

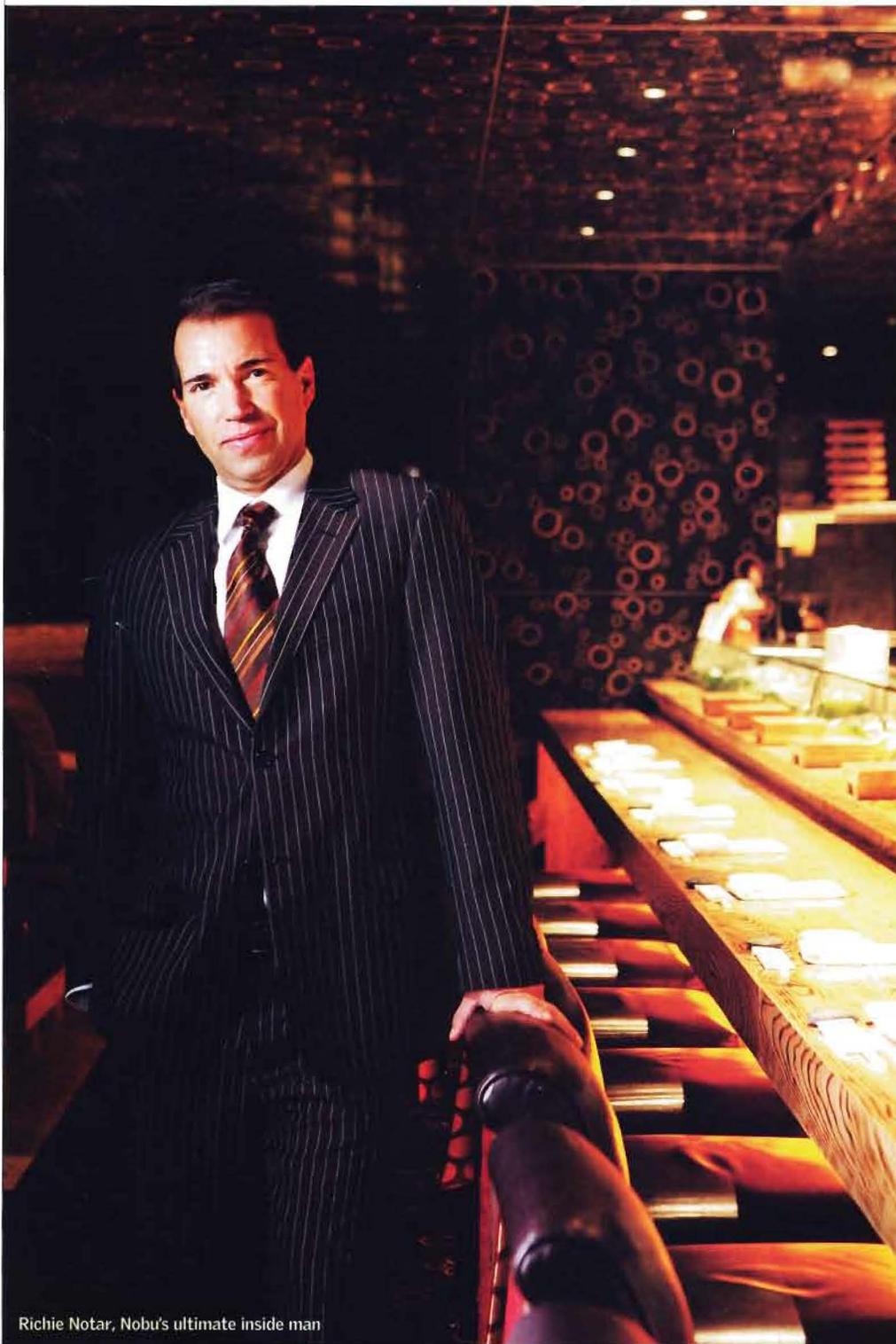
Behind the Velvet Rope

Running a place like Nobu isn't a job for the weak. And you had better know that Joe Pesci doesn't like sushi. *By Lindsay Van Gelder*

Steven Spielberg and Kate Capshaw are chowing down at one table; Tony Bennett is at another nearby. Sarah Jessica Parker is due any minute, and former president Clinton was in earlier. The nearly-as-famous black cod with miso is on the menu, as always — and in the midst of all this stardust is managing partner Richie Notar, smiling and schmoozing, but also making sure that everything at New York's new Nobu 57 is operating with the seamless precision of a sashimi knife.

