



# Unreasonable Hospitality

By Will Guidara • Optimism Press 2022

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Will Guidara is the founder of Thank You, a hospitality company that develops world-class destinations and helps leaders across industries transform their approach to customer service. He is a former co-owner of Eleven Madison Park and the NoMad. He has co-authored four cookbooks and was named one of Crain's New York Business's 40 Under 40.*

## The Summary

### 1. Welcome to the Hospitality Economy

At home, we were on top of the world. Our restaurant, *Eleven Madison Park*, had received four stars from *The New York Times*, and a couple of *James Beard Awards*, too. But at the 2010 *World's 50 Best Restaurants* awards, my chef-partner Daniel Humm and I realized we were in a whole different league. Surrounded by world-famous chefs who didn't acknowledge us, I felt like a freshman in a new high school.

We hoped to rank around thirty-five or forty, but when the awards began with: "number fifty, a new entry from

New York City: Eleven Madison Park," we were crushed. We slumped over, mortified as our dejected faces were projected onto a gigantic screen. It was a huge honor, but in that room, we had come in last place.

When I was young, my dad gave me a paperweight that read, "What would you attempt to do if you knew you could not fail?" That's what I was thinking about when Daniel and I wrote, "We will be Number One in the world," on a cocktail napkin. Just before I fell asleep, I added two more words: "*Unreasonable Hospitality*."

Chefs at the finest restaurants in the world had long been celebrated for being unreasonable about the food they served. At Eleven Madison Park, we came to real-

ize the remarkable power of being unreasonable about how we made people feel. Hospitality is a selfish pleasure—it feels great to make other people feel good. I'm writing this book because I believe it's time for every one of us to start being unreasonable about hospitality.

*Welcome to the hospitality economy.*

## 2. Making Magic in a World That Could Use More of It

For my twelfth birthday, my dad took me to the Four Seasons for dinner. I didn't know its historical significance, but I knew it was the fanciest and most beautiful place I'd ever been. That night, I learned a restaurant could create magic, and I was hooked. By the time we left, I knew exactly what I wanted to do with my life.

In college, I took the Guest Chefs class and got a chance to work with Daniel Boulud. After a memorable dinner, we ended up hosting him and his team at my house.

Later, not long after my mom's passing, my dad and I went to Daniel's restaurant. We were given a once-in-a-lifetime experience in the Skybox, with Daniel personally overseeing our meal. During a dark time, Daniel and his staff offered my dad and me a ray of light in the form of a meal neither one of us will ever forget.

That night, I learned how important, and noble, working in service can be. When you work in hospitality—and **I believe that whatever you do for a living, you can choose to be in the hospitality business**—you have the privilege of joining people as they celebrate the most joyful moments in their lives and the chance to offer them a brief moment of consolation and relief amid their most difficult ones. We have an opportunity—a responsibility—to make magic in a world that desperately needs more of it.

## 3. The Extraordinary Power of Intention

I went to work with my dad every Saturday. He was the president of Restaurant Associates, overseeing places from coffee shops to fine-dining establishments like the Rainbow Room—and the Four Seasons. I loved the behind-the-scenes access and the surge of energy that coursed through me when I walked through those dining rooms.

My dad was incredibly intentional with his parenting, as with everything in his life. I inherited from him an understanding of the importance of this concept.

When I was thirteen, my dad asked me what I wanted to do with my life, and unlike most thirteen-year-olds, I knew exactly what my life goals were: first, I wanted to study restaurant management at Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration. Second, I wanted to open my restaurant in New York City. And I am proud to say I achieved both.

I applied and got into the hotel school at Cornell. I met some of my closest friends there. Near graduation, my friend Brian and I visited many of the best restaurants in the city. Two stood out to me: Tabla and Eleven Madison Park, both owned by Danny Meyer. I fell in love with their company, Union Square Hospitality Group.

Danny had revolutionized fine dining with a philosophy called Enlightened Hospitality. His big idea was to hire great people, treat them well, and invest deeply into their growth, and they would take great care of the customers.

By the time I graduated, there was no question: Danny Meyer was the guy to work for. I landed an interview and a month later, I was a manager at Tabla. My education had begun.

## 4. Lessons in Enlightened Hospitality

Tabla transformed contemporary Indian cuisine in the United States—and the engine behind that transformation was Chef Floyd Cardoz.

