

From left: Tribeca Grill co-owners Drew Nieporent and Robert De Niro, wine director David Gordon and managing partner Marty Shapiro have run the restaurant through the ups and downs of a quarter century.

THE TRIBECA ERA

ROBERT DE NIRO AND DREW NIEPONENT'S GRAND AWARD-WINNING TRIBECA GRILL HAS HELPED SHAPE NEW YORK CITY'S WINE AND DINING SCENE SINCE 1990

BY BEN O'DONNELL // PHOTOGRAPHS BY QUENTIN BACON



David Gordon (pouring) started at Tribeca Grill as a manager but eventually changed his focus to wine, building the restaurant's list into one of Manhattan's most impressive.

“ always believe in things being around for a long, long time.”

Robert De Niro, 73, made his first screen appearance in 1965 and has more than 130 film credits as an actor, director and producer. But he's talking about Tribeca Grill, a restaurant he opened in 1990. It's still going strong. “People like tradition; they like coming back; they like knowing it's there.”

De Niro got the idea to start a restaurant in downtown Manhattan in 1988. “I was living in Tribeca, and I wanted to set up a production company,” he says—the Tribeca Film Center. “But I wanted a restaurant down on the bottom floor. I thought that was important.”

The megastar actor, already a two-time Oscar winner (*The Godfather: Part II*; *Raging Bull*) and two-time nominee to boot (*Taxi Driver*; *The Deer Hunter*), had become a regular at one of the few fine-dining establishments in the zip code, a French place called Montrachet that had opened in 1985.

“I liked Montrachet very much. It was a terrific restaurant,” says De Niro. He approached owner Drew Nieporent about opening a second restaurant, and one night, the two men walked over to an old warehouse nearby, deciding it made for an intriguing possibility.

De Niro then set about asking friends for investments. Some of the names of those who said yes may be familiar: Sean Penn, Bill Murray, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Christopher Walken, Ed Harris, Lou Diamond Phillips, Russell Simmons.

But others declined: De Niro's faith in Tribeca Grill's future was at odds with the reality that New York City chews up restaurants and spits them out. Even the hottest fame magnet can burn out quickly. And for most, in the 1980s, the sleepy Tribeca scene was barely on the map when it came to high-wattage hangouts.

“Tribeca Grill was a huge roll of the dice,” says Nieporent, who is now 61. “It was an audacious thing in this neighborhood to do a restaurant of this size. There was nothing happening” in terms of dining.

But Tribeca Grill started strong, fueled by its star power; according to Nieporent, the original stakeholders (most of whom are still financially involved) recouped their investments within three years. It wouldn't be long before the neighborhood became a crucible of culinary competition. “It's quite easy to become complacent,” says Nieporent. To stay on top, Tribeca Grill needed to step up its game.

So in the mid-1990s, wine director David Gordon and now-managing partner Marty Shapiro came up with a plan to inject fresh excitement into the restaurant and make it stand out from the crowd. Their idea was to give the wine program a significant upgrade.

Nieporent's first response: No.

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Clockwise from above: Opening night at Tribeca Grill in 1990, with Drew Nieporent (arms up), Robert De Niro, then-chef Don Pintabona (chef's coat and jeans) and managing partner Marty Shapiro (blue shirt) on hand; Robert De Niro, Toukie Smith and Martin Scorsese relax at the grill; Liza Minnelli and Mark Gero attend a party at the restaurant.

“I did fight against it. I had Montrachet.”

Montrachet, Nieporent's first restaurant, launched with only 60 selections but by 1994 had captured *Wine Spectator's* Grand Award, reserved for the best wine programs in the world. Few other places could match the depth of its French selection, and the list glittered with the gems of Burgundy.

But Gordon, who is now 56, believed he could build a serious program with an identity of its own that would match Tribeca Grill's personality. “In the '90s, people were starting to learn more about wine; people were spending more on wine,” says Gordon. “Everything was bought along the way, bits and pieces as we had enough money to do it, and we just grew organically from that.”

