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FOOD & LIFESTYLE

50 YEARS OF STELLAR SERVICE AT THE REFECTORY

Image: Columbus Business First

Owner Kamal Boulos has worked at the venerable North Side restaurant for decades, pushing his chefs, sommeliers and staff to make every meal an experience.

Kamal Boulos, owner of The Refectory.

JEFFRY KONCZAL FOR CBF



By [Dan Eaton](#) – Senior reporter, Columbus Business First
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Foodie culture creates a constant pull toward the new – new restaurants, new chefs, new trends.

And while innovation is vital to a vibrant restaurant scene, its backbone is built on the classics.

In Columbus, that is The Refectory.

Founded in 1976 as the Olde Church-House Restaurant, it remains among the finest of local fine dining.

Kamal Boulos has been there nearly since day one: Employee in 1977, manager in 1978, owner in 1991.

Though there's a veneer of history – the building goes back to the 1800s and the restaurant style is classically French – historic and classic should not be confused with staid and stodgy at The Refectory, where the menu changes daily.

“We would much rather delight your senses in ways that are surprising, that are more of an adventure,” Boulos said. “Maybe that’s something you’ve not had before or maybe it’s familiar components, but in a way you’ve not experienced before.”

A fixture on best-of lists, The Refectory has earned consistent annual honors from *Wine Spectator*, including its Grand Award in 1991. It's received AAA's Four Diamond Award every year since 1995.

“Fine dining is about connecting with the people you're with,” Boulos said. “As you look back on your life, you will have memories of places you've been and the people you've shared experiences with.”

“A lot of those memories are going to be around a table.”

The Refectory

Address: 1092 Bethel Road

Opened: 1976

Original name: Olde Church-House

Renamed and remodeled: 1981

Owner: Kamal Boulos

Executive chef: Richard Blondin

Employees: 65 full and part-time

Boulos recently sat down with *Columbus Business First* to share his experiences. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

The son of Egyptian immigrants, Boulos grew up in upstate New York. He was 14 when he went to work at a resort owned by a friend's parents.

Boulos: My first dining room job was at Lake Mohonk. It sat 750. There were eight busboys. My friend and I were the youngest. He had a very intuitive, 30,000-foot view of everything.

I was fortunate to have this incubator. If my first job was among people that were complaining about everyone they served, that could have become me.

Later, another friend of ours started. When the three of us were scheduled, sometimes they'd give the other guys the night off. Here we were, three 16-year-

olds, bussing a room of 750. The maître d' was like, 'Well, I see five guys standing around and three guys hustling.' That really set my path.

That path had bumps. Boulos graduated from high school in 1970 in a college town with an active drug culture.

Boulos: I had a lot of self-destructive behavior. It didn't affect my work ethic, but I wasn't raising the bar. One day the manager sits me down and takes out a piece of paper. He puts a dot on it and draws a circle around it. 'See that dot? That's you. See that circle? That's your world. As long as you're making the choices you're making, that will always be your world.'

He said I could make different choices and grow. He put a dot outside the circle and drew another circle. And he did it again.

I was a punk. I walked out thinking, 'What was that about?' But it never went away.

I never really had goals. Never thought about tomorrow. But doors began to open in ways I didn't seek or imagine. I realized it happened because I was making different choices. I put destructive behavior behind me. That seed that was dormant ultimately bore fruit.



Kamal Boulos.

JEFFRY KONCZAL

One of those doors opened while driving a family from the resort to LaGuardia Airport. During the drive, they offered him a job at a Columbus restaurant they were investing in, the Olde Church-House. Its dining room sat 60 and was confined to what is the Refectory's lounge today.

Boulos stopped in on a drive to Las Vegas, but the managing partner didn't want to hire him. Instead, the family offered him a job with their securities business. Three months later, he returned to Columbus and took the job.

Boulos: I did that for a year and hated it. But during that year, I'd help at the restaurant. Just an extra pair of hands.

I started full-time after they bought out (their partner) in July 1977. The place was losing money. They raised money to build a disco (in the current dining room). By March '78, that money was gone.

They let me take over. I had to cook because I couldn't afford a chef. Within one month, I went from losing \$10,000 a month to breaking even. I could tell you at

the end of a week if one piece of shrimp was missing. I was counting everything.

The restaurant was grossing maybe \$375,000 a year and we were \$100,000 in debt to vendors. That was unsustainable. I went to Michael's Finer Meats & Seafood. We owed them \$7,000. I said, 'I want to pay \$15 a week.' They started cursing me, but when I told them we had \$100,000 in debt, they got quiet. I said, 'If you keep me alive, you might get something.' We operated that way for three years.

Then Richard Corna and Benny Ciotola bought it. The early investors probably lost collectively \$400,000, but the vendors probably got 95 cents on the dollar. They were happy.

The new owners renamed the restaurant The Refectory and asked Boulos to stay for a year.

Boulos: I told them, 'Pay me what you want.' In the first 10 years I never asked for more money. I want to under-promise and over-deliver.

They let me run it. I said I want to grow the wine cellar. I want to do this. I want to do that. They said, 'All we care about is that you pay your bills.' As long as I did that, I had carte blanche.

A little more than a decade later, Boulos decided he wanted to buy The Refectory. Corna and Ciotola eventually agreed.

Boulos: I didn't want investors; investors want a return. I want to take care of staff and guests and make a living. I don't want to go to investors every time I want to buy a piece of equipment or if I want to have a staff party.

They realized I was serious. This was just one investment for them. I made money for them. They gave me an extraordinary price. And then, at the end of the negotiation, I said, 'By the way, can you lend me the money?'