Two things happen when the best leaders walk into a room: the people who work for them straighten up, making sure everything's perfect—and they smile, too. That's how we were with Floyd. Everyone who worked for him would do whatever they could to help him make Tabla a success.

At Tabla, I learned about the extraordinary impact of small gestures. We started offering to feed parking meters for guests, which went from a simple fifty-cent gesture to a memorable act of hospitality.

Danny has always understood how language can build culture by making essential concepts easy to understand and teach. He is brilliant at coining phrases around common experiences, potential pitfalls, and favorable outcomes. “*Constant, gentle pressure*” was Danny's version of the Japanese phrase *kaizen*, the idea that everyone in the organization should always be improving, getting a little better all the time. “*Be the swan*” reminded us that all the guest should see was a gracefully curved neck and meticulous white feathers sailing across the pond's surface—not the webbed feet, churning furiously below, driving the glide.

Danny's management style made it cool to care about the company culture, and I was proud to be a part of it.

So when Danny announced he was opening a restaurant and jazz club called *Blue Smoke* and asked me to be the assistant general manager, I was thrilled.

Which begs the question: *Why on earth did I say no?*

## 5. Restaurant-Smart vs. Corporate-Smart

“Before you fall head over heels with this one way of doing things, make sure you understand there are different approaches out there,”

When I told my dad about my dream job at Blue Smoke, he questioned whether it was the best step for me to take and introduced me to the concept of restaurant-smart vs. corporate-smart.

He explained that in restaurant-smart companies, team members have more autonomy and creative latitude, allowing for better hospitality, but they often lack the systems that make great businesses. Corporate-smart companies have back-end systems and controls that make them more profitable, but systems can get in the way of human connection. My dad wanted me to one day run a company that was both corporate-smart and restaurant-smart. Danny was the most restaurant-smart guy out there, but his restaurants lacked big-company infrastructure.

It was time to get the other half of my education.

I left Tabla to work for Restaurant Associates, my dad's old company, as the assistant purchaser and controller. I learned how to inventory a walk-in refrigerator, receive deliveries, calculate costs, and order food and supplies. I worked with the controller, Hani Ichkhan, who helped me track the impact of my decisions on the company's bottom line.

One afternoon, Hani flagged a report: food costs at a restaurant were up because lobster prices had skyrocketed. We realized we had to remove the dish from the menu. Watching that analysis unfold was exhilarating; it made me understand the power of systems.

Later, Danny Meyer offered me a job at the Museum of Modern Arts, overseeing the casual food service operations. My experience working at the cafés in MoMA

showed me it was possible to be both corporate-smart and restaurant-smart.

Then Danny asked to meet with me again.

## 6. Pursuing a True Partnership

I spent the summer between high school and college working as a busboy at Spago, the crown jewel of Chef Wolfgang Puck's empire. One afternoon, I accidentally shattered a stack of plates. The chef de cuisine charged out of the kitchen and screamed at me in front of everyone.

That experience showed me how some fine dining establishments didn't respect the dining room staff. I loved restaurants and wanted to work with a team to take great care of the people we were serving, but I knew that the highest level of fine dining wasn't for me.

So when Danny Meyer asked me about becoming the general manager at Eleven Madison Park, I wasn't sure what to say. EMP was a spectacular room but had received only two stars from The New York Times. Danny had hired Chef Daniel Humm to elevate the food, but the restaurant still wasn't working.

I met up with Daniel Humm and over a round of beers, we found a mutual passion. We decided we'd be a restaurant run by both sides of the wall. More open communication between the kitchen and the dining room made sense to Daniel, too.

A restaurant driven by the chef was always going to do what was best for the food, while one driven by the restaurateur would always do what was best for the service. But if we had to make decisions together, we decided, we would end up with what was best for the restaurant as a whole.

## 7. Setting Expectations

*"To be the four-star restaurant for the next generation."*  
That was our first mission statement at Eleven Madison

Park, and the one Daniel and I came up with over those first beers.

When I started at EMP, there were two factions in it: the old guard, proud of their friendly and relaxed service, and the fine-dining squad, who wanted exacting standards. Everyone seemed pissed off. The restaurant was badly disorganized, with no real systems to communicate standards which led to inconsistency.

I realized the team needed to feel seen and appreciated. We needed to return to the first principle: take care of one another. Therefore, I spent my first few weeks sitting down with every single member of the team and hearing them out. My father taught me that a leader's responsibility is to identify the strengths of the people on their team, no matter how buried they might be, and this was my way to dig them up.

