

GQ ON EATING & DRINKING

# Forked & Corked

Eating & Drinking

**Two Wise Men**

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Between the two of them, restaurateur Danny Meyer and chef/restaurateur Alain Ducasse own nearly three dozen restaurants worldwide. Collectively, they possess a small galaxy's worth of critical stars. Meyer's Union Square Café and Gramercy Tavern are consistently ranked amongst the best places to eat in New York; this year, his restaurant Eleven Madison Park received a rare 4-star rave in *The New York Times*. He recently opened Maialino, a Roman trattoria in the Gramercy Park Hotel. Alain Ducasse is a multi-star Michelin chef; his restaurants Le Louis XV in Monaco and Alain Ducasse au Plaza Athénée in Paris are French cultural institutions. And his Manhattan bistro Benoit, where we all met in the upstairs dining room over late-afternoon profiteroles, is an ideal spot to ingest some buttery holiday cheer. It's a big-deal room—original woodwork from a 200-year old Bordeaux pharmacy is involved—and it's the perfect backdrop for a couple of guys at the top of their game. We sat down with them to talk stuffed birds, celebratory wines, and where they'll be for the holidays.

**Being arbiters of good taste, I'm interested in knowing where it comes from and whether any of your childhood holiday traditions show up in your restaurants today?**

**DANNY MEYER:** I grew up in a reform Jewish family in St. Louis. Our idea of Judaism was no Bar mitzvahs and a Christmas tree that had a skirt at the bottom embroidered with the names of my grandparents.

**ALAIN DUCASSE:** I grew up on a farm in the Southwest of France. My grandmother did all the cooking at Christmas. We ate fattened chicken. We would feed it even more so it would be big and fat. There was foie gras. And we would fish salmon from the nearby river. The chicken was roasted. The salmon was smoked. We also had oysters from Arcachon and mandarins from the Cote d'Azur, which was very exotic for us.

**DANNY MEYER:** When I was young, I had no choice as to what I was eating. For Thanksgiving and Christmas, we would go to my grandparents' house either in Saint Louis or in Chicago. We always had French people living in our own home because my father was the first American agent for Relais & Chateaux. We had these sons and daughters of French inn keepers living in our home who would work for my dad during the week and they would be our *au pairs* during the weekend, so no matter where we spent our holidays there was always a bottle of Beaujolais or Bourgogne Rouge on the table. And we ate whatever my grandparents served. I usually ate so many hors d'oeuvres on Christmas that I could barely eat dinner. For an appetizer, my grandmother made steak tartar on Thanksgiving and she formed it into a mold of a large turkey. It was raw beef. It looked like a turkey. She called it "Cow That Goes Gobble." On Christmas, she molded it into the shape of a Christmas tree.

**ALAIN DUCASSE:** The most classic French dessert around the holidays is the Christmas log, with butter cream. Two flavors. Chocolate and coconut. My first job in the kitchen when I was a boy was to make these Christmas logs.

**DANNY MEYER:** We wanted to grow up and eat *that* kind of food. Another appetizer we had was something my grandmother called "Fuchsia." It was literally the pinkest pink you've ever seen in your life. She mashed up beets and cream cheese. We'd spread it on Triscuits. She had another one that involved taking a can of sardines and mashing it up with cream cheese and Worcester sauce. That one went on celery.

**Where was she getting these recipes? They seem pretty off now, but they also remind me of combinations that are really popular in mid-century American cookbooks. Betty Draper would make some of these things.**

**DANNY MEYER:** I honestly have no idea where she got them, but it gets even better. The main course on Christmas was always prime rib of beef served with Matzo Meal dumplings. Just to show what kind of Jews we were, the Matzo Meal was mixed with eggs, chicken stock, and milk, which of course isn't kosher because you end up serving dairy with meat. But they were wonderful dumplings. You'd eat them with the roast beef jus, *j-u-s*, over the top of them. For dessert, my grandmother served "Dieter's Apple Pie," and the reason she called it "Dieter's Apple Pie" was that she thought everybody would be so full by that point that she simply left the top pastry off. It was pastry only on the bottom and therefore it was diet.

**Did the French people in your house think you guys were crazy?**

**DANNY MEYER:** They didn't know what to make of it.

**Chef, at one point did you start cooking the holiday meal?**

**ALAIN DUCASSE:** My grandmother did not want me to get involved. But I was very curious and would watch very closely. I was limited to the Christmas log.

