

Client: Macondo

Media Outlet: Wall Street Journal

Circulation: 2.7 Million Subscribers

Date: April 3, 2009

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

© 2006 Dow Jones & Company. All Rights Reserved

It's autumn at the Four Seasons

Famed eatery trades on past but retains some quality dishes; for adventure, try Macondo

By **RAYMOND SOKOLOV**

New York

Michael Douglas, Barry Diller and I had lunch together on a balmy day at the start of spring. Maybe "together" is pushing it a bit. We weren't actually at the same table, but in the walnut-paneled intimacy of the landmark modernist dining room where we were eating, we were close enough to air kiss. And we were all collaborating on a rite first celebrated 50 years ago: lunch at the Four Seasons.



Kenneth Chen for The Wall Street Journal

The Grill Room at the Four Seasons in Manhattan

In today's world of star chefs and molecular gastronomy, the Four Seasons isn't a player. Yet media biggies still flock to the Grill Room -- for some reason its twin dining space, the breathtaking Pool Room, with its large rectangular water basin in the center, doesn't get the dealmongers -- for food that's more than elegant but less than cutting-edge. They come for the exposure and because they are treated so well.

A couple of suits near us celebrated one of their birthdays with a single-candled confection. For their little party, the kitchen had come up with a basketball-size cloud of white cotton candy. Our waiter gently suggested that the cold seafood platter one of us had ordered as a starter was "a lot of food" and happily arranged for us to split the medley -- an extravaganza of just about every shelled marine creature prepared in a dozen styles, with dipping sauces galore.

We can't say we enjoyed our usual anonymity on this visit. We've been coming to the Four Seasons off and on since the early '70s. We did miss the glorious and legendary early days, when Philip Johnson, the patrician architect, designed the place where Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's original plan for this retail space within the Seagram Building had called for a car dealership. Nor did we experience the pathbreaking, seasonally changing menus created under the martinet genius of the restaurant's founding father, Joseph Baum, who consulted with James Beard and others on matters culinary. But we have heard a lot about those heady times from this newspaper's architecture critic, Ada Louise Huxtable, who worked on the startup team with her husband, Garth.



Kenneth Chen for The Wall Street Journal

The Grill Room's filet of bison with foie gras and Périgord truffle sauce

Anyone who thinks Alice Waters invented the idea of seasonal produce, or believes that locavorism was thunk up yesterday, has forgotten or never knew about Joe Baum's mania for getting fresh and local food to his precious tables, wild mushrooms foraged from nearby forests, periwinkles from Long Island waters. I remember, with a pang for vanished innocence, how adventurous I felt, spearing these little marine snails and pulling them from their shells with straight pins while discussing a book project with my editor at water's edge in the Pool Room some time around 1980.

Nowadays, few people would go to the Four Seasons in search of novelty. Even the first chef, the learned Albert Stockli, wasn't the star of the show, and he wasn't trying to reinvent the wheel. After all, in 1959, America followed France's lead in food, and France would still wait more than a decade for la nouvelle cuisine to end her culinary slumber and jump-start our world of chef prima donnas making it new every night. But the original Four Seasons marked a decisive step toward the modern American cuisine for which Ms. Waters gets entirely too much credit. Today, though, what was once electrifying feels like a museum -- which is an impression the collection of modernist art by dead masters like Picasso on Mies's last-century international-style walls reinforces. But sometimes a visit to a great museum-restaurant can give you a healthy perspective on the strenuous triviality of TV smackdown cooks and \$40 hodgepodes of foods made unrecognizable by blowtorches and liquid nitrogen.

At our recent lunch, we followed the seafood platter with two substantial dishes, each more or less traditional, but built on ingredients of rarefied pedigree. A risotto with tender bay scallops was a sweet breath of the sea wafting through rice. The bison special with foie gras was tender but big-shouldered. Still, if we had been looking for artistically plated food, we would have been disappointed by the homespun presentations of these dishes. The risotto, in particular, had a, shall we say, unstudied look about it. Clearly, plenty of the Four Seasons' still-well-heeled customers don't much care about swooshes of beet purée or necklaces of bonsai vegetables. Every seat in the Grill Room was full during our lunch. The Pool Room also was humming at capacity on an earlier evening. There was hardly a person there that night who wasn't visibly eligible for Medicare, but we are just as long in the tooth as most of them. Not being so well-heeled, however, we wondered about their willingness to fork over \$16 for a Caesar salad, but we envied them their ability to pay \$110 without a wince for a fat and classy wagyu rib-eye steak from the fabled beef of Saga Prefecture, Kyushu, Japan.



Kenneth Chen for The Wall Street Journal
Macondo's exterior

If the Four Seasons is a bit like the finale of Proust's novel "Remembrance of Things Past," when the elderly hero, Marcel, walks into a soirée full of long-lost acquaintances just as creaky as he is, then the "freestyle" pan-Latin lounge-restaurant Macondo in Manhattan's East Village is like a magically real dream of the future out of Gabriel García Márquez's "One Hundred Years of Solitude."



Kenneth Chen for The Wall Street Journal
Macondo's Bacalao Arepa (cod, tomato, peppers, fried egg)

Macondo is, in fact, the made-up location on Colombia's Caribbean coast where the García Márquez novel takes place. The restaurant specializes in small-plate versions of street-food classics from all over Latin America and Spain. Colombia itself is represented

by the *carimañola*, a cassava fritter. From Venezuela, comes that light and sweetish cornmeal bread-muffin, the *arepa*. From Puerto Rico, plantain-and-pork balls called *mofongos*. Macondo's kitchen turns out better versions of all these dishes than I have ever managed to find on their native ground.

The most expensive item on the menu costs \$14. All dishes were painstakingly garnished and plated. The mixologist plays deep and original games with tropical fruit. No one but me in the crowded, lively place looked eligible for a senior discount on the subway.

We wish the Four Seasons another happy 50 years, but we think you don't need a weatherman to tell you the wind is blowing in Macondo's direction: affordable, small plates of attractive original food, in clublike settings with drinks from blenders, not from red Burgundies costing in the triple digits.

- **Email me at eatingout@wsj.com.**



Hanna Lee Communications, Inc.
575 Madison Ave, 8th Floor, NY, NY 10022. Phone: (212) 527-9969, Fax: (212) 605-0388
www.hannaleecommunications.com