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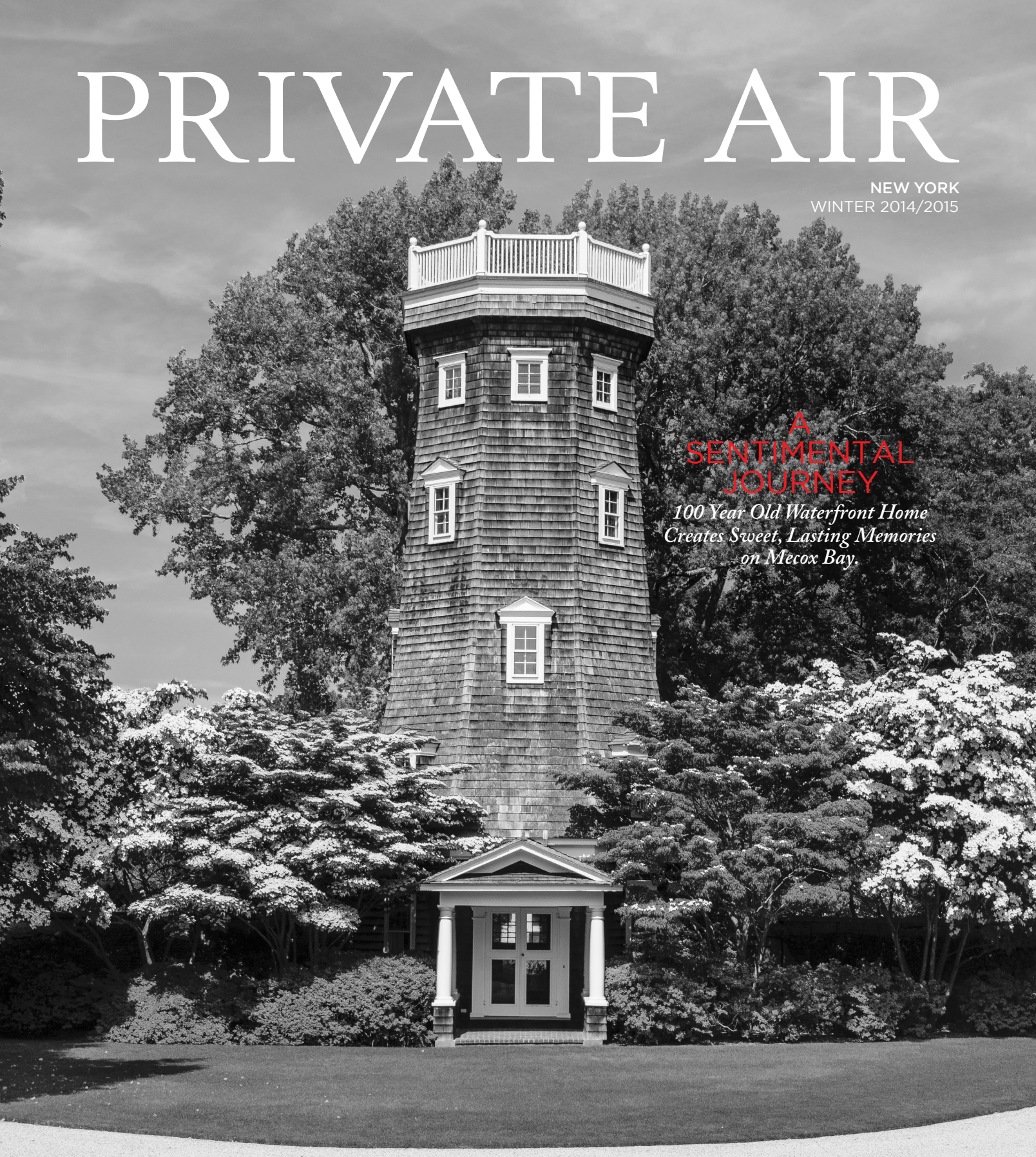

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SIRIO MACCIONI: A CULINARY LEGACY

Simply elegant and fine cuisine is what is created in each of Sirio Maccioni's restaurants around the world. The tradition of excellence continues

By: Carrie Buckle

When you have entertained everyone from Pope John Paul II to Andy Warhol, you can afford to rest on your laurels. But not legendary restaurateur Sirio Maccioni; At 82, he still arrives every morning before the customers at his famed Le Cirque flagship in Midtown Manhattan and he is the last to leave at night. He is always impeccably dressed, holding court near the entrance six days a week. "I respect everybody, but I don't believe everybody," smiles Maccioni, speaking in his native Tuscan accent, sitting in a leather chair in the restaurant that is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year.