Tribeca Grill had hearty food and comparatively gentle prices, so Gordon sought out wines with similar qualities.

“It's hard to believe, but 25 years ago, California wine wasn't like it is [today]. And certainly the Southern Rhône wasn't.” So that's where Gordon headed. In the beginning, for example, he looked hard at Zinfandel, “back when white Zinfandel was the biggest thing.” He bought Screaming Eagle, Colgin and Bryant, among the original cult California Cabernets, in their early years. He also began exploring abroad, initially following his own tastes in pursuit of values.

“I always loved Rhône wines,” says Gordon. “Châteauneuf-du-Pape, many, many wines you could put on a list for \$75 and under. Even in the year 2001, the consumer didn't know that much about the Rhône. But I thought the style of that wine—which is big, robust, with a little bit of spice—really suited the cuisine

here, which was meat-focused; we always had intense flavors.”

Gordon began organizing his list by grape variety instead of region, to help educate customers. “They knew the names, but they didn't know Sancerre was Sauvignon Blanc.” One cellar in the bowels of the old Martinson Coffee warehouse eventually grew to three, today holding 30,000 bottles under the city streets (an advantage the restaurant has over other wine-centric Manhattan eateries; most with large lists must pay for off-site storage).

Tribeca Grill entered *Wine Spectator's* Restaurant Awards program in 1998, earning a Best of Award of Excellence, the program's middle tier.

And the list kept growing. Gordon added a preface once it reached tome size: “Dave's Picks,” where less easily categorized value propositions might be found. Plus, a page devoted to *Wine Spectator* Wine of the Year winners through the decades. In 2000 and 2001, Gordon

STARS OVER TRIBECA

SOME OF HOLLYWOOD AND NEW YORK'S MARQUEE NAMES HAVE INVESTED IN THE GRILL

Robert De Niro, actor

Sean Penn, actor

Bill Murray, actor

Christopher Walken, actor

Mikhail Baryshnikov, ballet dancer and choreographer

Ed Harris, actor

Lou Diamond Phillips, actor

Harvey and Bob Weinstein, producers

Russell Simmons, co-founder, Def Jam record label

Peter Max, artist

Shep Gordon, music talent manager

Allen Grubman, entertainment lawyer

Frank DiLeo, music industry executive and actor (deceased, shares sold)

Penny Trenk, stock trader

Richard Krasnow, lawyer (shares sold)

hired two servers whom he'd train to work the floor as sommeliers and help him manage the wine inventory: Yoshi Takemura and Patrick Cappiello. He now has four. (The same team also reports to Gordon protégé Jason Jacobeit at Best of Award of Excellence winner Bâtard, the French restaurant that occupies Montrachet's former space.)

By 2002, the list had grown to 1,450 selections, and that year, Tribeca Grill earned a Grand Award, which it has held ever since.

Today, the restaurant is an iconic wine destination, offering 2,200 selections. With only 87 Grand Award winners in the world, Tribeca's nine peers in New York City include such standouts as Daniel Boulud's Daniel, Mario Batali's Del Posto and Danny Meyer's the Modern.

What emerged from Gordon's buying philosophy was an all-American bar and grill with "the biggest list in the world for Châteauneuf-du-Pape, easily, including any restaurant in Châteauneuf-du-Pape," holding "more Clos des Papes, probably, than anybody except Clos des Papes," says Gordon. If you can squeeze through the cellar rows, the claim looks plausible, Châteauneufs stacked floor to ceiling.

Because Gordon began buying early in the Rhône's darling phase, Tribeca Grill can offer pristinely aged wines kept as close to their release list prices as possible, even when the wine has moved up-market since. The Clos des Papes 2004 red is listed at \$180, for example, while the 2010 is \$275. (The current vintage, 2013, retails for \$125 on store shelves.)

