FOOD FOR THOUGHT: Thomas Keller's Per Se tasting menus wouldn't exist without the work of Related at the Time Warner Center.

Eat this

The heroes behind New York City's better-than-ever restaurant scene are developers

By STEVE CUOZZO

MEET THE GOURMAND'S BEST FRIEND: the Real Estate Man.

What, you say? Don't landlords evict eateries to score big bucks from a bank? Don't developers raze beloved neighborhood haunts to create high-rises?

In fact — surprise! — guys like Jean-Georges Vongerichten and Thomas Keller owe their toques to people with names like Donald Trump and Kenneth Himmel. And all New Yorkers who benefit from an unprecedented proliferation of restaurants should be thankful, too.

Although low-watt thinkers who clog Internet sites and the New York Times with anti-landlord rants will choke to hear it, most of the good news in Manhattan dining is due to real-estate development and investment.

How can this be? Didn't top retail broker Brad Mendelson recently say that rising rents are pricing restaurants out of the market? Didn't a demand for much higher rent doom the Second Avenue Deli? Didn't hotel builder Sam Chang force out Greek-Italian eatery Dona? What about Café Madeleine's perhaps futile court battle to stave off demolition?

Sad cases all — especially Dona, perhaps the best restaurant ever to fall to the development sword so soon after it opened.

But listen to JDF Realty's Leslie Siben, a broker who has done deals for everything from tiny bistros to Stephen Starr's mammoth Buddakan in Chelsea Market: "Real-estate development is completely instrumental for creating new environments, both for restaurant-going and restaurant-operating. Both development and investment are creating beautiful and astounding neighborhoods with new homes and workplaces from which people trot out for business lunches and dinners and private parties."

Another way to put it: No Chelsea Market, no Buddakan.

Not enough diners grasp that many of today's best restaurants are direct products or byproducts of new development.

Trump brought Vongerichten's flagship, Jean Georges, to his Trump International Hotel & Tower. And do you think Vongerichten would have launched Perry Street without a glamorous Richard Meier-designed condo tower in which to open it?

Without Related's Time Warner Center, there would be no Per Se, Masa, Café Gray, Porter House or forthcoming Landmarc. They were given life entirely by the commitment of Stephen Ross, Related's CEO, and the passion of Kenneth Himmel, the Related honcho who created the building's galleria. Vornado's Steve Roth facilitated Le Cirque opening at the Bloomberg tower. The Lefrak family paid to build out the Nobu 57 space.

Le Bernardin would not exist without Equitable; the company specifically designed its new headquarters in the 1980s to house three glam dining spaces (which now include Bar Americain and Piano Due) and subsidized their rents for many years.

What about the regrettable displacement of small, family-run joints in residential neighborhoods? This needs perspective, too. Many old haunts have been uprooted. But they've regrouped in new locales. Ninth Avenue from 34th

TIME TO EAT: The Time Warner Center is also home to Masa, Café Gray and Porter House.

Street north has always had ethnic eateries, but never as many as today; thank the burgeoning Midtown West population eager to support them.

Only the condo-ization of the Upper West Side finally brought in enough disposable income to support restaurants as good as Picholine, Ouest and Telepan.

And it was the new apartment towers in Flatiron that catalyzed the economic energy to support the myriad bistros and brasseries in a vast district once dead after dark.

All reasons for real-estate bashers to eat their words.