It is a rainy afternoon when we meet and Maccioni is looking even more dapper than usual, in a blue pinstripe suit. This is because he is heading straight from the restaurant to meet new Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi at a reception at the Italian consulate at 6 p.m. This is just an ordinary day in the extraordinary life of Maccioni who rose from a modest upbringing in the Tuscan town of Montecatini to becoming one of the world's most renowned restaurateurs. His modern take on French and Italian cuisine has transformed the New York dining scene. As well a Le Cirque, there is Sirio Ristorante at The Pierre, A Taj Hotel in the city. Today Maccioni's empire includes ten restaurants in places as far flung as New Delhi, the Dominican Republic, Las Vegas and Abu Dhabi, the location of the most recent Circo restaurant outpost.

ABOVE: Young Sirio in Italy and Sirio as Maited at La Foret
OPPOSITE: The Macconi Family and Sirio Maccioni and Michael Bloomberg

Yet it is Maccioni's flagship in New York, designed by longtime collaborator Adam Tihany that captures Maccioni's glittering career trajectory since he broke out on his own in 1974. Prior to that he was maître d' of society restaurant, The Colony Club. Cast your eye over Le Cirque and you'll see black and white photos of famous guests such as Robert De Niro, Sophia Loren, Woody Allen, Ronald Reagan, and Jimmy Carter.

"We've had all the Presidents, the Pope, Andy Warhol, we've had everyone," Maccioni says, adding that he's not impressed by celebrity or money. His favorite president was Jimmy Carter: "He was the most intelligent, with a sense of humor," he says. When asked about Warhol, Maccioni says: "A great man. Honest. He didn't talk much." And Frank Sinatra? "A true Sicilian, very strong. Some people it's better to be on their side than against them." Maccioni lights up when talking about Pope John Paul II. "I found out that he spoke 15 languages perfectly and most of the politicians, they don't even speak English well," he smiles.

When Le Cirque first opened at its original location at the Mayfair Hotel, Maccioni's vision was clear. "I already knew exactly what I wanted to do. That's why I opened 20 years later than I should have done," says Maccioni of the French eatery. "There was nobody around that knew what food was all about. I wanted to cook simple food better than anyone else." What was the biggest challenge? "Everything. Keeping customers happy, making food that tastes good," he says.

It was certainly a winning formula. Just as famous as the menu (think tuna tartare, pasta primavera, and crème brûlée) is the roll call of gifted chefs who have passed through Le Cirque's doors, including Daniel Boulud, David Bouley and Geoffrey Zakarian. When asked what the secret to his success is, Maccioni replies matter-of-factly: "I don't know. I can't even tell my sons what to do because success is something very difficult to define." He continues: "I don't have all the answers like everybody thinks. I just try to do the best I can. I've been working all my life." He has certainly passed this work ethic onto his three sons, Marco, Mario and Mauro, who are all in the family business. Today his son Mauro is busy working the dining room at the end of the lunchtime rush. How do they all manage to work together? "It's very difficult," Maccioni replies honestly. Does everyone have different roles? "No, I like somebody that can do everything."

Looking back, it is this work ethic that has kept Maccioni going over the decades. "You have to do something in your life. You have to keep on going," he says. "I've been here for 60 years and I'm very proud of that. It's a long time but I'm still here doing what I do at my age because it's what I was born to do."

When asked what he is most proud of in his life, it's not the celebrities he has served or the number of restaurants that he owns. Instead, he says, "My sons and my grandchildren. I am proud of them because they are all intelligent." The newest addition

ABOVE:
Sirio and Grandson Massimo

is Marco and wife Sabrina's angelic two-year-old son Massimo. "He's beautiful," says Maccioni.

A constant by his side is his wife Egidiana and despite all the decadent dishes on the menu at Le Cirque, it is her home cooking that he enjoys most. "My favorite food is Italian and she cooks very simple, good food. I don't like too much preparation," he says. "I have very great chefs here, but at the end of the day, I call my wife and I say I'm coming home to eat."

What keeps Maccioni grounded, as well as his family, are his visits every summer back to his beloved home in Montecatini. This is where his roots are and they keep him connected to everything that's important to him. "There I still have a fantasy," he says. "Everything is perfect. Tuscany is the best part of the world."

At this point, a customer stops by to tell Maccioni that her lunch was "Magnificent!" "You better not get used to it!" he jokes. Afterward, I ask him how he manages to greet new and old friends day in and day out, and always be so polite. "It takes the same time to be polite as to be stupid," he says. "You have to be ready to do a good job every day." Then he looks thoughtful. "But sometimes things are stronger than you. I have a full life, but I hate to be at this point because I don't like to be old. But you have to do that too, it's part of the game." How long will he keep working at the restaurant? "That you have to ask the guy upstairs," he says.