


STARR
Turn

Restaurateur Stephen Starr is redefining the art of fine dining with his indelible flair for the dramatic.

By Robert DiGiacomo

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Borromini restaurant, Philadelphia

It's showtime at Borromini, restaurateur Stephen Starr's new Italian spot in Philadelphia. Named after a Roman architect from the Baroque period, the restaurant announces its presence on the north side of Rittenhouse Square, an iconic park and anchor of an upscale downtown neighborhood, with a gracious terrace and a marquee-like sign spelling out its name in all caps—signaling that *la dolce vita* awaits inside.

Behind the double doors, a high-end production awaits: A legion of uniformed servers zigzags along polished marble floors and between tables set with crisp white linens. Bartenders pour *molto grande* spritzes behind an expansive copper bar, and food runners bear a steady stream of traditional Italian dishes like arancini, rigatoni carbonara and osso bucco.

It's the type of performance that Starr, who early in his career promoted then-emerging talents such as Jerry Seinfeld and U2 and produced stadium shows for Madonna and George Michael, has conjured time and again over the past three decades. "Every new concept is based on a feeling," he says. "I have to walk into a space and feel the magic. That's how I know that it's the right location, menu and vision."

From a French brasserie that seems straight out of Paris (Parc in Philadelphia) to a Japanese spot created with a sushi master (Makoto in Miami Beach, Florida), to a California-inspired seasonal restaurant (Upland in New York City), Starr's holdings now span more than 40 locations not only in Philadelphia—where he got his start and the site of half of his restaurants—but also in New York, Greater Miami and Fort Lauderdale, Nashville and Washington, DC.



Stephen Starr

Putting the Show in the Restaurant Biz

Starr, the 2017 James Beard Award winner for Outstanding Restaurateur, knows it takes something indefinable to keep the public coming back for more.

"I'm a big music guy, so I think about what makes certain bands unique and successful," he says. "To me, that's a band like The Beatles, where every record was different. I like to channel that into my restaurants. It's a blessing and a curse

because I am always challenging myself and looking for ways to create magic."

Starr, who grew up in southern New Jersey, long harbored an interest in entertainment—starting with brief stints as a radio DJ when he was a teenager and later as a film student at Temple University. In the 1980s, he opened a series of nightclubs and music venues in Philly before venturing from the financially risky world of live events to perhaps an even riskier business: restaurants.

In 1995, he transformed a former diner in the Old City neighborhood of Philadelphia into the Continental Restaurant & Martini Bar. Riding the craft cocktail trend, the retro spot enjoyed a 25-year-run (and spinoffs in Rittenhouse Square and Atlantic City, New Jersey) and helped create the template for his high-concept approach that treats

each restaurant like a big-budget production. Forever the impresario (and neither a chef nor a designer), Starr instead assembles a team of A-list creatives for each project.

A Love Letter in Restaurant Form

To bring the two-story, 320-seat Borromini to life, Starr worked closely with virtuosos in the restaurant, design and architecture worlds, most notably New York City restaurateur Keith McNally. They transformed a former Barnes & Noble into a love letter to Italian architecture—a series of vaulted spaces defined by white-tile-lined arches, a mural depicting a scene from Pompeii, and backlit displays of spirits and wine bottles—all for a jaw-dropping \$20 million price tag.

"I wanted to make a space that was timeless and grounded in authenticity for an Old World feeling, but with the creative license to make it more dramatic," Starr says.

The food, of course, also plays a major role in any Starr production. For Borromini's

menu, Starr traveled to Rome for research and development and even flew in an Italian chef to the US for a week of consultations. The resulting dishes, tested multiple times in the Borromini kitchen, hit familiar notes but add their own touches—such as the signature 100-layer lasagna, made lighter with béchamel and marinara sauces.

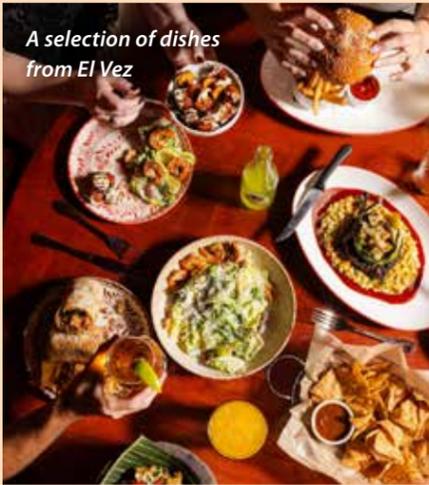
"I wanted the food to highlight the best of Italy," Starr says. "The dishes are simple and familiar but refined and perfectly executed."

With Borromini well underway, Starr is already back at it. This past October, he reopened New York City Italian stalwart Babbo and at press time was brainstorming the concept for yet another location on Rittenhouse Square—his fourth—next to Parc.

"After 30 years, the opening night of each restaurant is what I consider to be the saddest day," Starr says. "The creative rush, the magic, is complete, and I am ready to pass off this baby to my incredible team to honor the vision while I begin my next endeavor."



Clockwise, from top left: The 100-layer lasagna from Borromini; the Terrace at Makoto, Miami Beach; the dining room at Parc, Philadelphia; Borromini's Italian-inspired dining room



A selection of dishes from El Vez

A CONSTELLATION of Restaurants

Over the decades, Stephen Starr has opened dozens of places (and shuttered more than a few). Here are some key spots to check out:

The French Connection

Parc's boffo box office inspired Starr to create a copycat in DC called Le Diplomate, a magnet for politicians and power brokers that features a similar menu of onion soup, steak frites, profiteroles and the like. He has continued in a (more contemporary) French vein in New York with Le Coucou, a joint effort with internationally known chef Daniel Rose that garnered a James Beard Award for Best New Restaurant in 2017, and Le Café Louis Vuitton, a restobar located on the fourth floor of the luxury brand's flagship store.



Le Diplomate, Washington, DC

Icons Ripe for a Comeback

Starr has also helped breathe new life into iconic restaurant brands and locations. In 2019, he teamed up with Keith McNally to bring back New York City's Pastis after a five-year absence. Located in the Meatpacking District, the destination French bistro is known for its celebrity sightings. (Starr has since opened versions in DC, Miami and Nashville.) And in 2025, Starr reopened the century-old Occidental inside Washington, DC's Willard Hotel, with traditional touches like a martini cart, pigs in a blanket and lamb with mint jelly.

Major Collaborators

Starr has regularly teamed up with well-known chefs and restaurateurs, starting in 2001 with Iron Chef Masaharu Morimoto for his namesake sushi restaurant in Philly. Other collaborators have included the design studio of Roman and Williams for La Mercerie, a French restaurant inside its Guild shop in New York, and award-winning chef Nancy Silverton for Osteria Mozza in DC.

South of the Border

Named in honor of Robert "El Vez" Lopez, aka the Mexican Elvis, Starr's El Vez in Philadelphia opened in 2003 and is known for its kitsch décor and dishes like guacamole prepared tableside. El Vez has since been replicated in New York and Fort Lauderdale, Florida. In DC, Starr also has El Presidente, which riffs on Mexico City-style cuisine and cocktails.



Le Café Louis Vuitton, New York City