"The key is buying smart—wines that age. When I look back, I wasn't thinking at the time, 'Is this wine I'm going to want to have in 10 years?' but it worked out," says Gordon, and he made it a core tenet of his philosophy. Because Gordon established relationships with producers and importers many vintages ago, he gets dibs on difficult-to-procure wines every year (there are 18 bottlings of California's Sine Qua Non on the list, 27 of Roumier Burgundies). Because the restaurant has always done brisk business, he can keep a million-dollar inventory (based on what he paid for the wines; their actual value is much higher), holding off on offering wines he doesn't think have reached their prime yet and building many impressive verticals (eight vintages of Clos des Papes, 11 of Chave Hermitage Blanc, nine of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti Richebourg).

You can drink the best stuff out there at Tribeca Grill, but even today, high-roller wines are "not where my interest lies," shrugs Gordon. "I like having a focus on wines that are affordable, while having a big list."



David Gordon (left), shown here with Marty Shapiro in the cellar in 2000, was and is especially bullish on California Cabernet and Zinfandel, as well as Châteauneuf-du-Pape. In 2002, Tribeca Grill would win Wine Spectator's Grand Award for its wine list.

Back in 1983, five years before De Niro had his inspiration and when the concepts of the 54-page wine list and of Tribeca as a destination neighborhood barely existed in New York, Nieporent was already taking the first steps toward changing all that.

He was on a jog, training for the New York City Marathon, when he spied a space where he might open his own restaurant after years working for others, in the way-downtown neighborhood formerly known as Washington Market, which in the 1970s had been renamed Tribeca (a portmanteau of Triangle Below Canal Street). Montrachet, named after the great wine of Burgundy, debuted to considerable acclaim in 1985.

"The greatest reason to be down here was the cost," says Nieporent. "There's nothing more gratifying, in New York especially, than to be in an area where it's a little bit of an adventure to find it. Tribeca was that sort of uncharted waters back in the '80s."

Tribeca Grill would not be Montrachet lite: Nieporent originally envisioned a seafood restaurant in the mold of San Francisco's historic Tadich Grill, and De Niro wanted his place to be welcoming and unpretentious.

When interviewed by a reporter for *New York* magazine shortly before the opening of Tribeca Grill, De Niro said, "The place should be warm; people should feel comfortable in it. It should

what Nieporent estimates were more than a thousand workers a day. Business restarted, a little shaky while cars were still prohibited in the area, but New Yorkers embraced the downtown community, and soon the house was full again. In November 2001, vintner Ann Colgin wielded a gavel at a wine auction at the restaurant that raised a high-six-figure sum for the Windows of Hope victim-relief charity—in one night. The neighborhood was back on its feet, and Tribeca Grill returned to form, with the Grand Award announced soon afterward. When the restaurant clinched the honor, *Wine Spectator* wrote, "Tribeca Grill endures. For wine lovers, it's a downtown bastion of simple good times, a place that takes a casual attitude toward everything but quality."

As the years unfurled, Robert De Niro has watched with equanimity from his corner-table perch, nursing a glass of wine (white is favored) served by David Gordon.

David Gordon's upbringing did not portend a vinous future. He grew up in Brooklyn's far-flung Midwood neighborhood, which remains well outside the cool precincts of the borough. He's an alum of the same high school as Bernie Sanders and Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

"My dad was a travel agent, my mom was a high-school secretary," says Gordon. "We never went out to eat. We went to a Chinese restaurant once every six months, New China Inn. Until I went to Cornell, I hadn't eaten anything other than pizza and bologna sandwiches or bagels."

But a year into his undergraduate studies, Gordon decided he wouldn't spend his career working in an office and transferred to Cornell's hospitality school. Not long after graduation in 1982, he moved back to the city.

"You have to realize something about the '80s, which is that there were no American sommeliers in New York," Gordon recalls.

So Gordon began teaching himself. "It just got to me, looking at the bottle and thinking, 'Where does this come from? What is it like?'" He became an avid reader and found acceptance into the small but enthusiastic crowd of New York wine geeks of the 1980s. One day, with some restaurant friends, he chipped in for a bottle of Penfolds Grange Hermitage, which came to \$8 a head: "I don't want to say 'epiphany,' because it makes it sound romantic—but it really made an impact."