We also needed systems. I instituted daily thirty-minute pre-meal meetings with mandatory attendance. These meetings helped set the tone for my management, communicated proper standards, and inspired my team.

It wasn't much longer before I finally delivered my rousing, Christopher Russell-style speech. It wasn't at my first pre-meal or even my thirtieth, but the one I gave after I'd finally started to feel confident that everyone was talking to one another and me and knew what was expected of them.

*"We're going to make this restaurant one of the best in New York. It's not going to be easy, but we're going to make it fun. Will you come?"*

## 8. Breaking Rules and Building a Team

One day our service director (firmly in the fine-dining faction) corrected me for leaning on a guest's table—a "fine-dining no-no"—which led me to start questioning traditional rules that didn't improve the guest experience. My lack of fine-dining background became my superpower which made me critically assess whether

these practices brought us closer to our ultimate goal: connecting with people and providing genuine hospitality.

Knowing less is often an opportunity to do more. We broke several fine dining rules at EMP. For example, we served soufflés in a way that allowed better interaction with guests, even if it wasn't traditional. We replaced canelés as a goodbye gift with granola—something guests would appreciate more the next morning.

With this approach, hiring the right people was crucial. Instead of looking for a fine dining experience, we looked for individuals with the right attitude and a genuine passion for hospitality. Moreover, everyone started as a kitchen server so that they could fully absorb our culture.

The culture we aimed to create was one where it was cool to care. We encouraged our team to fully engage and take pride in their work. This shift was evident when team members celebrated perfecting synchronized service techniques and embraced their roles with enthusiasm.

## 9. Working with Purpose, on Purpose

*“The place needed a bit of Miles Davis.”*

I remember reading that out loud to Daniel in the windowless back office we shared. He asked, “What the hell does that mean?”

I had no idea, but I wanted to find out.

I was reading an old review of Eleven Madison Park by Moira Hodgson. We were looking for language to articulate our vision to the team. We had our mission statement—to be the four-star restaurant for the next generation—but that was the *what*.

We needed the *how*.

Miles Davis reinvented himself with every album. His influences were eclectic and wide-ranging. Researching Miles gave us eleven words that became our roadmap:

- Cool
- Endless Reinvention
- Inspired
- Forward Moving
- Fresh
- Collaborative`
- Spontaneous
- Vibrant
- Adventurous
- Light
- Innovative

We printed these words and hung them in our kitchen. They became our guiding light.

Of all the words, “*collaborative*” stood out. We realized that inviting our team to take part in identifying and naming the goals of the company would increase the likelihood we'd meet those goals together.

We held our first strategic planning meeting in 2007, including everyone from managers to dishwashers. Four words took center stage:

1. Education
2. Passion
3. Excellence
4. Hospitality

But the inherent conflict between “hospitality” and “excellence” would inform everything we did going forward. We needed to be good at both.

I wrapped up that meeting by telling the team, “*We have the ability to make people's lives better by creating a magical world they can escape to—and I see that not as an opportunity, but as a responsibility, and a reason for pride.*”

## 10. Creating a Culture of Collaboration

The day after the strategic planning meeting, the air in the restaurant was charged with promise and excitement—and that energy showed no signs of dissipating in the weeks that followed. Our passionate and creative team had a say in where the restaurant was going and were willing to work even harder because they had a stake.

I wanted collaboration to mean everyone, every single day.

Daniel and I spent a lot of time studying other, more established and successful fine-dining restaurants. In NYC, *Per Se* was the best of the best.

After dinner at *Per Se*, I was feverishly taking notes on our experience, which had been spectacular. Every course had been an inspiration. Then, at the end of our meal, our server presented us with a board of twenty-four different chocolate truffles and described every single one of them. It was a feat of memory so audacious, so superhuman, it might as well have been a magic trick.

Finally, I got to the cup of filter coffee I'd been served after dinner. It was a perfectly fine cup of coffee, but because everything else about that meal had been so unbelievably *perfect*, that just-okay cup of coffee stood out.

And it made me think about Jim Betz.

Jim was an unrepentant coffee geek who worked with me at EMP.

Passion was one of the core values we committed to pursuing during our strategic planning meeting. And so the last thing I wrote in my journal after that epic dinner at *Per Se* was: “Jim should be in charge of our coffee program.”

With that, the ownership program at Eleven Madison Park was born.

## 11. Pushing Toward Excellence

“Will! I’m pretty sure I just sat Frank Bruni.”