**DANNY MEYER:** I would always go into the kitchen because of the smell, but nobody wanted any help.

**ALAIN DUCASSE:** My room was above the kitchen and I remember the smell very early in the morning. My grandmother started very early. When I started cooking the meal at home, after I had started cooking in restaurants, I usually would prepare bay scallops or lobster. But it wasn't appealing to my family because it wasn't a part of the tradition. They liked the other way better.

**Danny, did you ever try to reform your family's holiday meal, make something new, only to hear, "We want Fuchsia?"**

**DANNY MEYER:** Goose. That was the time it happened. I made one Christmas dinner, this was after I had lived in France, and I made roast goose with oysters and a chestnut stuffing and all I heard all night was, "Why do we have to have all this fat? Why can't we just have turkey? Why can't we just have roast beef?"

**And diet pie.**

**DANNY MEYER:** Exactly.

**So, your family's opposed to fat?**

**DANNY MEYER:** In some ways they are. It's true. My revenge has been to open restaurants and feed people and sell a lot of pork.

**What do you think about going out to dinner for holiday meals as opposed to cooking at home? How should a holiday meal out differ from a regular night in a restaurant?**

**ALAIN DUCASSE:** In France, Christmas is a family holiday. You stay home. New Year's Eve is when you go out.

**DANNY MEYER:** I've now been in the restaurant business in New York for 24 years. Until last year, we never had a restaurant open for any major holiday. Ever. And it was only because at Eleven Madison Park, Daniel Humm is Swiss and doesn't care about Thanksgiving. It's not a Swiss holiday and he actually begged me to keep the restaurant open because he said that a lot of the cooks and a lot of the servers really wanted to work. They'd rather make money than not. But I never wanted to ask anybody to work on a holiday when I didn't want to work. So, that's why we were never open. And now this year, with Maialino, our brand new restaurant, we'll have Thanksgiving because it's in a hotel. But none will be open for Christmas and I agree with Alain. New Year's Eve is when you go out to eat.

**But say you actually want to go out on Christmas, or need to?**

**DANNY MEYER:** If somebody doesn't want to cook at home or has more family members than they have room for, than it's great to be in a city that's got restaurants that are actually busy on the holidays. I remember being in St. Louis when I was growing up. There were many nights where we would go out to dinner on Christmas Eve and it would be the most depressing night to go out. The restaurants were half empty. Nobody wanted to be working. And so I think it's important to find a busy restaurant where people are happy to be there. Chinese is ok.

**What restaurants would be worthy of your New Year's celebration?**

**ALAIN DUCASSE:** I would have to choose Le Louis XV in Monaco. It's a unique room. Very special environment.

**You'd eat at one of your own restaurants?**

**ALAIN DUCASSE:** It's a very unique experience. A unique mix in the room. Black truffles, white truffles, caviar, lobster. The check is around 1000 Euro. But you get plus plus plus.

**Perfection in excess.**

**DANNY MEYER:** Right. No holding back. No disappointments.

**Where would you go?**

**DANNY MEYER:** Anywhere *but* my own places. I always try to be away from New York. My first rule is don't work. The next thing is, I either want to do something with just people I love in a small cozy setting. Or, I want to go to Monaco and have the real thing. What I don't want to do is go to a bunch of parties in search of the holy grail because I won't find it at any of them.

**ALAIN DUCASSE:** As long as we're talking about these holiday feasts, we should talk about the special menu at my county hotel, La Bastide de Moustiers. We finish the meal with 13 desserts, which is a tradition of Provence. Dried figs, quince jam, hazelnuts, dark honey nougat, many other symbolic sweets. There are special macerated grapes that we keep in a dark room until Christmas. Very special. Like eating sauterne. The whole thing is almost a caricature of generosity.

**The French really have deeply developed holiday food traditions and we have...**

**DANNY MEYER:** We have holiday sales.

**With all your restaurants, do you ever feel responsible for sharing different culinary traditions around holiday time? Spreading not only joy, but a certain kind of sophistication?**

**DANNY MEYER:** No. I think It's a very private thing. It's about family traditions and what happens in the home. But I do think we have a responsibility to provide a setting around this time of year for people to really be with each other and have a wonderful experience. It's one of the reasons we chose not to open yet for lunch at Maialino. We hated to miss out on December because there would be a lot of business, but we also knew we wouldn't be ready and we feel a responsibility to not inadvertently ruin somebody's holiday celebration at lunch.

