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ALAN REYBURN

The Bloomingdale Interviews
by Estelle Ellis
Q. Okay. We're on...
A. Right. Well, as I said, I think I have one of the more unusual jobs in Bloomingdale's, because I'm neither a merchant nor a retailer in the commonly accepted sense of the word. And yet, as a restauranteur, I feel that I am both and need to embody both and need to embody both techniques and talents in whatever I do with the addition of being a food person.

When Mr. Traub asked me to join Bloomingdale's some seven years ago, I doubted I would be able to make a major contribution and I was questioning why he would want to have a person such as myself, with my background, joining this company. Mr. Traub pointed out to me that in this very competitive world of retailing, the points of difference were the important points: Since so much merchandise was uniform, it was the other things, the other departments, which would make Bloomingdale's stand out. And one of these should be, and could continue to be, the restaurant division.

With that appeal to "honor," so to speak, I could not refuse, and wanting to become associated with this dynamic group of persons who are surrounding Mr. Traub, I agreed and have never looked back since then.

Q. Tell us a little bit about where you were before.
A. Well, before the Bloomingdale's association, I was
with an international design and consulting group which gave me an enormous insight into food and beverage practices and themes and designs around the world. And prior to that I had some fine British shipping experience, with Cunard Lines, where I was responsible for five passenger ships and had the joy of overseeing everything that happened to a passenger, short of pure transportation, from point A to point B, from the moment a customer passenger walked up the gangplank. So I had the belly dancers and the in-cabin entertainment and the food and beverage services and the quality of the bed linen--everything was under my direction! Which was a tremendous experience.

With Bloomingdale's, I have enjoyed very much the stimulus that Marvin Traub has given to me on a personal basis, and I think I forgive him for his desire and his tenacity in wanting to be personally involved with virtually everything and everybody, because I know how much I benefit, overall, from this involvement with me. When Marvin Traub has a couple of comments (which he never fails to have, I might say, on whatever is done or presented to him), then it is surprising and somewhat startling, quite frankly, how often he is on track, and how often what he is saying and pointing out is very pertinent. He often picks up points that even I am overlooking, and presents them sometimes from a different perspective, which makes me realize that possibly something could be done additionally or alternately.
Marvin is a very good friend of food and beverage, and is a great believer that fine food and fine beverage should go hand in hand and do, indeed, play a vital role, a vital part of every cultured and every Bloomingdale's-type client. Our shoppers are people who enjoy restaurants, which is one of the reasons why New York is today the world's most exciting restaurant city. And the New Yorkers that we seek are, indeed, the Bloomingdale's clients, so the two are compatible. And we do try to make restaurants inside Bloomingdale's, most especially within the 59th Street store, as exciting or challenging or innovative as Marvin Traub and his other department heads try to make the other departments appear to the shoppers of this store.

As a recognition, by the way, of Mr. Traub's interest and contribution to food and beverage, in 1986, at the time of the introduction of the Beaujolais Nouveau—Beaujolais Village Nouveau by Georges du Boeuf who is commonly called the king of "le beaujolais," Mr. du Boeuf knowing that the "launching" luncheon would once again be taking place in Bloomingdale's Le Train Bleu restaurant, where the chef and I had researched and the chef was preparing a special menu from the Burgundy-Lyon district, Mon. du Boeuf bottled a double magnum of wine and had a customized label imprinted saying, "Georges du Boeuf of Beaujolais Nouveau district honors Marvin Traub of Bloomingdale's, and thanks Marvin Traub for his encouragement and sponsorship of the
luncheon offered on XY date, in Le Train Bleu.

I think for a wine maker of international stature
to realize that Marvin Traub was a force to be reckoned with,
and certainly a force to be thanked, shows that Marvin's
contribution is accepted and is certainly a....
Q. Do you have a copy of that label? Do you have a
copy of that label?
A. I still have a bottle, because, not to be immodest,
Mon. de Boeuf made two bottles and presented one to me, and
presented the other double magnum to Marvin Traub. Marvin,
I know, has used his and I still have not.
Q. Did he keep the label, do you know?
A. I do not know if he's kept the label. I still have
the bottle....
Q. I'd love to have a...
A. A facsimile of the label itself?
Q. Yes, of the label itself.
A. Well, why don't I see if I can get it off the
bottle.
Q. All right.
A. What other...Without being more detailed, what
sort of...
Q. Well, give me some sense of what working with him
is all about. In other words, you've taken trips with him?
What are the...What are some of the major memory incidents
for you?
A. Marvin's indefatigable energy level. He loves having meetings at 7:00 or 7:30 in the morning, which my system tells me is an inappropriate time for meetings of a business nature anyway, and he seems to enjoy doing those things when on the road, traveling with a group of his people. And this meeting is following a late night outing, where Marvin has been eating along with whoever he's with really adventurous food stuffs. I have only done a couple of trips in the company of Marvin Traub, and I have found them perfectly exhausting, as I believe most people do who do travel with him. But one, at the same time, cannot take away the fact that the trips, similarly, are much more...not only productive, but aware-raising, conscious-raising, by Marvin's tremendous industry and tremendous intellectual curiosity and his grasp of things that are taking place.