It was late 2006 when our breathless, wide-eyed maître d’ caught up with me to tell me the food critic for *The New York Times* had just walked into the restaurant. If Bruni was in the restaurant, our review season had begun.

To say that our team had been laser-focused on what the Times would have to say about the changes we’d made at EMP is an understatement. *Obsessed* is probably a better word.

EMP had gotten two stars from the *Times* when it opened, and again when it was re-reviewed in February 2005. So while we may have been dreaming about four stars down the line, we needed three.

Confession: I’m a perfectionist. And it was at EMP that I came to see my fanatical attention to detail as a superpower.

I believe that people can *feel* perfection. At EMP, we opted to try to get as close as we possibly could to perfection. That’s the very definition of excellence: getting as many details right as you can. We chased excellence in every element of what we did.

In January 2007, a photographer from *The New York Times* called to schedule a photo shoot. Daniel and I were excited—and anxious. Thankfully, it was good news. Bruni asked: “When did you last look at Eleven Madison Park? If the answer is more than a year ago, look again.”

We’d achieved our first goal: three stars from *The New York Times*.

At our first pre-meal after the review, we poured everyone a little bit of champagne to celebrate. I told them to save up a little bit of the feeling they had that afternoon so they could tap back into it when the going got tough because we had a long way to go.



## 12. Relationships Are Simple. Simple Is Hard.

I love any excuse to wear a tuxedo.

So it was a thrill to put one on and walk down the red carpet at the James Beard Awards in May 2007 at Lincoln Center with chefs like Thomas Keller and Daniel Boulud. Daniel had been nominated for the Rising Star Chef of the Year Award. Then they opened the envelope: “And the 2007 award for Rising Star Chef goes to Momofuku’s David Chang!”

Daniel was devastated. Even though I also felt the loss acutely, my responsibility that night was to take care of Daniel. It’s easy to be someone’s partner during the good times, but it’s most important during the hard ones.

I have never been the kind of leader who brushes off bad feelings. After a setback, I’d tell the team to go ahead and wallow. “Guys, this sucks. We’re working so hard, and we care so much, and still—today didn’t go our way. Let’s allow ourselves to feel the disappointment; it’s real and we don’t need to pretend it’s not.”

Managing people boils down to two things: how you praise them, and how you criticize them. There’s no one-size-fits-all rule for managing people. Some need a gentle correction; others need a little fire.

Establishing your traditions is part of a layered and nuanced culture. In 2007, we opened for Thanksgiving for the first time. Danny’s restaurants had never opened on major holidays, but I convinced him. After serving the last guests, the entire staff sat down for our own Thanksgiving dinner. We went around the table, and everyone shared what they were thankful for.

If you don’t create room for the people who work for you to feel seen and heard in a team setting, they’ll never be fully known by the people around them.

## 13. Leveraging Affirmation

*Relais & Châteaux* is an association of some of the best independent restaurants and hotels in the world. When we applied, the American restaurants on the list included *the French Laundry*, *Daniel*, *Le Bernardin*, and *Per Se*.

We applied in 2008—only to find out we’d missed the deadline.

I told Daniel Boulud, who offered to help. He, Thomas Keller, and Patrick O’Connell came in for dinner. All three sent letters to *Relais & Châteaux*, saying we were one of the great restaurants in New York.

It’s impossible to overstate the impact this trio sitting at table 74 had on the staff. Seeing them there was huge for me and Daniel, but the staff was over the moon.

After that night, I started leveraging external affirmation for the team. I made sure to turn the spotlight on those who deserved it, making them the stars of the show. If a PR person reached out about our beer program, I connected them with Kirk, who ran it.

Not only did this ensure Kirk was getting the credit he deserved, but it got everyone else on the team thinking, “Wait a minute! I want that kind of recognition, too.”

## 14. Restoring Balance

Ambition is an extraordinary thing, a nuclear reactor that provides unlimited amounts of energy. Getting accepted into *Relais & Châteaux* gave us a taste of success, and we wanted more... a lot more.

We were on fire.

Then, one night at eleven p.m., a cook who worked the morning shift ran through the doors in a panic. In her sleeplessness stress and disorientation, she thought she was two hours late for her nine a.m. shift; in reality, she was ten hours early.

Our ambition had gotten the better of us. The nuclear reactor was melting down.

We'd lost our balance, and we needed to get it back.

So, with some deliberation—and even a little sadness—Daniel and I decided we needed to slow down.

