

Chef Daniel Boulud is master of haute and homey

BY LYDIA MARTIN



'Every chef and food personality is in town [for the South Beach Wine & Food Festival]. And everybody has the fever for fun. Because Miami is fun,' says Daniel Boulud. During the lull between lunch and dinner, superstar chef Daniel Boulud disappears into the kitchen of his restaurant at the Brazilian Court Hotel in Palm Beach. He only occasionally visits Café Boulud, one of 10 restaurants carrying his name, and a couple of wide-eyed staffers pop out to report what he's up to:

Boulud, master of American-influenced French cuisine, who made his name in the late 1980s as executive chef of New York's Le Cirque and whose flagship restaurant, Daniel, last year nabbed a maximum three Michelin stars, is raiding the cooks' work stations to fix a bite for a visitor who has a long car ride ahead.

He returns with a hot Cuban sandwich, one of his favorites, and ``a tomato salad the way I like *eet*": wedges of heirloom tomatoes, a little onion, fresh basil, olive oil and vinegar. Also in the paper bag: chocolates, fruit jellies and mini madeleines.

Boulud, who will be honored Saturday by the South Beach Wine & Food Festival at a sold-out tribute dinner cooked by some of his famous buddies -- among them Nobu Matsuhisa, Eric Ripert and Claude Troisgros -- is as French as a chef can be. But he's not so high and mighty he can't hook you up with a simple sandwich for the road.

``What do you mean? French chefs have a reputation for being pretentious?" jokes the very French Ripert of New York's Le Bernadin. ``But yes, Daniel is very cool. But in the kitchen he can be very tough. And he is relentless in terms of searching for quality. He has more energy than most people I have ever known. You just have to party with him to know what I mean."

And the party will definitely be on this weekend, Boulud says.

``There is no other festival of this magnitude. It's quite impressive. Every chef and food personality is in town. And everybody has the fever for fun. Because Miami is fun. You're away

from the cold and there is so much happening," says Boulud, who expects his first Miami restaurant, a DB Bistro at the new Met 2 tower downtown, to open in October.

``As a chef, Daniel is a perfectionist and very professional," says Nobu. ``As a friend, I agree, he's definitely unpretentious and fun to be around. He is also very thoughtful of others."

Boulud, whose cuisine is known for an elegant complexity (even his burger is a masterwork: red-wine braised short rib, foie gras and black truffles inside a shell of ground sirloin) says he loves nothing more than cooking a big batch of his famously fluffy scrambled eggs for pals after a night of partying. Earlier this month, in a promo for NBC, he took to the streets of Manhattan in a food truck, grilling merguez sausages for passersby.

``There he was, in the freezing cold, serving lunch out of a truck," says Lee Brian Schragar, founder and director of the South Beach Wine & Food Festival. ``He was funny, charming. He had something nice to say to everybody who stepped up. Maybe some of them had no idea who he was. That didn't matter to him."

Knowing Boulud tends to be a game guy, Schragar asked him to make an extra appearance during this year's festival: Boulud, along with Iron Chef Masaharu Morimoto and chef Chris Wessel of Biscayne Boulevard's acclaimed Red Light, agreed to take over the kitchen Wednesday at South Beach's Tap Tap restaurant for a Haiti relief benefit.

INSTANT SELLOUT

``At \$325 per plate, the dinner sold out in a day," Schragar says. ``Then I went to see the kitchen at Tap Tap, and it's a clean kitchen, but it's small and sparse. I thought, `Daniel will never be able to cook in there.' I was a little concerned about his reaction. But he said. `I'm fine anywhere.' He's a chef's chef."

Born and raised on a farm outside Lyon where his 82-year-old father still cures hams and bakes bread, Boulud will tell you he has an occasional hankering for the straightforward.

``Sometimes I want real food," he says. ``I was in my Beijing restaurant a couple of weeks ago and I decided to do a braised pork shoulder Provencal for a group of chefs that I invited to come over after hours. . . . You sear the pork, add red wine, olive oil, orange juice, a little bit of stock. Of course there is onion, garlic, tomato, fennel, artichoke, potato, black olives, orange peel, rosemary.

``You fill up a big pot, add seasonings on top, make it peppery, add a big seal of bread dough and put it in the oven and cook it for about three hours. I put no new invention into it, no reinterpretation. It's a classic flavor and I just wanted to recapture it the way it is supposed to be."

So he doesn't usually make ``real food" at his restaurants?

``Real food smells good, tastes good, looks good -- no pretention," says Boulud, 54. ``Of course, sometimes you want something different than that. Let's say a parfait of lemon with caviar. There

is a sophistication, a delicateness. It is not related to any other recipe. It's just a creation. You want something sensual, something refreshing, maybe a little briny. You want to put together interesting flavors. You're interested in textures. But to me real food is something else. Real food is homey."

After working under some of France's biggest names in the 1970s -- Roger Verge, Georges Blanc, Michel Guerard -- Boulud cooked in Copenhagen for a couple of years. He came to the United States as private chef to the European Commission in Washington.

"After that, I knew I had to go to New York before returning to France. But I went to New York and I have wound up living in the same ZIP code for 30 years," Boulud says.

"In Denmark, there was a sense of isolation. I knew if I stayed there I would have married a Danish girl and become Danish. But New York is big enough that no matter what your culture is, you will find a community to keep you connected to your roots."

Boulud cherishes his returns to those roots.

"Today, every chef wants to become a farmer. I was a farmer before I became a chef. We were raising goats, cows, pigs. We were making our own goat cheese. We had guinea hens, squabs, turkeys, ducks, chickens. We grew vegetables. On the weekend I would go to the farmers' market in Lyon with my father to sell products from our farm.

"And everything is still the same at home. What we all dream of today, the farm-to-table experience, I had every day growing up. That's why my food has always been very ingredient-driven."

TEAM EFFORT

Boulud says he is in the kitchen at Daniel most nights, but he doesn't apologize for all those other kitchens he runs but only visits, including DB Bistro Moderne in Midtown Manhattan, Daniel Boulud Brasserie in Las Vegas, Lumiere in Vancouver and Bar Boulud in London.

"Even a chef who has one restaurant, you can't expect that he is actually in the kitchen every moment. And even if he is there, there is a whole staff cooking.

"The job of a chef is to select and train his staff. With any chef, it's about team work. I don't care if it's me, Eric Ripert, Jean-Georges [Vongerichten]. Any great chef depends on a team."

As serious as Boulud is about high cuisine, he also loves the low.

"In Palm Beach, on one of the big roads, there is a place that is like a truck stop and we go around midnight for the Cuban sandwiches," he says. "I sit on the sidewalk and have it with a beer."