Which means being part referee, part upscale bouncer, part psychologist, "plus mother, father, coach, mentor, and orchestrator," says Notar. "My job really involves knowing people and their nature." On a nightly basis, that juggling act can run the gamut from arranging the discreet safe exit of someone who has passed out in the ladies' room to breaking it to Martha Stewart that she can't have the tobyanaki charcoal grill that she spied at Calvin Klein's table ... because there's only one.

Nobu 57 (on 57th Street) is just a piece of the restaurant empire created over a decade ago by chef Nobu Matsuhisa.



Richie Notar, Nobu's ultimate inside man

There are now three Nobu each in New York and London, and others in Miami Beach, Malibu, Las Vegas, Dallas, Milan, Tokyo, and Paradise Island in the Bahamas. There are also two restaurants in the family called Matsuhisa, one in Los Angeles and one in Aspen. Both Nobu 57 and the Bahamas restaurant were launched in late 2005, a branch is slated to open in San Di-

ego at the end of 2006, and new outposts are in the planning stages for Hong Kong and Dubai.

Normally, when a brand expands that far and that fast, it risks triggering mass Cheezeball Mall Syndrome — that ennui we feel when we go to a new city and find the same stores, restaurants, and spas we left behind. But Nobu has consistently man-

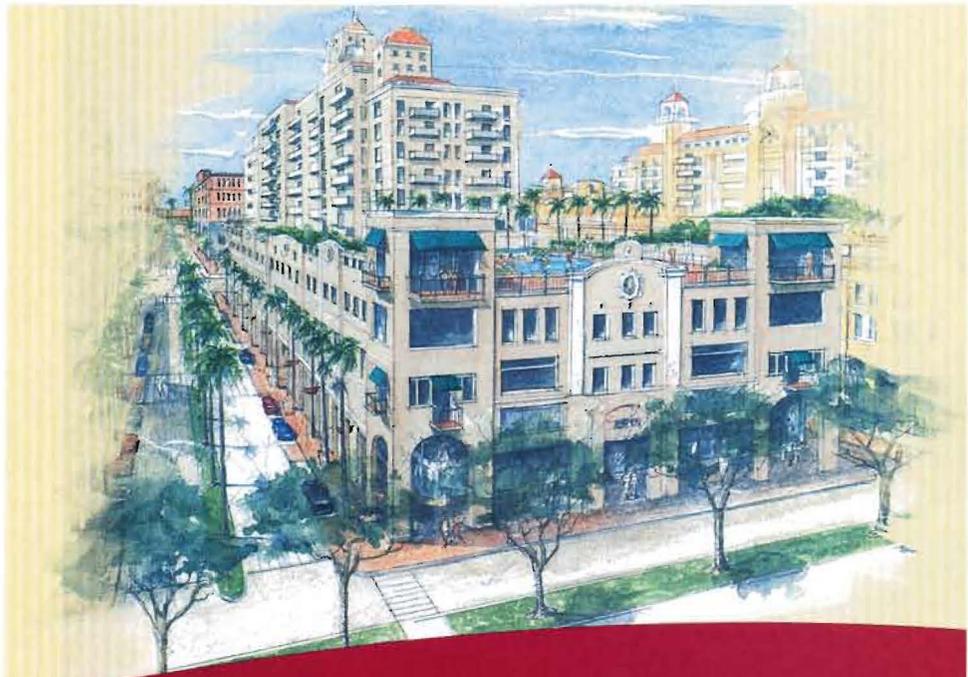
aged to top itself. For instance, the branch on Old Park Lane in London was the first Asian restaurant in the city to earn a coveted Michelin star, and it was voted the most popular restaurant in the 2005 London Zagat Survey. The Milan branch is part of Giorgio Armani's megaplex building; the one in Miami Beach is in the hip oceanfront Shore Club Hotel.

