed to prove to myself that... I could do something else besides that. And the pastry chef, Claudia Fleming, needed to prove that she could actually be a pastry chef. We had actually met when she was a, um... She was trying to put herself...

00:50:56 She was trying to survive as a ballerina, and she was waiting tables at Union Square Cafe. And one day, she said, "I really want to learn to cook. Can I apprentice in the kitchen here?" She went on to become a James Beard Award-winning best pastry chef in America. But she used Gramercy Tavern to prove that.

The wine director, service director had to prove that he could do what... He had, he had become famous in Phoenix. He had to prove that he could do it in New York. So Gramercy Tavern became this kind of really, really magical place, and it has stayed that way for generations of cooks, and we've only had two chefs there in our entire 25 years. Mike Anthony had to prove that...

00:51:42 One quick thing, and I'll finish on this. Mike Anthony was the co-chef, with Dan Barber, at Blue Hill Stone Barns. The two of them, together, co-won the James Beard Award. Or, or they co-won Best New Chef in America for "Food & Wine." And at some point, they split, and Mike had to prove that he could do it on his own, so he... So it's fascinating to me how Gramercy Tavern seems to be this proving ground for people.

00:52:16 Clifford Chanin: Remarkable. I mean, but it must be built in to the place in some way.

Danny Meyer: I think it is.

Clifford Chanin: Yeah, Yeah. One more-- in the back, please. Please wait for the mic.

Danny Meyer: I have time for two more here, easily. Come on, I can give this crowd what they came for.

(laughter)

Clifford Chanin: All right, well...

Audience Member: Could you say something about the future of alternative proteins? Beyond Meat is trading at almost \$96 today with a market cap of \$5.9 billion. A very young company. Are you seeing, in your business, more demand for so-called fake meats?

(Meyer chuckles)

00:52:53

Danny Meyer: Who do you represent before I answer this?

(laughter)

Danny Meyer: You're not answering? You're just a curious consumer?

(audience member responds offmic)

Danny Meyer: About the...?

(audience member responds off mic)

Danny Meyer: Got it. So to answer the second question, we're absolutely seeing everywhere an increased interest in vegetables. Which I find

fascinating, because we've been doing that since the first day we opened Union Square Cafe.

00:53:30 And I'm sorry to digress for a second, but back in those days, every dish in a restaurant would either come with no vegetables or the exact same vegetables. There was one sauté pan. It was usually carrots and broccoli, and that went with the swordfish. And that went with the salmon. And that went with the veal, right?

00:53:54 Um... And, uh, you know, the notion of serving a different vegetable with everything was a, was a new thing. One year, we came up with a dish at Union Square Cafe, and this is probably 1990, and it was called Earth and Turf. And the notion was, we were going to invert the relative size of... Three-quarters of the plate was gonna be earth, and one-quarter was gonna be meat protein.

00:54:28 So we've been seeing this for a long time, um... I think the notion of laboratory-created, uh... Food that is pretending to be meat in terms of texture and juices and stuff like that is obviously a very, very new thing. None of our chefs wanted to work with it. It's obviously doing incredibly well, as you said. The team at Shake Shack has not been interested in using it. They would rather create plant-based vegetables-- which kind of sounds weird, doesn't it?

(laughter)

00:55:04 Danny Meyer: Than plant-based meats, and try to create something craveable that uses vegetables that is not pretending to be something it's not. Um, that said... You know, it's, it's hard to argue with the, the consumer response to this. And I always felt that vegetarians or vegans did not secretly crave something that was pretending to be meat.

00:55:36 And I think I may have been right about that, but what I was wrong about was the number of meat eaters who, once every so often, want to feel

virtuous that they didn't kill an animal, or didn't hurt the watershed, or didn't add methane, and they still got to have a burger, or a meatball, or a sausage pizza, or whatever. So it's, it's really fascinating to watch this happen, and it's, it's just not something that we are doing right now.

00:56:15

Clifford Chanin: Take one more. Up here in the front. Just wait for the mic, if you would.

Audience Member: Thank you. First of all, I, I do work in the publishing industry, and, um, I'm afraid we don't have those expense accounts anymore, at least in my...

Danny Meyer: I'm afraid you're right.

00:56:34

Audience Member: In my generation, at least. So I'm sorry for that. But, um, I do want to say, I was a big fan of Tabla back in the day, and I wanted to ask you, um... You know, I understand why, economically and logistically, it didn't quite work out. But is there any reason why, you know, you might feel averse to opening restaurants that are, for lack of a better term, ethnic? Because Tabla, I think, was a fantastic restaurant-- you know, Indian cuisine, and, um, really wonderful.

00:57:10

Danny Meyer: Well, thank you.

Audience Member: But is there any... Is there any reason that you would feel averse...

Danny Meyer: No.

Audience Member: ...to opening new restaurants similar to that, yeah?

Danny Meyer: No, as a matter of fact, I want to... First of all, thank you for saying that. I want to guide you to a restaurant that we are operating right this minute, and will be for the next couple of months.

00:57:31 We have a restaurant called Intersect on 14th Street, and we've done this in collaboration with Lexus. And it's unlike any of our other restaurants in that it changes every four months, and we bring in a restaurant in residence from a different part of the world. So not from New York.

00:57:53 Our cooks are there, um... And the one that we have right now is called... It's, it's a restaurant from Bombay, and it's called... O Pedro is the name of the restaurant. It is spectacular. I promise you that if you liked Tabla, you will like this even more. And, um, when we changed the, the menus-- the last one we had was from Buenos Aires, a restaurant called Mishiguene...

(laughter)

Clifford Chanin: We would have guessed that.

00:58:25 Danny Meyer: You would have guessed that. Go figure for... New York had never seen that... We may be meshugene, but we didn't have that restaurant. That was food of the Jewish diaspora seen through the hands of an Argentinean cook. But when we change the restaurant... And another one before that was from, um... Where was it from? Chile, and then before that, from France. And I'm not sure what's coming next, but many of them are ethnic.

00:58:55 I don't even know what "ethnic" means anymore. If what you mean by that is not from Western Europe, that's, that's the case. But right now, you should, you should try O Pedro at Intersect. It's really, really good.

Clifford Chanin: That sounds great. Well, there is much more to say, and I hope we find another occasion to say it, but we're going to end the evening here. I'm going to thank our members, and ask those of you who are not members to consider becoming members outside. But I want to, all of you, to join me in thanking Danny Meyer.

00:59:24

Danny Meyer: Thank you, Cliff.

(applause)