

# Mauro Maccioni: the son rises at *Le Cirque*

By Kristopher Carpenter



There are few living legends inhabiting the strata of Manhattan's luxury restaurant world. And no one can agree on the average lifespan of a city restaurant, but according to the NY State Restaurant Association, over 70 percent fail in their first five years. Enter Le Cirque – in 1974, a 32-year-old Sirio Maccioni, founded what would become a New York institution, drawing a confluence of the elite, both in the dining room and in the kitchen. Le Cirque has been so successful over the last three and a half decades that the Maccionis have become something akin to restaurant royalty. One couldn't name every famous person who has had a meal there; it would be easier to name those who haven't. The roster of former kitchen staff is no less impressive, including Daniel Boulud, Michael Lomonaco, David Bouley, Geoffrey Zakarian, and Jacques Torres. Le Cirque has most recently been the subject of the HBO documentary *A Table in Heaven*, where Sirio, wife Egidiana and all three sons were featured in the film detailing the restaurant's 2006 move from the Palace Hotel to its current home in the Bloomberg building on East 58th Street. But for Mauro Maccioni, the youngest of the brood and heir apparent to the Le Cirque legacy, this was all just part of everyday life growing up. Mauro learned the ropes from some of the best chefs and restaurateurs in the world and it is readily apparent when watching the dapper 37-year-old at work, doing everything from welcoming guests to clearing tables – that this isn't just the family business: it's his passion.

**Q. What was it like growing up in Le Cirque?**

As a child, really I took it for granted. I'm sure that Daniel Boulud remembers me as the teenager asking him to make me a burger for lunch. There's a lot of nostalgia in those memories. I feel like I appreciate those times even more now. Being involved with all of the intricacies and nuances, I can see how much work goes into the everyday operations. When I was a kid, I would work on Saturdays for lunch and offer Champagne, so obviously my typical day is a little different now.

**Q. What's your favorite part of the job?**

I really enjoy the food aspect, the business side... a little less. But, we all have to grow up and I can't just be playing with our food all day. I do enjoy the whole experience, meeting people and welcoming them, but my passion is definitely on the food side. At an early age, I expressed a desire to my father to go abroad and work in kitchens in Europe. So in my early 20s I started at Les Crayères, which is a three-star Michelin restaurant in Reims, France. I worked in the dining room there, but also in the kitchen for our good friends Gerard and Elyane Boyer. Seeing the discipline in their kitchen was incredible. I also worked in Arzak under Juan Mari Arzak in San Sebastian, Spain. He was really the grandfather of avant garde Spanish

cooking. I also worked in several places in Italy, including Enoteca Pinchiorri, also a three-star Michelin Restaurant near Florence, where our family is from. Of course being an Italian-American I have a lot of reverence for Italy.

**Q. Over the years you've had quite a host of characters come through the kitchen...**

We absolutely have, and it has added so much value to what Le Cirque is today, to have all of that amazing talent come through here; and to celebrate that tradition with all of them at our 35th anniversary just a few months ago. It's special for my father. He built Le Cirque to be a place where those types of chefs would want to work. I'm so happy to see that so many of them own their own restaurants. When I eat somewhere like Daniel, I can still see and taste the same things that I remember about [Boulud] at Le Cirque – his attention to detail and dedication to fresh seasonal ingredients arranged in innovative ways. I also love working with our current chef Craig Hopson, talking about how we can make the food unique and new while staying close to tradition. For a lot of people, Le Cirque is and will always be Champagne and Dover sole and chocolate soufflé; and there's nothing wrong with that. We're blessed to have a fantastic, loyal customer base and we always want to keep them happy.

**Q. So, tell me a little about the family.**

We're obviously a very tight bunch since we're all involved. My father and I are going to a dinner in France for *Tradition et Qualité*, which is an association of French restaurants around the world. The dinner is going to be hosted by Paul Bocuse, who is widely regarded as one of the best chefs of the 20th century, so I'm really excited for the event and to be there with my father. He's obviously still involved in running Le Cirque. At Osteria Del Circo, which my mother manages (she's an excellent chef), I'm involved a lot more with the decisions in the kitchen, and I've worked very closely with Chef Giuntoli on the menu there. My brother Marco does most of our wine selections for both restaurants; he had an extensive wine training that was very similar to my culinary training. And Mario manages our stores in Las Vegas – Le Cirque and Osteria Del Circo in the Bellagio Hotel.

**Q. What's next?**

I'm trying to get involved with a project where I'm more on the kitchen side. I'm involved now, but most of my time is spent in the dining room. So, in the next few years, I'd love to open up a small place and be very involved with the menu. I know all chefs say that they want to open a small place to cook the way they want to cook, but that's exactly what I want to do.