There was trust there. I didn't go to them every couple of months and say, 'Hey, I'm doing a great job, how are you going to take care of me?' If I'd constantly demanded things over 10 years, would they have given me a wonderful price? Would they have financed it?

Again, that imprint from Lake Mohonk, working for my friend's parents. That's who I became.

Over the years, notable chefs have passed through The Refectory's kitchen, including Michael Sullivan and Don Hauck.

But when it received the Wine Spectator Grand Award in 1991, Boulos wanted a world-class chef to match its world-class wine cellar. He'd known Chef Richard Blondin for years. The native of Lyon, France, trained with the likes of Pierre Orsi before coming to the United States.

Boulos: Richard worked at L'Auberge in Dayton. He'd left L'Auberge for a job in Vail, Colorado. But nine months later, he calls me. He loved working there, but another Frenchman owned the place. 'He doesn't need me. I'm not using my skills.'

He could have gone to Chicago or New York, but he wanted to be in Ohio, to be close to his wife's family. He was willing to take this on. I said to him, 'This is

going to be the hardest job you're ever going to take.' It's been remarkable.

I have had the privilege of working with amazing people. I've had the privilege of serving people who have been incredibly supportive. It's those relationships. When our daughter was born, people that I didn't even know very well brought us gifts. Small things – a card, a stuffed toy. I was absolutely overwhelmed. That's humbling.

But our evolution was always driven by our people. Chef Richard was a driver. (General Manager) Jeff Elasky was a driver. He was the architect of us getting the Grand Award.

I've been fortunate to work with people who were driven to excellence in a way that wasn't self-promoting. We just wanted to become better at what we were doing, whether that's service or wine or spirits or food.



Longtime Executive Chef Richard Blondin in the kitchen.

JEFFRY KONCZAL

Elasky worked there from 1979 until he died of cancer in 2016. That was a crossroads for Boulos.

Boulos: He was my wingman. We built the wine cellar together. ... We'd be here until 1 or 2 in the morning dreaming about next steps, working toward something extraordinary.

When he was gone, it was like, 'How can I do this?' For nine months I came in and put one foot in front of the other. I was numb. I didn't know if I wanted to keep going. But eventually I realized moving forward was the best way to honor all the things Jeff had done.

No restaurant reaches 50 years without difficulties.

Boulos: We've been on the edge of financial ruin a few times. We took over the Wyandotte Inn in 1997. It didn't cost us a dime other than what we wanted to do to the place. Sounds like a great opportunity, right? I thought having a casual place would be nothing but cash flow. We were arrogant about it, made a lot of mistakes. It was humbling and it almost took down both restaurants.

In 2006-2007, business dropped 10%. We were coasting. One day you wake up and you pay the price. The value of the real estate plummeted. We had this massive amount of equity and that was gone. No safety net.

My wife Linda and I moved in with her parents. I took no pay. Linda started teaching. Jeff took a voluntary 10% pay cut.

A strong banking relationship and a new advisory board helped refocus the restaurant.

Boulos: Huntington let us go interest-only. We never missed a payment. Never missed a check. They let us go six months, then another six months.

In March 2008, I asked for another six months. They gave it to me, but their advice was to walk away: 'Look what it's doing to you, look what it's doing to your family.'



Staff at The Refectory made sure every guest was happy during an evening dinner service over the holidays.

JEFFRY KONCZAL

We came back up 5% so we were moving in the right direction. Then fall 2008 happens. Our principal was going to kick back in. We had maybe six months of life left. Jeff and (long-time business manager Sandra Losco) said, ‘We’ll stick with you.’

In 2009, a year where every restaurant was down, we finished up 1%.

An advisory board member challenged Boulos about community involvement. Although the restaurant supported nonprofits by providing gift certificates, it didn’t participate in events.

Boulos: ‘If your business is not visibly seen supporting the community, your business will become invisible to the community.’ That hit me like a ton of bricks.

In the midst of our spiral, we went from doing no (nonprofit) events to doing 36. It wasn’t out of abundance. We were doing them out of poverty. But it was the right thing to do.

So 2009 comes and the economy is tanking. Our survival wasn't going to rise or fall on these events, so we kept doing them. Those nonprofits rallied around us and became our advocates. They wanted to help because we stood with them in a bad economy.

That's been a turning point in my thoughts and actions ever since.

Not even the Covid pandemic could change the restaurant's community-centered approach.



Denis Danchine and Natalia Jouikova enjoy some wine before their meal.

JEFFRY KONCZAL

Boulos: I thought we were going to close. Can't let the circumstances change who we are. We created a carryout business. We'd sell food out the front and we'd give food away out the back.

Whatever resources we had we would use for our guests, our staff and our community. We helped staff with rent and utility payments. Some of them never came back to work for us. That's OK. That wasn't why we did it.

Covid changed operations. The Refectory is now open four days a week for regular business and two for private events – but it didn't change the restaurant.

Boulos: We want you to celebrate life in your own way and we frame it in a way that's going to delight you. We want to be an environment where that can happen.

That's what drives me in this business – the memories around a table.

That'll never change. The need for that will never go away.

But change will come. Although Boulos has no retirement or succession plan, he is starting to think about it.

Boulos: Chef Richard is nearing retirement as well. I'd love to see a chef-owner – someone who would want to put their imprint on the foundation that's already here.

The name doesn't have to continue, but there's a lot of positives someone could build on here.

I would love to see this place continue another 50 years. That would be my hope.