When I was off to India, and I studiously avoided going to India with anyone else, because going to India is a challenge, and I didn't feel that I wanted to travel with a gang of people. I wanted to do this thing at my own pace and absorb things in my own way.

I went up to have a chat with him in his office a week before I went, and from the top of his head, after he had heard of my itinerary, he started giving me--for 30 minutes--interesting thoughts, places, people and food stuffs and sights--which he would suggest that I try to see and do and experience. I was taken aback that, in the middle of
a busy day and fully a year after he had most recently been to India, he was able to recall from memory that "when you get to the top of the mountain, remember to turn 'round left and look at the mountain over your left shoulder," because that would be the more particular one.

So, in ways like that, traveling with Marvin, certainly enhanced...Enhances your awareness of what's going on. Even if it may play the very devil with your constitution and your bodily function.

Q. What about the relationship of what you're doing here, in the restaurant, to the overall growth and the arena of products that relate to food preparation? Do you get involved in the discovery of the adventuresome food that makes your restaurant on that new track always? Do you ever coordinate, or is this ever consciously coordinated with what goes on in the home division?

A. I think I have to say yes, somewhat modestly, that I do...That I am able to keep Mr. Traub relatively reassured that what is new in food and restaurant service, if not already in Bloomingdale's is indeed on the point of being introduced to our Bloomingdale's restaurant in one form or another.

I had a small vignette about something--a red pepper puree. Bell pepper puree. I hope Mr. Traub won't mind my telling this little joke. But this was about three years ago, just at the time that "Culee" and "Verblon"
were really coming into their own in the New York restaurant market. And I sent up to Mr. Traub a menu proposal for a luncheon which he was hosting in the executive boardroom the week hence. And I proposed whatever-it-was with a red bell pepper puree as the sauce.

Mr. Traub sent back the menu to me, circled this item and wrote above it, "Certainly not!" I attached another piece of paper to this menu and wrote back to him and said, "I will gladly change it for a brown gravy or something very safe. But I'd like you to know that red bell pepper puree is the 'in' thing at this time."

Traub sent back the menu to me saying, "Okay, then go ahead."

At the luncheon itself, I took care to be in the boardroom when this item was served, in order to measure the reaction not only of Mr. Traub but of his honored guests. And I was somewhat tickled when, as soon as the plates went down, Marvin tapped the side of his wine glass and said, "Ladies and Gentlemen, I would just like to draw your attention to something very new and very exciting which you are going to be having today. This red puree is that of a red bell pepper, and this is the newest thing on the restaurant scene right at the moment."

Q. Isn't that marvelous. Isn't that marvelous.
A. And I thought that was very nice. It shows that the man was big enough to accept an idea which he found
somewhat abhorrent, or strange at least, and was able to find in his intellectu the ability to acknowledge something new, and here he was. He was brave enough to say it. So, I think that overall we are able to stay one step ahead, or, certainly, in step with Mr. Traub's expectations. Remember, however, he does eat out six times a week and he usually has a double date. So, effectively, Marvin has 12 to 15, if you count his lunches...

Q. Experiences: Restaurant experiences.
A. Restaurant experiences outside. And the kinds of places he is able to go to are, of course, the really wonderful restaurants of the world. So I am delighted to hear from him what it is he experiences in these places, when he has time to talk to me about them, because I can only but enjoy and learn from these situations.

Q. The Le Train Bleu concept. Where did it come from?
A. Well, Le Train Bleu, before it existed some eight years ago (and this is just before my time at Bloomingdale's) I understand Marvin went up onto the roof and said, "We really should make use of this space up here. How can we make it productive? I'd like a restaurant up here." Whoever was with him said, "Well, you can't have a restaurant up here because if you did, people would have to walk up some stairs. And anyway, the restaurant (because it's a long narrow space) would have to look like the interior of a train or the interior of an airplane." So Mr. Traub said, "I'll take a train.
Make me a train."
Q. I love it.
A. And Barbara D'Arcy and Fred Palatinas, at that time in our design department, created a train. And rather than having just a train (typical of Bloomingdale's flare), they researched interesting trains and rather than having the obvious train, they researched the Blue Train, which was the nickname applied to the train running from the grey skies of Paris to the blue sea and the blue skies of the Mediterranean, and which became known as the most luxurious, fashionable, fun, getaway train. Because, you know, this was at the height of the period where there were no airplanes, and not all that number of people had private cars to drive down to the South of France. And, of course, that's where everybody in "le toute societe" would go to.

