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REAL ESTATE PEOPLE

Industry gives ex-restaurateur food for thought

By ALICIA HARTGROVE

A young Frenchman aspiring to be an English teacher in France came to New York City in 1986 to improve his English but ended up staying for the long haul.

Raba Belkadi, originally from Paris, is now a broker with DJK Residential and specialist in the downtown/ Battery Park area.

Growing up, Belkadi's fondest memories were walking the streets of Paris, but he said Paris doesn't have the energy that New York City does. He attended Sainte Denis University in Paris where he studied English.

After being in New York City for a short time, he started working his way up the restaurant chain. First he was a bus boy at Le Bistrot de Maxims, a French restaurant. Then, four months later, a waiter at Lezint, a French bistro in Tribeca. He continued serving at three and four star restaurants like Sondimenico and Palio (both Italian restaurants) for a few years.

In 1991, Belkadi opened and managed a restaurant with his friend, Jean Claude in Soho. Belkadi and Jean Claude went on to open Soho Steak in 1994.

"The best part of working at a restaurant is people are happy to come in and eat something; it's different than working in an office," said Belkadi.

"New Yorkers sometimes want more than a good meal from a restaurant they want to hear a good story."

Soho Steak was a "trendy" restaurant for about 10 years with regular monthly newspaper and magazine reviews. Belkadi considers himself very lucky in the success of his restaurant and met a lot of famous

people during its popularity. Madonna, Richard Gere, and Cyndi Lauper were among the celebrities who ate there.

Belkadi said the contact he had with customers in his restaurant "was a plus" and helped him succeed in real estate because "you just have to listen to them (clients), respect them, and try to please them as much as you can."

Soho Steak closed in 2005 after the landlord continued to increase the rent, which sparked Belkadi's interest in real estate. "I have to study this field so I can make changes," he said.

Belkadi, interested in big cities, took a year off to travel all over South America and Asia with his wife, Ohmi.

He especially loved Buenos Aires, Argentina, where he stayed for one week.

"It's the Paris of South America," he said of Argentina. "Beautiful people, nice clean city, good food, and it's three times cheaper than New York."

Like the restaurant business, when Belkadi entered the real estate profession, he "started at the bottom and learned from others." He studied at an uptown office for two years before becoming a member at DJK Residential, where he now has exclusive listings.

"It's a fun business to be in because there is a lot of networking that is needed," said Belkadi.

He prides himself in patience he learned in manag-



ing restaurants and the ability to put himself in his clients' shoes.

Besides meeting different kinds of people, he most enjoys the "the freedom to be in and out of the office."

Belkadi's biggest triumph in the market happened last June when he sold an apartment for the highest amount per square foot on Rector Place after the first open house.

"It's interesting to see how people think, how they purchase an apartment, everyone has different priorities," said Belkadi.

Outside of work, Belkadi plays soccer "just for fun" and enjoys taking long walks. When he ran the restaurant with his partner he used to visit Paris a lot, but now he only visits about twice a year because he has exclusive clients, he says, he needs to be committed to them.

"There is a place for everybody in New York ... and you have to make compromises, but that's what life is about," said Belkadi.