It's great to talk about food and baseball with others who are equally passionate on the subjects and recently I was fortunate enough to do so with the Nieporent brothers, Drew and Tracy, as well as Mike Landeen, Senior Vice President, Venue Services & Operations for the New York Mets. Along with

Nobu and the Tribeca Grill, the Nieporents have added the Acela Club at Citi Field to their restaurant empire, which has dramatically changed the way fans can experience a professional baseball game.

Major League baseball games have become continually longer, with the average length about three hours. Instead of complaining about it (like me) the Mets organization has addressed the problem with extracurricular activities at the ballpark, many of them involving food.

According to Landeen, gastronomy was an integral part of Citi Field's original planning. "When we began designing Citi Field it was our intention to pick the best of the best of New York so we got Danny Meyer (Shake Shack) and Dave Pasternack (Esca, Catch of the Day) and of course Drew Nieperont," he said. It was the Mets' mission to redefine the dining experience at sports and entertainment facilities, and they have certainly done so from the basic concession stands to the Acela Club, a pristine glass house sitting high above left field, it's perfection obscured only by an orange foul pole.

"We treat people like we want to be treated ourselves," said Drew. "It's entertainment," added Tracy. The expansive glass wall affords a view of the entire stadium and with televisions placed strategically throughout the restaurant it's hard to miss any aspect of the game.

At most other premium stadium restaurants, the food is usually served buffet style, and that is something the Acela Club has avoided. "Stadiums are like cruise ships. You have a small window of time to feed a large group of people so buffet style is often the easiest method," said Landeen. "We like to call buffets food coffins, because they kill the food."

The Acela Club is setup so you can order an entree (seven choices) from a menu but appetizers and salads can be obtained at market tables or "grazing stations," as Tracy Nieporent likes to call them. These stations are not typical stadium buffets because there are no steam tables. The Butcher Block station offers prosciutto, salami, along with artisanal cheeses and breads. The Antipasti station offers salads and marinated vegetables while the Al Forno station has meatballs, caesar salad and thin crust pizzas. Taqueria, the fourth station, has assorted tacos, chips and salsas.

Our waitress Erina helped me and my friend Joe navigate the menu and more importantly, the restaurant, which has four separate tiers. We sampled almost everything at the market tables (it's all you can eat) and I ordered the New York strip steak while Joe decided on the steamed branzino. We both enjoyed all the fare from the market tables but the standouts were perfectly prepared meatballs plus a delicious crispy Caesar salad with the exact amount of necessary dressing. The entrees were just the right size to accompany the amount of food available at the various stations. My strip steak was tender as a filet but more flavorful and seasoned like a dream with tarragon, shallots and garlic herb butter. Joe's branzino was steamed with leeks in a saffron mussel broth and excellent as well. The cost for dinner is \$48.00 for adults and \$25.00 for children and given the prices of hot dogs and beers that's a very good deal. The wine list is reasonable with prices ranging from \$36.00 to \$150.00 per bottle. "There's something here for every New Yorker," said Joe. Amazingly, we made room for dessert and the panna cotta was excellent but the showstopper was the raspberry cheesecake donuts which would easily make the Homer Simpson hall of fame.

We sat down at our table shortly before the game began and stayed until the fifth inning when we returned to our seats. The only thing that took a bit of getting used to is that the restaurant is soundproof so you can't hear any stadium noise, but the same holds true when watching a game at a sports bar or restaurant, and this was certainly a far different and better experience. "You immediately know that you're a part of the game because everyone stops for the national anthem," said Tracy, and in fact they did, with the majority of customers standing up.

More importantly, unlike other stadiums, most seats at Citi Field allow entry into the Acela Club. "We have a chance to create friendships," said Tracy. "We want to serve everyone who comes to the stadium and offer a gracious dining experience without being elitist."