

EATING & DRINKING

IN MY KITCHEN

JULIAN NICCOLINI

The urbane restaurateur is a weekend beekeeper, illicit forager and would-be professional cyclist

CO-OWNER OF MANHATTAN'S iconic Four Seasons, Julian Niccolini presides over the restaurant's Philip Johnson- and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe-designed dining rooms like a circus ringmaster—seating, and playfully teasing, some of the nation's most prominent entrepreneurs and entertainers. For the last 36 years, Mr. Niccolini, 59, has used his irreverent sense of humor and political savvy to establish the Four Seasons as the city's power-lunch gold standard. And he's permitted the restaurant to evolve, recently introducing \$59 prix fixe lunch menus, for example, and Saturday cooking lessons. Mr. Niccolini is currently looking into opening a second Four Seasons; he has mentioned China but will only definitively confirm that he is exploring options "outside of the U.S."

In addition to running the restaurant, Mr. Niccolini finds time to appear in films—most recently "Arbitrage," with Richard Gere—and write the occasional column for the New York Observer, Details and Gotham magazines. Born near Lucca, Italy, where his family raised chickens and produced prosciutto and cheese, he makes his own wine, honey, olive oil and tomato sauce, available for sale at julianotheseasons.com.

The father of two grown daughters, Mr. Niccolini escapes the din of the restaurant world at the Bedford, N.Y., home he shares with his wife, Lisa, and their Labradoodle, Dutch. Recently he spoke about the simple pleasure of beekeeping, the lure of cycling and the civilized indulgence of a well-made spritz.

I believe smaller is better and live in a very convenient two-bedroom house. It's extremely economical and compact. I enjoy visiting people in large houses but it's a total waste of electricity, fuel and the wood you're cutting down to build the property. People should reassess once in a while and say, "What's better for the world: to live in a huge palace, or to be in a place you can manage?"

On a typical weekend, I go bike riding—if I weren't at the Four Seasons, my dream job would be to be a bicycle racer. And we'll go to the Bedford Post Inn for breakfast, or lunch when it's warm, because you can eat outside and it's very beautiful. Then we cook at home.

I don't have a restaurant kitchen in my house, like a lot of people do—and which they rarely use. My wife is a great cook. I make Italian specialties like caprese salads.

My favorite meal to eat at home is farro, which I prepare like a risotto, with vegetables and olive oil. Once the weather gets warmer, it's easy living. We eat salad and whatever's growing locally. We grow our own tomatoes and basil,

but the deer get to them, and we don't like to spray. We're not supermarket people unless we have to be.

I have so many cookbooks. I like David Tanis's "A Platter of Figs and Other Recipes." But I love the cookbook of my favorite dishes that my wife Lisa compiled. It's spectacular. Some day we should publish it.

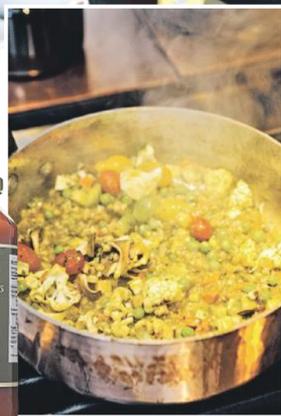
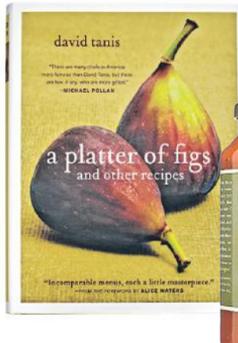
We have seven beehives in our backyard and make honey every year. We also have a shower outside, and the bees come and check on me there. Even though it's difficult, making honey is definitely worth it; I love being able to make something that's 100% pure.

I go out and pick mushrooms. I don't think it's very legal—they're on someone else's property, and they probably don't want me to pick them—but they're hen of the woods, the best. We sauté them or roast them. Sometimes I pick so many I have to bring them to the kitchen at the Four Seasons.

I always have my own olive oil, which we make near Siena. I have to have good coffee—no question about that—and wine. I drink Ronnefeldt Morgentau



CHEZ JULIAN Clockwise from right: Julian Niccolini in his Bedford, N.Y., kitchen; farro primavera; Julian of the Seasons Tuscan Tomato Sauce; 'A Platter of Figs' by David Tanis; Mr. Niccolini with his dog; Venetian glasses; wine, 'Mona Lisa' and other kitchen essentials.



green tea. I also like Sigg's plain yogurt. It's made in New York with an heirloom Icelandic recipe. And I love to drink a classic spritz, made well: Campari, Prosecco, some Pellegrino water.

My "baby" is a Labradoodle called Dutch. We wanted to call her Coco but too many people have dogs called Coco. She has a very good appetite and loves it when I bring home leftover bison from the Four Seasons. I sauté it with green vegetables and serve it with a little bit of Fromm Surf and Turf [grain-free dog

food] and a dash of Primadophilus [probiotic]. She loves it!

My greatest splurge is going to the Amalfi coast and having lunch at La Conca del Sogno. It's such a romantic place, and completely inaccessible by car. You need a boat to get there, and it's the best seafood in the world. It's like heaven.

The best dinner I've had in years was in a restaurant called Antica Osteria Cera just outside of Venice. The food was

outstanding, and we had beautiful langoustines from the Adriatic.

When you're entertaining at home, if you have incredible guests, you don't have to worry about anything else. Candlelight is beautiful, and we use old Venetian glasses—the short ones without the stems. They're much more fun.