We stopped changing the menu as frequently, so everyone had more time to catch up. We hired more people, so the existing staff wouldn't be spread too thin. We cut many of the flourishes we'd added to the service.

I reminded myself: If adding another element to the experience means you're going to do everything a little less well, walk it back. Do less, and do it well.

And then, almost as a reward for taking the time to invest in our foundation, the universe gave us a little gift. In December 2008, Frank Bruni wrote that we were “hovering just below the very summit of fine dining in New York.”

We were ecstatic. Keep going!

## 15. The Best Offense Is Offense

The Michelin Guide was created at the beginning of the twentieth century as a marketing ploy to encourage people to drive around France. Over time, it became the most prestigious restaurant ranking in Europe. In 2008, after gaining three stars from the Times and acceptance into *Relais & Châteaux*, we expected to be included. But when the list was released, we weren't even on it.

The team was crushed. I told them, “We've always been at our best when we're the underdogs... Think of this as fuel for the fire, and use it.” It was time to start playing offense.

Then, the global recession hit. Business fell off, and we were hemorrhaging cash. My dad told me, “Adversity is a terrible thing to waste.” We got creative. We cut costs without affecting the guest experience: by reducing lin-

en use, saving on cleaning chemicals, and switching from disposable to reusable hats.

We played offense by introducing a \$29 two-course lunch to fill empty seats, attracting a new demographic. We added a dessert trolley, boosting dessert sales by 300%.

Despite the challenges, we didn't lay off a single team member. Finally, after months, we received the call: we had earned four stars. “A magnitude of enchantment!” Frank Bruni wrote.

We had done it—by playing offense, staying creative, and being unapologetically us. We celebrated like never before, ready for our next chapter.

## 16. Earning Informality

The 4-star review changed everything.

Our dining room was full every night. The team was floating on air. With the increased business came a host of new challenges. The biggest challenge took the form of shifting expectations. Guests dining at a newly minted four-star restaurant had different hopes.

We were thrilled to have a fourth star, but we'd gotten there by focusing on creating meaningful connections with our guests, and we couldn't let the accolade erode what had gotten us there. We still wanted to bring comfort, informality, and a sense of fun to fine dining.

Bruni himself supported this. He wrote: “I realized that I'd been recommending Eleven Madison to people more often than I did its four-star betters... It found a hugely appealing compromise in this regard.”

Our informality had helped us earn that fourth star. Still, people were reserving tables months in advance; they wanted a little ceremony. We faced a conundrum: the very feature that had won us this accolade—our ease and informality—had suddenly become less appropriate.



Our approach was what we called earning informality. We had to earn the respect of guests alarmed by how young we were by amping up the formality at the beginning of their meal. Throughout the evening, we'd earn their trust enough to shift their expectations.

We were no longer in the business of running an extraordinary restaurant; we were now in the business of human connection.

And apparently, the world was noticing. One morning in early 2010, I opened the mail and discovered that EMP had been nominated as one of the World's 50 Best Restaurants for 2010.

## 17. Learning to Be Unreasonable

I can still feel the wave of embarrassment when they announced that EMP had come in fiftieth—dead last—on the World's 50 Best Restaurants list for 2010.

After a setback, it's a leader's job to guide the team from disappointment to motivation. Daniel and I set a bold new goal: to become the number one restaurant in the world. We introduced the concept of "Unreasonable Hospitality," even though we didn't yet know exactly what it meant.

We decided to apply the same unreasonable approach we had toward excellence in our food to the way we treated our guests. Just as we meticulously prepared dishes like our turbot, we wanted to bring that level of care to hospitality.

We conducted an audit to remove anything transactional from the dining room. We removed the computers and podiums. Instead of a *maître d'* behind a podium, guests were greeted by name at the door. The *maître d'*s studied guest photos found online to recognize them upon arrival. The same *maître d'* who confirmed reservations on the phone would greet guests in person.

We implemented a ticketless coat check, so guests didn't have to fumble for tickets at the end of the meal. We turned ordering into a dialogue rather than a monologue, listing dishes by principal ingredient and engaging guests in conversation.

We began asking guests not just about allergies but about ingredients they didn't like, making the experience much more personalized.

We aimed to provide over-the-top experiences for all guests, not just VIPs. We reimaged the kitchen tour and offered it to any interested guest.

By being unreasonable in our hospitality, we came much closer to our goal of becoming the best restaurant in the world.

