

Lutèce

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF
AMERICA'S GREATEST
RESTAURANT



IRENE DARIA

A woman with short red hair arrives carrying a carton of tomatoes. She is Lucky Lee, a co-owner of Sunrise Sun-Ripened Tomatoes, Inc. She and André exchange pleasantries, and after she leaves he tells me the story of that company. Ten years ago, Lucky gave up a show business career to spend time with her terminally ill grandmother in Florida. There, she and three of her six siblings went into the tomato business by chance. Fed up with the poor quality of the tomatoes they found, even in Florida supermarkets, the kids went to a local "U-pick" field, where they could choose their own.

At first they picked just for themselves. Then they decided to pay for a visit to their mother, who lived and worked in New York, by bringing a van load of tomatoes with them and selling them in the city. Word of the tomatoes' beauty and taste spread through the restaurant world, and over the next several years the siblings rented bigger and bigger trucks. Today they own their own tractor trailers.

Later, Lee tells me she first knocked on Lutèce's door three years ago. "I'd heard André was a living legend. His attention to detail and consistent dedication to what he does is what brought me there. I knew that someone who cared that much about what he did and someone who was there all of the time to take care of his customers [would want the best possible tomatoes]. Many times you find owners and chefs who are not there taking care of business. They spend half their time there and half the time flying all over doing promotions.

"I remember the first time I brought him a box of tomatoes, he looked at it and said, 'I haven't seen tomatoes like this in twenty years.' I wanted to fall over. Here's someone I had tremendous respect for and to get a compliment like that just bowled me over. He had won a big award in France for a dish he did with tomato and fish and he said these tomatoes would enable him to be able to do that dish again."

Lee has come to know André well, but still, she says, "I can't get him out of that restaurant. I do tomato tastings at the James Beard House and tomato talks. On a number of occasions I have asked him if he could please be my guest chef and do the food. His dedication to the restaurant is so strong that he will not take the night off."