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and The Sea Fire Grill

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Benjamin Prelvukaj and Benjamin Sinanaj



Owners, Benjamin Steakhouse, Benjamin Steakhouse Prime, and The Sea Fire Grill

The story of the two Benjamins, Benjamin Prelvukaj and Benjamin Sinanaj, is one of hardship, inspiration, and human endurance - but it is by no means surprising. After a childhood spent in the Albanian countryside, where a hard work ethic was instilled in the two men at a very young age, the Benjamins immigrated to America for the same reason that most immigrants brave foreign lands: a better future.

The Benjamins worked their way up from entry-level positions at Peter Luger Steakhouse, at the same time coming to understand the specific operations of the old-world restaurant and the notoriously competitive NYC restaurant landscape. From there, they made the plunge as restaurateurs and opened up Benjamin Steakhouse in 2008. Relying on principles of determination and an excellent work ethic, they have cemented their restaurant brand's identity as one of the best old-world steakhouses in New York City and the world.

The two businessmen now oversee over 200 employees and have opened four locations concentrated in the Metro New York area, as well as a new location in Tokyo; with this newest development, the Benjamins have proven that their formula of hard work, hospitality, old-world charm and good steak can carry well internationally. What separates Benjamin Steakhouse from others like it, according to its two



Benjamin Prelvukaj and Benjamin Sinanaj, Owners, Benjamin Steakhouse, Benjamin Steakhouse Prime, and The Sea Fire Grill

namesakes, is "the hospitality... We treat everyone who comes in the door like family." This marriage of hard work and family, both results of their Albanian heritage, have catapulted Benjamin Prelvukaj and Benjamin Sinanaj to great triumph.

This immigrant success story is certainly inspiring, yet reaffirms a classic message integral to the Ameri-

can identity; with hard work, determination and a little gumption, you can climb your way to success in any industry.

What led to your decision to immigrate to America from Albania?

We both wanted a better future and knew we could obtain that in the States.

How did you two come into contact?

We've known each other since we were much younger as we grew up in the same area. We are now brother-in-laws (Benjamin S. is married to Benjamin P.'s sister) and felt starting a family business was the right thing for us.

How did you come to the opportunity at Peter Luger Steakhouse?

Benjamin S. applied and got a job there, and years later, Benjamin P. got the job through his brother-in-law.

What led to the opening of the Benjamin in 2008?

After working at Peter Luger for many years, as well as other restaurants before, we were able to understand the flow of things. We were determined to open a restaurant and make it our own, found a space and made it happen!

Why did you make the decision to leave Peter Luger Steakhouse to start your own restaurant?

We saw an incredible opportunity to start our own business and we felt we had the tools to do so, so we went for it. We found our first space and jumped right in! Best decision we ever made.

What makes owning your own restaurant a better experience than simply working in one?

We are able to make the restaurants

feel like home for not just ourselves and our staff, but for our guests too. We love offering wonderful dining experiences to our guests and a place where they always know what they can expect.

How are your duties or roles different in these two separate operations?

Instead of just having a few roles working in another restaurant, we have to work every role. We don't get to go and just do a job and go home – this is our life. We have chosen it and wouldn't trade it for the world. It's completely different as you can imagine, overseeing over 200+ employees, each detail in the restaurants, guests, etc. We live and breathe our restaurants and business every single day.

How exactly did you work your way up in the notoriously difficult restaurant industry?

Benjamin S. – Determination, excellent work ethic, and always doing the best job I could. That doesn't go unnoticed and helped move me up the chain.

What differentiates your restaurant from Peter Luger and other famed steakhouses in the city?

Benjamin S. – I believe it's our hospitality first and foremost. We treat everyone who comes in the door like family. Our staff is also part of our family, and knows these restaurants aren't just ours – it's a piece of them too.

Benjamin P. – I am on the floor, talking with guests, at each restaurant almost every night and I believe that interaction and overseeing really makes an impact as well. Our staff sees how hard work makes a difference, and they put forth their best foot to make the restaurant as successful as possible. We teach them to remember names and faces, orders and favorite drinks to offer an even better experience.

What lessons did you take from Peter Luger?

The concept of cooking steak and doing it right. You have to care so much and ensure the quality of meat is right because as a steakhouse, the expectation of excellent steak is always there.

Does your Albanian heritage influence the food or service at Benjamin Steakhouse? In what regards?

The food at Benjamin Steakhouse is not influenced at all by our Albanian heritage, however we as a whole are very hospitable people and that certainly shows in our service and how we run the business.