**Chef, what will you be cooking for Christmas this year?**

**ALAIN DUCASSE:** Depends on the market. Because of my profession, maybe I'll take it easy for Christmas. I'll be in the French Basque country, so it depends on the fishermen and what they're able to catch. I'll draw inspiration from that. The market is the plan. I eat less now than I did when I was a child around the holidays because, now, it's sort of a festive time all the time, whether I'm eating in my own restaurants or somebody else's. There are many feasts. I'll have six to eight people over.

**I would imagine they'd have certain expectations.**

**ALAIN DUCASSE:** *Oui.* They'll get very honest, simple goodness with some excellent wine. I don't want to do a demo.

**Just to get some frame of reference, what did you make last year?**

**ALAIN DUCASSE:** Bay scallops with black truffle. Foie gras that was poached. Roasted chicken with black truffle. Smoked salmon. Do you have a *commis*, Danny?

**DANNY MEYER:** Uh. My wife.

**ALAIN DUCASSE:** My wife is not a good *commis*. She doesn't come highly recommended. So, I have to play both chef and *commis*.

**Do you follow any of your grandmother's recipes?**

**ALAIN DUCASSE:** I don't feel like there's any regret or nostalgia for what once was. Today, what's available is fantastic.

**Have you ever had a Thanksgiving dinner in America?**

**ALAIN DUCASSE:** I have many times. It's the classic American meal. It's slowly but surely starting to invade Europe. There are waves of Americans populating Europe and they demand it.

**Are there any adjustments you'd make to the classic American Thanksgiving menu? Or, you think it's perfect as is?**

**ALAIN DUCASSE:** It's a matter of finding the right Turkey. You can only find it here. It's harder there.

**In case I can't make it to Monaco, what can I do at home to have a Ducasse-approved New Year's? A little Le Louis luxury in Brooklyn.**

**ALAIN DUCASSE:** You're going to go to the market. You're going to look around for whatever is most visually appealing and fresh. Vegetables. Cultivated by farmers. You take your Le Creuset, some olive oil, a little fresh butter, and a nice thick piece of pork belly. You're going to take all the vegetables you picked up at the market. Clean them, cut them in big pieces.

**Carrots, onions?**

**ALAIN DUCASSE:** Yes. And mushrooms, spinach, root vegetables.

**Parsnips?**

**ALAIN DUCASSE:** Exactly. Whatever is fresh. Cooked with love. If you stumble across a truffle, that would be nice. Add a little chicken stock, slowly as it's cooking.

**Covered?**

**ALAIN DUCASSE:** Yes. On the stove top over a low heat. And then an hour later you take your pot off the stovetop and place it directly on the table. You can shave some raw fruit or vegetables on top to create a contrast of texture. To have the raw and the cooked. You put it on the table. You take a drink. You share your generosity with friends, your love and time slowly simmered. That's the most important.

**To drink?**

**ALAIN DUCASSE:** One beautiful bottle of wine opposed to three mediocre ones. I'm thinking Puligny- Montrachet or Chassagne to start. A half bottle each. That's to start.

**DANNY MEYER:** If I want to make a commitment to having a gastronomic experience, then I want the best and I'm really thinking Monaco's a great way to go. But I also think I can have just as much fun putting on a sweater and blue jeans and opening up some good wine and having fondue with friends. But, usually, it's either about love or gastronomy. If I can get both, I'm doing pretty well.

**Can we be specific about what bottle is worthy of the night?**

**DANNY MEYER:** Bottle? I'm talking about a lot of wine. I'm not working on January 1st. I think if you don't drink Champagne on New Year's Eve, and good Champagne, when are you going to drink Champagne at all? That's a hard choice, but if I have to decide right now, I'd say I'd like to drink Billecart Salmon Blanc de Blancs. I'd be very very happy with that. After, I'd want to have some white Burgundy. I'm thinking about Meursault.

**Chef, why don't you pick some reds.**

**ALAIN DUCASSE:** Haut-Brion. One magnum per person.

**DANNY MEYER:** I would like '89 Haut-Brion, if I'm being particular.

**After-dinner drinks or even more Champagne?**

**ALAIN DUCASSE:** Tokaji to finish.

— *Howie Kahn*

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