You have to serve excellent Champagne. I wouldn't go with Prosecco, but I'd serve a Franciacorta from Ca' del Bosco or Cavalleri, or a really beautiful pink Champagne, like Dom Pérignon. Moët & Chandon Rosé is another superb bottle.

We really like to entertain outside. We have a very large deck that we built ourselves, and I love to barbecue on my Lynx professional grill. Last Easter, I grilled incredible ham.

The best dinner party of my life was the day that my wife and I got married, in 1982, at Le Cirque, with just six people. We had a great meal there, and we were drinking exceptional Cristal Rosé. Without question, the smartest thing I ever did was marry Lisa. I love her. She changed everything.

—Edited from an interview by Jackie Cooperman



Farro Primavera With Parsley-Pecan Pesto
Total Time: 45 minutes Serves: 4

In the bowl of a food processor, combine **1 bunch Italian flat-leaf parsley, 1/4 cup toasted pecans, 1/2 cup grated Parmesan cheese, 1/2 teaspoon salt and 1/2 teaspoon black pepper.** Turn on food processor and add **1/4 cup olive oil** in a slow, steady stream until a smooth pesto forms. Set pesto aside. // Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil over high heat. Place **2 cups farro** in a strainer and rinse. Add farro to boiling salted water and cook until tender, 15–20 minutes. Strain farro and set aside. // Bring another large pot of salted wa-

ter to a boil over high heat and fill a large bowl with ice water. In boiling water, blanch **1 cup peas, 3 medium carrots, diced, 1 parsnip, diced, 1 celery root, diced, and 1/2 head cauliflower,** cut into small florets, transferring vegetables to ice water as you go. Drain vegetables and set aside. // In a large sauté pan heat 2 tablespoons grapeseed oil over medium heat. Add **1 pound sliced porcini mushrooms, 1 teaspoon butter and 1 shallot,** minced, and cook, stirring often, until mushrooms are tender, about 5 minutes. Season with salt and pepper to

taste and reserve. // In a large sauté pan heat **2 tablespoons olive oil** over medium-high heat. Add blanched vegetables, farro and mushrooms and stir to combine. Add **1/4 cup chicken or vegetable stock** and bring to a boil. Add parsley-pecan pesto and **1 teaspoon butter.** Cook, stirring, until everything is heated through, 1–2 minutes. Add **2 cups halved grape tomatoes** and toss to combine. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Garnish with **black truffle shavings,** if desired.

—Adapted from the Four Seasons

HOW TO

MAKE BEURRE BLANC

Master this classic sauce and instantly expand your repertoire of elegant meals

I TEACH A LOT OF cooking classes, and I've logged many hours observing the way that mastering certain simple but fundamental recipes and techniques can make cooking more intuitive, relaxed and creative. The versatile French sauce *beurre blanc* is one of them.

It is little more than a shallot, white wine and white-wine vinegar reduction that, mixed with cold butter, magically emulsifies into pale-yellow lusciousness. Its bright but delicate flavor works particularly well with seafood, as in the salmon recipe at right, as well as poultry and vegetables. Made correctly, *beurre blanc* is light, airy and just thick enough to cling to any dish it adorns.

I was taught that the sauce should be served right away to prevent separation, but I've since learned something rather revolutionary: Many of the chefs I admire include cream as a stabilizer and have a much easier time of it. I'm now a cream convert. Stabilized in this way, the sauce will hold in the refrigerator as long as three days and in the freezer for at least a month.

Beurre blanc is really very easy to make. The main points to remember are not to let the sauce get too hot and not to add the butter too quickly. Let each piece of butter melt almost completely into the sauce before you add the next. Keep the sauce just under a simmer; control the temperature by taking the pan on and off the heat. And if you over-reduce in step one, be sure to add some water back in. A certain amount of liquid is necessary for emulsification.

Once you've got the basics down, go wild. Play around with flavored vinegars, or stir in fresh herbs. Or make a *beurre rouge* by substituting red wine and red-wine vinegar for white. Whatever you do, remember that you're working with just a few ingredients: Begin with a good wine and the best butter you can buy. —Gail Monaghan

STEP ONE: Combine **3 shallots,** finely minced, **1 cup dry white wine** and **6 tablespoons white-wine vinegar** in a nonreactive saucepan over high heat, bring to a rapid boil and reduce until almost dry, about 4 tablespoons.

STEP TWO: Add **2 tablespoons heavy cream** to shallot-wine-vinegar reduction. Once liquid simmers, remove pan from heat.

STEP THREE: Off heat, whisk in **3 tablespoons cold unsalted butter,** one at a time. Return pan to stove on lowest setting. Whisk in **13 tablespoons cold unsalted butter,** one at a time, allowing each adding more to melt into sauce before adding more. Remove pan from heat and whisk in **1/4 teaspoon salt, large pinch white pepper** and **lemon juice** to taste.

SALMON WITH BEURRE BLANC TOTAL TIME: 10 MINUTES SERVES: 8

Oven-poaching produces delicate salmon, a good match for light, lemony *beurre blanc*.
8 cups fish or vegetable stock
8 (7-ounce) salmon fillets, about 1-inch thick, skinned
Salt and pepper, to taste
1 cup warm *beurre blanc* (see recipe

above)
1/2 cup finely minced fresh chives

WHAT TO DO:

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Bring stock to a boil in a medium saucepan. Season salmon fillets on both sides with salt and pepper.

2. Place salmon in a lightly buttered roasting pan and pour boiling stock over top. Place pan in oven and cook until salmon is rare inside, 3–4 minutes.
3. To serve, divide fillets among eight plates and spoon *beurre blanc* over and around salmon. Scatter chives over *beurre blanc* and serve immediately.