



Daniel Boulud, right, with Tyler Shedden, taste testing in Toronto.

clam and parsley broth. My entrée, the duo of *cumbra* beef, consisted of a dry-aged strip loin alongside red wine-braised short ribs and spinach *subric*. The grapefruit *givr * — a frozen grapefruit shell filled with sorbet, grapefruit wedges and rose-flavored Turkish delight, crowned with fluffy threads of *halvah* and a torched sesame cracker — was a visual masterpiece that playfully juxtaposed textures and temperatures.

As the man who invented the gourmet burger, Boulud naturally has ‘mad’ love for beef, and never strays far from the *other* three Bs: bacon, butter and brioche. I spoke with the master about his successes, his roots on the farm, and what he likes to cook with his daughter, Alix.

Is true fine dining a thing of the past?

Fine dining is very much alive and kicking in the greatest cities of the world. But the definition, in many ways, has evolved.

How do you define fine dining?

It doesn’t have to be pompous or boring. Fine dining is exciting and rare. For me it can be a \$2.50 [piece of] sushi or sashimi made with the highest-quality ingredients. Or going to Brooklyn for the best pizza made with local clams, local herbs, the perfect crust... while

AMERICA’S FRENCH FARM BOY

Chef Daniel Boulud’s dishes are haute but homey, and always from the heart. By Shira Levine

To eat a meal crafted by Daniel Boulud is to be dazzled with a full-sensory culinary experience. My epicurean evening took place in Toronto, at the James Beard award-winning chef’s latest restaurant project. Called Caf  Boulud (like its New York and Palm Beach counterparts), the fine dining hotspot is positioned within the glassy-chic Four Seasons Toronto, recently redone in exquisite style. The multi-cultural culinary Mecca already has its share of hip eateries, yet visitors and locals alike are hungry for a bite of Boulud.

Dbar is the lobby bar and caf , but it’s the mezzanine-level restaurant outfitted with Mr. Brainwash pop art pieces that has people talking. Indeed about the art (an unexpected pairing with French haute cuisine), but more about the equally jaw-dropping menu.

My tasting began with octopus *  la plancha* followed by a British Columbian black cod *persillade* in a

it might be casual, it can be fine dining. Of course it’s about the food, but it is also very much about the service, and then the ambiance. Fine dining is about living well and enjoying life.

What is the universal thread that runs throughout your 14 restaurants?

Detail. I pay a lot of attention to service and training. Even though fine dining is becoming more casual, it is also more focused on details, more and better service, with more attention paid to making the customers feel at ease with the experience.

You’ve been living in the U.S. for many years; do you still consider yourself a French chef?

When you’re French you can’t take it out of you. I live in America, and I love America; my daughter was born here. But I am certainly French.

American foodies have embraced regional Italian cooking. Do you think you have been suc-



Art by Mr. Brainwash is a lively addition to the décor at Café Boulud.

IMAGE BY CHRISTIAN HOBAN

Successful in spreading knowledge about French regional cuisines?

Well, you tell me! I love all of it and I think it is fair to say people like my food. The *cuisine regional* — especially the specialties of cheese and charcuterie — is what has made me ‘stay French’ and feel so proud to cook French. Like many countries we also have the *cuisine bourgeois*: the food of the people. We have a history of cooking meals that are very elaborate yet very soulful. Then you have *brasserie* cooking for the big city; *bistro* is smaller scale and local. *Lyon de bouchon* is also very special: it’s the micro-scale restaurant where there is

no choice on the menu because they serve you what they have made that day. It’s cooked with love. I have lived and worked all my life for *haute cuisine*: the best of the best. It takes a lifetime to master and it’s still never enough.

These micro-scale restaurants seem to be more appealing to today’s foodies.

This is the challenge for young chefs. They open a place with \$100,000; it’s a shack, but they cook amazing food. Yes, it is fine cuisine, but the idea is to elevate the town with a fine restaurant. You don’t want a town with all the restaurants imitating one another.

“Fine dining is about living well and enjoying life.”

What city’s food scene inspires you most?

Copenhagen is really exciting. I lived there 32 years ago and I could see then that this place was going to be something amazing one day. I love their street food so much. I love the little skinny hot dog with the tiny bun! There is so much young Danish talent inspiring the culinary world with the way they are thinking about and making food. I also love Charleston, South Carolina. San Francisco and Chicago are longtime

favorite food cities.

You grew up on a farm in France and weren’t always accustomed to fine dining.

What do you make for a home-cooked meal?

I keep it really easy; I cook with my daughter sometimes. I live above Daniel so usually what I do is go down to the restaurant and grab a roast or a fish, and then on the spot propose something for us to make.

Can you envision making your own Jiro Dreams of Sushi film? Maybe Daniel Dreams of Butter?

Not like that, but I am working on a documentary. It’s around a new cookbook I have coming out that celebrates 20 years of Daniel. It’s called *My French Cuisine*. It shows that I’m proud of my French identity and that no matter where I travel and what I experiment with, I still think French food is the best.