Thanks to his long tenure and his empathetic character, Gordon has been a mentor to a whole generation of wine professionals. He has instilled in them the values of accessibility and education.

"This restaurant has had so many generations of wine drinkers come here and discover how great it is to be able to drink old wine at a good price," says Cappiello, who now owns two wine-focused Manhattan restaurants of his own: Pearl & Ash and Rebelle.

At 26, Tribeca Grill has outlasted several of Nieporent's Myriad Restaurant Group spots: Layla, Tribakery, Rubicon (Montrachet's California counterpart) and Montrachet itself, whose former space later housed Cotton and now Bâtard, both under

the Myriad umbrella. It has also outlived Midtown's French white-tablecloth staples Lutèce, La Caravelle and La Côte Basque, which fell victim to the strained New York economy in the years following the Sept. 11 attacks. Fellow wine mammoths Veritas, Gilt and Cru foundered in the wake of the 2009 recession.

The keys to Tribeca Grill's longevity are hardly secrets. With the same four guys at the helm for 26 years, consistency has always steadied the ship, and fair prices in food and wine have kept it buoyant. "Now it's not something new, but it's become kind of classic," says Gordon.

"I just see it as a downtown New York experience, a New York dining experience that has stood the test of time," says Nieporent. "There is something specifically different about coming below Canal Street, into this neighborhood, and literally coming in these old, cool warehousing spaces, spaces that bespoke an era."

The choice to honor the original space in Tribeca Grill's interior design was once considered brash. Now, restaurants, bars, storeroom studio spaces and even urban parks, not just

Tribeca but across downtown Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens, follow suit, preserving a New York in which textiles, salt, dairy, steamed coffee and everything else that once fed the appetites of the thrumming city passed from freighters to stevedores to warehouses.

Tribeca Grill's other legacy extends far beyond Tribeca: its alumni network in the kitchens, dining rooms and corner offices of food and wine around the world. That Nieporent, Shapiro and Gordon have made the restaurant—with all its lovingly honed standards of hospitality, wine and food—their livelihood means few, if any, other restaurants can boast as many, and as illustrious, alums as the School of Drew, Marty and David can.

Cappiello, 44, is one exemplary pupil, currently at the forefront of Manhattan wine and food. After his Tribeca Grill years, he goes on to earn a Grand Award at his own Pearl

& Ash in 2015. His latest venture, the next-door Rebelle, came on the scene last year and earned a Best of Award of Excellence 2016. (For more on Gordon's influence, see "The David Gordon School of Wine," page 89.)

"I learned more in my four years [at Tribeca Grill] than I think most sommeliers will learn in their career as far as tasting good wine and understanding the philosophy behind the wine program," Cappiello says. At Tribeca Grill, he learned not only wine, but how to wield wine service in a way that would keep people coming back to his restaurants. "That's the one thing you see from the people who have worked there; they all walked away having learned: to be nice."

"It's like a family in a way," is how De Niro puts the Tribeca Grill dynamic. The New York food-and-wine scene today would be alien to a visitor from 1990. But one landmark would be familiar: Tribeca Grill. De Niro's faith that it would become a fixture has been borne out.

"I like to think that things I get involved with are going to be part of, and are part of, the fabric of New York," he says—"and I continue to be part of the tradition of New York."

"I just see it as a downtown New York experience, a New York dining experience that has stood the test of time."

DREW NIEPARENT

...the feeling of a place that isn't by-night. It'll last. Only time will give it a tradition."

Nieporent began assembling a core team that would remain in place for more than a quarter century. Shortly before opening, he hired Shapiro, who is now 61, away from the restaurant and disco-heque Regine's, which had a far more decadent atmosphere—but also access to a killer guest list.

Six months after the launch, a rootless young hospitality mercenary and self-described "schmo from Brooklyn" named David Gordon came on board as a manager and never left. Nieporent had known Gordon since a decade earlier, when the two Cornell School of Hotel Administration alums worked together at Tavern on the Green in Central Park.