Keeping the buzz alive is part of Notar's job. "My worst nightmare is someone saying, 'You guys are just a chain, like McDonald's,'" he says. In fact, each Nobu is differently and spectacularly decorated (no sea-urchin-toned golden arches here), the only common design element being the bare scorched-ashwood tables. "We made a decision early on not to do tablecloths," he explains. "With soy sauce, they end up looking like Jackson Pollock paintings."

When the first Nobu opened in Tribeca in 1994, its black-pebble wall and sleek tree-trunk sculptures set it apart from other Manhattan sushi bars, and the fact that Robert De Niro is a partner probably doesn't hurt its glitz quotient, either. It was also the inventive, high-priced, but relatively low-calorie Peruvian/Californian take on traditional Japanese cuisine that had jaded Manhattan foodies fighting like sharks to get in. Dishes like yellowtail with jalapeños, tiradito (sashimi with cilantro and red-chile sauce), and toro tartare with caviar and gold leaf made the restaurant so trendy that the *New York Post* at one point published a chart showing the favored tables of Madonna, Denzel Washington, Tommy Hilfiger, George Soros, Robin Williams, Courtney Love, and dozens of other famous faces. The situation got so crazy that some patrons managed to get hold of the unlisted number that restaurant staff members used to communicate with each other (in those pre-cell-phone days) and tried to make reservations on it when the regular number was (as usual) busy.

But Notar had seen it all before. After all, he was the guy who invented the velvet rope.

Now 46, Notar was a neighborhood kid in Jamaica, Queens, in the mid-1970s, a little like the John Travolta character in *Saturday Night Fever*. While he was still in high school, Notar got a job as a busboy at a club owned by Ian Schrager and Steve Rubell. "I had been there about an hour, and I



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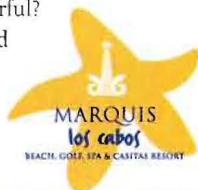


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like to talk about it, but it's no secret that certain tables are set aside to accommodate drop-in VIPs — and some customers will go to insane lengths to grab those spots. "There are otherwise upright citizens who think nothing of booking a table for seven, including Michelle Pfeiffer — and then somehow 'Michelle' never shows," Notar says. "People lie! It's part of my job to decipher what's real and what's not, to know things like who's filming where. I once had a guy call up claiming to be Joe Pesci — he had the voice down. Thank God I know Joe Pesci. So I start quizzing him. Where does he want to sit? Because I know Joe Pesci likes the back room, and this guy doesn't seem to care. Then I ask what he wants to eat, and he says sushi. Bingo! I know it's not him. Joe eats chicken. He doesn't like sushi."

Once, in the early days, before the real Spielberg was a Nobu regular in both Malibu and New York, "I had a Spielberg impersonator. The guy was saying all the right things, and I moved mountains to get him in. He walks in with an L.A. Dodgers cap, glasses, scruffy beard. But there was something off. I hadn't met Spielberg at that point, so I sat him by a casting agent I knew and asked her if it was Spielberg. Nope. The guy was spending money, but I was ticked off. What could I do? I realized the only way to get back at him was to embarrass him. He paid with cash. On his way out, the whole staff applauded him, and I announced that it was because it was the best impersonation of Spielberg I'd ever seen."

By now, the fusion food at Nobu has been widely imitated, as has the designer-Japanese-restaurant concept. But it's still a hotter-than-a-jalapeño ticket — sometimes too much so, especially in type-A-heavy New York and London. "I always say that people who are studying psychology should spend a month at the front desk of a hot restaurant," says Notar. "There are all these powerful guys who are used to making billion-dollar deals, and all day long people say yes to them. Then they walk into Nobu and want an eight o'clock reservation on a Saturday, and the answer is no." Hissy fits have been thrown. "I long ago learned that the answer to the question, 'Do you know who I am?' is, 'Yeah, [a jerk]' — although I would never say that," Notar laughs. **AWF**

LINDSY VAN GELDER is a Miami Beach-based writer whose favorite kind of sushi is sea urchin with quail egg.