## 18. Improvisational Hospitality

One afternoon, I was clearing plates from a table of Europeans headed to the airport. I overheard them discuss that they hadn't tried a New York street hot dog. I dashed out to the corner, bought a hot dog from Abraham's cart, and asked Daniel to plate it elegantly. When presented with it, the guests freaked out. Each of them mentioned to me that it was the highlight not only of the meal but of their trip to New York.

This experience sparked a realization: we could create these magical, personalized moments for our guests. I wanted to improvise, one guest at a time. We started paying closer attention, seizing opportunities to surprise and delight. A guest mentions loving a movie? We send them a DVD with their check. Celebrating an anniversary? We arrange for champagne in their hotel room.

If we were going to commit to this, we needed to create a position. Enter the "Dreamweaver." Christine McGrath, a talented host and calligrapher, became our first. Later, Emily Parkinson, an artist who *painted* her meals, joined the team. With their creativity, we crafted unique experiences—a teddy bear made from kitchen towels, a pri-

vate beach setup in our dining room, and personalized mementos.

We also built a “tool kit” for recurring situations. If a guest joked about a hangover, we’d send them off with a morning rescue kit—coffee, Alka-Seltzer, a muffin. Travelers received snack boxes for their flights. By systemizing these gestures, we empowered our team to create magic regularly.

Hospitality isn’t exclusive to restaurants. Every business can find opportunities for improvisational hospitality. It’s about transforming transactions into relationships through genuine care and personalized gestures. Gifts don’t have to be lavish—they just need to show that you listened and you care.

## 19. Scaling a Culture

Back in the day, the best restaurants in the world were in hotels. *César Ritz* and *Auguste Escoffier* ensured that the world’s great hotels would be known for their restaurants. Unfortunately, over time, hotel restaurants fell out of favor.

In early 2010, Daniel and I were approached by Andrew Zobler to run the food and beverage at a new hotel—the NoMad. Andrew wanted to make the restaurant an integral part of the hotel once again. We loved the idea.

But we had to talk to Danny Meyer. “We have huge aspirations for Eleven Madison Park,” we told him, “but we don’t want to be employees forever.” Danny said, “I can’t be partners with you at one restaurant and competitors with you at another just a few blocks away.” Then he offered: “How about you buy EMP from me?” I said, “We’d love to.”

We had less than three months to raise a huge amount of money. It was harrowing. Eventually, we found an investor and bought the restaurant.

We called our new company Make It Nice, after Daniel’s signature phrase. If EMP was Miles Davis, then the No-

Mad would be the Rolling Stones.

We wanted to bring over the culture of hospitality we’d created at EMP. We brought over team members from EMP to seed the new spot with our culture.

The NoMad was a hit. It gave our regulars somewhere to go more regularly. Meanwhile, back at EMP, there was no longer anything holding us back... or so we thought.

## 20. Back to Basics

Throughout the years that we were climbing through the ranks of the 50 Best list, Daniel and I were traveling to food and wine conferences and culinary events all over the world. We found ourselves deeply inspired by every one of the restaurants on the list.

We felt confident in the crescendos we’d added to the experience of dining at EMP; what was missing now was a sense of place. So when EMP made it to number ten on the 50 Best lists in 2012, we were resolved to explore what it meant to be a restaurant of, from, and about New York.

We threw ourselves into research and adopted a straight-tasting menu with a New York theme. The meal began with a savory take on the iconic black-and-white cookie and ended with chocolate-covered pretzels. There was sturgeon smoked at the table under a glass dome, custom-made potato chips, and even a magic trick inspired by Times Square’s three-card-monte dealers.

When the new menu debuted, I wanted every table to understand the rich history behind every course. Not wanting to leave any part to chance, I wrote exactly what I wanted the captains to say and drilled them over and over.

Four days later, The New York Times food critic Pete Wells came in. A few days later, he published a scathing takedown titled “Talking All Around the Food.” The

problem was what he called “the speeches.”

I realized I’d made two mistakes. The first was going too far, which I don’t regret. The second was more serious: I’d made my captains into performers, ruling out any possibility of a real, quality conversation. I had taken away their ability to be themselves at the table.

We returned to trusting the team. We simplified our mission statement: “To be the most delicious and gracious restaurant in the world.”

In 2017, after seven years of hard work and a truly unreasonable dedication to hospitality, Eleven Madison Park was named the best restaurant in the world. We’d won because of our collective focus on *Unreasonable Hospitality*.