After your four locations concentrated in the Metro New York area, why did you decide to expand to Tokyo?

Benjamin P. – About 30% of our customers were either Japanese businessmen or tourists and guests had been asking for years that we open a location in Japan. A great opportunity presented itself and with the right timing, it was the perfect decision for us. It's only been a few weeks but we've had some great success with that location already!

What challenges do you imagine this branch must contend with that your other branches won't?

We are exporting all of our USDA Prime meat from Pat LaFrieda to Japan, the same hand-picked meat we use at all of our US locations. Although we don't see the quality as an issue at all, as the meat is being dry-aged in house at the Tokyo location, exporting that amount of meat overseas could potentially be challenging. Thankfully there have been no issues to report and we hope to keep it that way! The Japanese are big steak fans and we believe everything is set up for a great run there.

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The Porterhouse with Fries served at Benjamin Steakhouse and Benjamin Steakhouse Prime



Main Dining Room at Benjamin Steakhouse Prime



Lobster Salad served at The Sea Fire Grill

What separates the Tokyo dining experience from the New York one and how will this be visible in the restaurant?

We really wanted to be a New York Steakhouse in Tokyo so there really isn't anything that is very different in that location. It has the same look and feel, an incredibly similar menu and overall our same New York steakhouse experience. Even the meat is the same as we ship it weekly from Pat LaFrieda's facility after we hand pick each piece. Then it gets dry aged in the 350 sq. ft. dry aging room and served perfectly to our guests.

Is it important for you to share your immigrant success story with others?

We believe that hard work and determination can get you very far. It's all up to you, so regardless of where you are from, it's important to know that you have to buckle down and work for what you want. Our story is the same of many, many people in America!

How has your childhood spent in Albania positioned you to become a great success in the realm of steak-houses?

We had great childhoods where we lived in the countryside. It was all about hard work that was instilled in us at a very young age.

In terms of cuisine, culture or even your role in a family kitchen/farm?

Benjamin S. – Family has always been the most important thing in our lives and that's why we wanted to be in this business together. Our staff is like family and we treat our customers like family.

Are you in the "people" business or the "real estate" business?

We are definitely in the people



Signature Filet Mignon Tartare with Black Truffle Crème Fraîche and Truffle Shavings served at Benjamin Steakhouse Prime

business. We've had to get into the real estate business so we can continue to expand our people business.

What customer experience are you striving for?

We always want our guests to feel like family, that is number one – they can relax and enjoy as if they were in their own home, but with a fine dining experience! We also pay great attention to detail regarding our steaks – we hand pick them every week, dry age them in house and grill them to each customer's ideal temperature, delivered on a sizzling hot plate. We strive for each guest to enjoy their mouth-watering steak, exceeding their expectations every time.

Old world or a more modern approach?

Definitely more of an old-world approach. We are surely "with the times" but we offer a classic, old school approach to ensuring our guests' experience is top notch.

What's your approach to sourcing beef and food?

We source our meat directly from Pat LaFrieda. We are his only client that he allows to come to his facility across the river every week and hand pick which pieces of meat we want for our customers. You can't find that kind of dedication anywhere else.

With so much competition how do you differentiate yourself?

We are a completely family run business, us being brother-in-laws, and we have other family members who work in the restaurant as well. We focus on offering our guests an unforgettable experience by making them a part of our family, each and every time. We also stand apart with our approach to steak – hand picking the best USDA Prime meat each week, dry aging in house and serving perfectly to our guests. We never cut corners on the food.

How do you attract guests?

We try a number of different advertising strategies and pay attention to the curve of business, what is happening every season and how we can best target our audience. We reach a lot of our guests digitally,

of course, and have reached many tourists with innovative advertising on airplanes, taxi cabs, etc.

Where does social media fit in your strategy?

We like to engage with our customers on a daily basis and have gained new followers from our amazing guests posting and sharing our photos. Social media is always evolving but we keep it pretty old school – we are who we are!

What's your approach to cultivating the tourist patron?

We work very closely with the hotels in the area as well as tourism boards, magazines, etc. that target tourists. We always work closely with other countries advertising agencies to target tourists before they even make it to New York City.

What is the future of your restaurant industry?

We are growing exponentially and the future looks very bright! We hope to have many more international locations, new restaurant concepts and continue to offer our guests an experience they simply cannot get elsewhere. We will stick to our family-like atmosphere in a fine dining setting with old-world charm!

If you continue to expand, where would you like to open new restaurants?

We'd like to continue on in Asia, and then hopefully Hawaii as well! The sky is the limit.

All photos courtesy of Benjamin Restaurant Group