So this was The Blue Train. And we've been very lucky with Le Train Bleu. We've kept it as one of Bloomingdale's best kept secrets.
Q. Why?
A. Since it doesn't advertise. We like to make it an "in" place to go. We do a very credible ....
Q. The inclusion of it in Passport is going to change all that, won't it?
A. The inclusion of Le Train Bleu (which has been reviewed many, many times; and, I'm glad to say, always very, very favorably), Le Train Bleu is doing well...I doubt very
much if almost anything we do will make it enormously more successful.

Q. Why?

A. The period of time which is not utilized is the evening time. And since Le Train Bleu depends on its clients, its guests, leaving the train before 5-9 in the evening, I don't believe we'll develop a major dinner business of people who will leave a restaurant before 9:00.

Q. As a concept, since the idea now of spinning off wonderful ideas and taking...like "Le Express" out at the airport...has anyone ever said why not do a Le Train Bleu restaurant of Bloomingdale's outside of the store?

A. The subject of having restaurants operated by Bloomingdale's, and in the style of Bloomingdale's, off premises and totally unrelated to the store, geographically, is one of some discussion every now and again. But so far we haven't broken the company's policy of saying no restaurants other than under the roof of Bloomingdale's.

So, at this moment, with 38 restaurants in our division (not all of these, of course, are public restaurants. Many of them are co-worker restaurants. But even co-worker cafeterias have a market, they have a clientele, they have a menu, they have food standards, they have a printed P&L statement, so every one of them is a restaurant despite who their clients are), so with 38 restaurants, our hands are reasonably full. And with the constant changing of foods,
of fashion, of styles—all of which is restauranteuring today—and with the training of young people and not such young people to try to give good service inside of Bloomingdale's restaurants, since this is one of the places where a Bloomingdale's shopper has the opportunity of sitting down for an hour or an hour and a half, the service must be better than elsewhere. Because if you sit down for an hour and you have poor service, it's far more noticeable than if you were standing buying something which you have selected for yourself and taken off a shelf and are now presenting to a cashier to be charged.

Q. Alan, restaurants, as you say, have become the signal callers of new trends and a way of really recording the change in people— their tastes, their style, their patterns of living, and also has been a tremendous influence on the food patterns and the table top patterns of buying people.

Since this is where we are now, at this moment in time, do you see any reason why stores that have really not understood what you understand about restaurants should now be doing something more exceptional? Why haven't they? Why haven't there been more Le Trains Bleu in major stores across the country? Why have they not understood this?

A. Well, restauranteuring is an art and a discipline of its own. Frankly, not too many people outside of persons intellectually attuned to this orbit will understand it.
This includes an awful lot of very brilliant business people who do not understand what it takes to run a successful restaurant. It is quite true that a restaurant by and large returns less money per square foot than does a department of a retail store. A successful department of a retail store. It is also a far more complex animal to manage. And we generate a lot of garbage, in the restaurant. We generate a lot of cooking smells in the restaurant. We need far more expensive equipment in order to manufacture the goods before we package the goods and before we sell the goods.

By the way, we are the only department, in the whole of the retailing industry, which plans its season, which does its own purchasing, which does its own receiving on premises, which does its own manufacturing, which does its own merchandising, and which does its own selling. I often wish I could be a better retailer who unpacked a hamper and then put the merchandise on the shelf and then stood back and waited for people to buy it.

Q Knowing all of this, and making you as unique as Bloomingdale's is, really, as an executive here, what it also says is that Marvin Traub is the kind of retail merchant who has a vision of this.

A. Yes, Marvin has more vision than most retailers, including many prominent, admirable people, whom I've met. Marvin sees a broader picture and has higher, has a quicker temper and a quicker level of impatience, and has a higher
vision of what his store, under his name, should present to the public. He wants a greater totality than do others.

Q. So, if I were to say to you, what is the single characteristic of the man, as a man...

A. I'd say it in one word. I'd sum it totally up as being excitement.

Q. As a merchant.

A. Excitement.

Q. As a citizen of the world.

A. Excitement at being a citizen of the world! His great curiosity about virtually every part of the world. I'm somewhat hurt, of course, that he doesn't seem to like London as much as Paris, but that is very personal, of course, and harks back to my own heritage.

Q. Is there one experience you had with him, on a one to one basis, that you'd like to record?

A. Yes. The look on his face after he and I had been talking about the type of menu which he envisioned I should arrange to be served by one of the leading hotels in New York City at a major dinner for the Prime Minister of France this springtime, where we had envisioned, he and I, doing something like lobster soufflés, I found out that one of the favorite foods of the Prime Minister of France is tripe. So when I went to Mr. Traub, and said, "Marvin, how would you feel about our serving tripe?" the look on his face was something that should have been recorded.
Q. But you're serving it.
A. No, in the interest of the 1,200 other guests, we will not be serving tripe.
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