Chef Don Pintabona, formerly of the River Café and later Aureole, shaped the cuisine from 1990 to 2002, striving to serve quality

no hot and cold running water—but we did the event."

"We were scrubbing the hallways and the floors on our hands and knees ourselves, even half an hour before the event!" Shapiro adds. *Wine Spectator* was on the scene to cover the party, reporting, "No one seemed to mind the raw concrete floor, plasterboard walls or lighting limited to Christmas twinklers strung from the unfinished ceiling." Said Baryshnikov at the party: "Oh, I like it this way. I hope they don't change it too much."

When it formally opened, Tribeca Grill was quick off the blocks. The food was straightforward and unfussy, a big tent for myriad tastes. Grilled chicken with Chinese cabbage and shiitake mushrooms, veal chop with whipped potatoes, and pennette with rock shrimp were on an early menu.

Burnished by De Niro's luster, the restaurant gained cachet as a gathering spot of 1990s one-namers: Denzel and Seinfeld and

Beyoncé and Aykroyd, Jordan and Barkley, Bill and Hillary and the Donald. Billy Joel engaged the crowd in an impromptu doo-wop one night. Harvey Keitel would order off an imaginary menu to bust the staff's chops, forcing them to scurry to track down what he wanted. Robin Williams did a routine in the street for Paul Bocuse and Roger Vergé while the toques were out smoking.



After the World Trade Center attacks of 2001, New York City chefs stepped up to serve food to relief workers. Tribeca Grill lent its kitchen. Above: Drew Nieporent (tie), Charlie Palmer (mustache), Michael Lomonaco (behind Palmer) and Daniel Boulud (looking left).

...ed in a big, busy spot at a time when top-flight restaurants hesitated to embrace, and still struggled to define, American cuisine. (In the succeeding 14 years, there have only been three other executive chefs: Stephen Lewandowski, Kamal Rose and now Richard Corbo, co-owner of Restaurant Gary Danko and the Standard Grill.)

But before any stove was even lit, there was the matter of transforming a century-old warehouse space into a multilevel eatery. The team decided they'd keep the industrial aesthetic intact. The only major changes in decor would be the addition of a massive mahogany island bar purchased from Maxwell's Plum—the shuttered watering hole of choice for celebrities of the 1960s and '70s—and expressionist artwork from De Niro's father, a painter.

Still, the guts required some surgical work, and the opening date fell behind schedule. "The very first event here we did [was] with Liza Minnelli and [her then-husband] Mark Gero," remembers Nieporent. "We had no gas. We had no electricity. We had

then Danube, not to mention Nieporent's own Montrachet, Nobu and Nobu Next Door. "I think Tribeca was the dining destination in Manhattan," says Nieporent. Tribeca Grill felt the heat even as its wine program leveled up.

But 2001 brought a trial orders of magnitude greater than anything as trivial as jostling for diners.

A 12-minute walk from the site of the Twin Towers, Tribeca Grill, along with most everything else south of Canal Street, closed for two weeks after the World Trade Center attacks of Sept. 11. "We were closed, feeding the workers. Everyone got paid, but we didn't know when we would reopen, what would happen," Gordon says.

The restaurant had a large capacity and a kitchen used to a demanding pace, so the team devoted itself to supporting the responders, providing nap space for aid workers and ferrying soup and sandwiches to Ground Zero. They managed to get the keys to the *Spirit of New York* and docked it by the site to serve as a canteen for

THE DAVID GORDON

SCHOOL OF WINE

"There was a generosity in this business that I felt when I started," says Tribeca Grill wine director David Gordon.

In the mid-1980s, "sommelier" hardly existed as a job title in New York City, but the young Gordon found mentors like Daniel Johannes (then of Montrachet, now of Daniel Boulud's group, Dinex) and Kevin Zraly (wine director at Windows on the World until Sept. 11). Through them, Gordon first joined the team that tasted all the wines for fitness to pour at the Wine Spectator Wine Experience, in 1991. He still remembers the affirming moment when he first identified a corked bottle on the line, and he's been back nearly every year since, now in a mentoring role.

