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The Evolution Of Hotel Dining

By *Derek Gale, Senior Editor -- Hotels, 5/18/2009 4:03:00 PM*

The hotel dining landscape in the United States has changed dramatically over the past 30 years, going from prominence to near-death and back to prominence again today.

“Thirty years ago, everyone ate at hotels because that’s what was available,” noted **Bob Amick, founder and managing partner, Concentrics Restaurants and Concentrics Hospitality Solutions, Atlanta**, at an educational session on the evolution of hotel dining at the **National Restaurant Show** in Chicago.

“That got lost when independent restaurants came in. Guests left [to eat], and hotels to a degree gave up—they decided they couldn’t make money in the restaurant business,” Amick said.

Essentially, offering F&B services for guests became a necessary evil and a losing proposition—in many cases a drain on the bottom line.

But in recent years there has been a hotel restaurant renaissance (perhaps starting with celebrity chefs opening Las Vegas outlets), with a renewed focus on profitable food and beverage operations that don’t just meet guests’ needs but actually provide memorable dining experiences for guests and locals alike.

Those types of operations come in many different forms and operating models, from leased out restaurant spaces to management agreements to self-operated concepts.

There’s no guaranteed formula for success for such outlets, but “the most important things are location, location, location, like freestanding restaurants,” said **Phillip Foss**, executive chef at **Lockwood restaurant at The Palmer House**, a Hilton hotel in Chicago. “We have struggled with this being in the lobby of the hotel. The placement of our restaurant is a downer sometimes. A lot of hotels these days are looking for street access for restaurants.”

Amick, who is about 10 days from opening three concepts at **TheWit**, a Doubletree hotel in Chicago, agrees. His company, Concentrics Restaurants, does mostly freestanding restaurants, so when he creates hotel concepts, he seeks street access.

“I want my own entrance, and drop-off, and a sign outside,” he said. “I don’t want you to have to walk through the hotel to get to my restaurant.”

The alternative to street access is to offer a great view—something **Frank Brunacci**, executive chef at the **Trump International Hotel & Tower, Chicago**, says has worked for the fine-dining restaurant at that property, **Sixteen**.

Amick also is counting on that for one of the venues at TheWit, **a 200-seat rooftop lounge on the 27th floor of the hotel**.

As for operating models, Amick said he thinks the industry will over the next few years see fewer celebrity chef management agreements. Hotels don’t want to give up the business—they want to do a better job managing it themselves, so many brands are committing to finding the right talent to develop and lead restaurants for the hotels.

Foss at Lockwood is one example of this. Bringing in a celebrity chef was discussed, but ultimately Hilton decided to do the restaurant at The Palmer House on its own. Part of the reason it has worked, Foss said, is that he has been given free reign to make decisions and run the operation as much like a freestanding restaurant as possible. For example, Foss does not report to the executive chef of the hotel, which he appreciates, because that model often creates a collision of heads, he said.

Brunacci agreed, noting that after a celebrity chef pulled out of being executive chef for the Trump property in Chicago, Brunacci was asked whether he wanted to be executive chef of the restaurant or the hotel. His response? “Both,” he said. “I didn’t want to butt heads reporting to the executive chef.”

But in working with a company like Hilton Hotels, even given a large amount of flexibility, Foss still has to play by certain rules of the brand, he said: “We haven’t been able to get away from Hilton brand standards for breakfast, for example.”

Amick noted that there is much more latitude today in working with hotel brands than there used to be, but said “you still have to fight for it.”

And that means picking your battles, Foss noted. For him, that included going to the Palmer House’s general manager in order to do more than 15 menu items at dinner.

Amick believes that strong hotel brands that want to manage their own restaurant concepts will start to look locally for savvy concept-creation partners and chefs.

In Chicago, he needs look no further for an example of this than the soon-to-open **Elysian Hotel**, which **recently named local culinary personality and James Beard Award nominee Mindy Segal managing pastry chef and master of sweet indulgence**.

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