Gordon has created wine lists for cuisines ranging from New French at the Myriad Restaurant Group's Corton (the now-shuttered successor to Montrachet), to Japanese fusion at Nobu, to airline food, consulting for Continental, to all 13 restaurant themes at Atlantic City megacasino the Borgata. (Not all of his work is confined to the Myriad Restaurant Group.)



From left: Patrick Cappiello, Steve Morgan, Yoshi Takemura, Gordon, Ryan Mills-Knapp and Tim Kopec are among the wine professionals who have passed through and influenced Tribeca Grill; all still guide wine lovers.

Tribeca Grill has always been an inclusive place, flowing from personalities like Gordon's, and that extends to staff opportunities. Everyone from floor workers to the top tier of management can taste a remarkable range of wines. Gordon brings in his assistants when he pretastes bottles that have been ordered, when he opens new restaurants and when he meets with winemakers. "You think, 'What's so special about that? [But] it's not common,'" says Gordon.

After 26 years, Gordon has a generation's worth of pupils running some of the most inventive, exciting wine programs in the country. Those who trained under him currently oversee wine at destinations such as Grand Award winner Pearl & Ash in Manhattan; Best of Award of Excellence winners

Bâtard, Lincoln Ristorante and Rebelle in Manhattan, On the Square in Tarboro, N.C., and Soby's New South Cuisine in Greenville, S.C.; and Award of Excellence winners the Lazy Goat in Greenville and Park Avenue in Manhattan. Others have left the floor for senior positions elsewhere in the industry.

"David is sort of like our spiritual godfather," says Jason Jacobelt, 30, wine director at Bâtard and former head sommelier at Tribeca Grill. "He is kind enough to give me tremendous creative license with the list. The greatest privilege of working with a cellar this deep, with 30,000 bottles of inventory, is the incomparable tasting education that you get every single night. You come [to Tribeca Grill] and you taste wines that you've read about, that you've heard about, that are the white whales of wine, the wines that everybody waits a lifetime to taste."

"He is a great delegator. Maybe one of the best of all time!" laughs Ryan Mills-Knapp, who worked at Tribeca from 2007 to 2010 and then built the list at Best of Award of Excellence winner Colicchio & Sons before going into wine retail. "He does a great job of letting you know the goal and then letting you figure out your way to that goal. And I have learned a lot, as a manager, from David Gordon, in the sense of letting good people do their job."

But then Mills-Knapp turns more serious on the subject of David Gordon. "Wines get drunk. When you build a wine cellar, that can't be your legacy unless you never sell any. His legacy is his people."

—Ben O'Donnell

DAVID GORDON'S ALUMNI

Mollie Battenhouse, MW, northeast regional educator, Jackson Family Wines, New York

Patrick Cappiello, operating partner and wine director, Pearl & Ash (Grand Award) and Rebelle (Best of Award of Excellence), New York

Shawn Dore, founder, Sommelier Services, Philadelphia

Anjoleena Griffin-Holst, beverage director, Soby's (Best of Award of Excellence), the Lazy Goat (Award of Excellence), Soby's on the Side, Nose Dive and Passerelle Bistro, Greenville, S.C.

Jason Jacobelt, wine director, Bâtard (Best of Award of Excellence), New York

Josh MacGregor, head sommelier, Tribeca Grill (Grand Award), New York

Ryan Mills-Knapp, partner, R Squared Selections, Brooklyn

Allison Napjus, senior editor and tasting director, Wine Spectator, New York

Shawn Paul, general manager, Corkbuzz Restaurant & Wine Bar, Charlotte, N.C.

Justin Randolph, wine director, Park Avenue Autumn (Winter, Spring, Summer) (Award of Excellence), New York

Inez Ribustello, owner, On the Square (Best of Award of Excellence), Tarboro, N.C.

Yoshi Takemura, brand director, WinelnStyle, Tokyo

Aaron von Rock, wine director, Lincoln Ristorante (Best of Award of Excellence), New York

***WORKED UNDER DAVID GORDON
BUT NOT AT TRIBECA GRILL**