

# FOOD ARTS

AT THE RESTAURANT and HOTEL FOREFRONT



HOT LINE TO TECHNOLOGY FRONTIERS

w o r l d w i d e

WINE REPORT HE'S THE SWAMI OF HOTEL BEVERAGE PROGRAMS, POTENTIALLY CHILEAN SALMON'S BEST FRIEND, A LIFELONG TECHNOPHILE, AND A BUDDHIST—BUT YOU CAN JUST THINK OF HIM AS FRED TIBBITTS, A ONE-MAN GLOBAL NETWORK AT YOUR SERVICE. TED GACHOT REPORTS. ►

Fred







Fred Tibbitts' shoes must last forever. Flying 250,000 miles a year, in the course of representing wine and spirits producers and importers and acting as a beverage consultant to hotel and restaurant chains, his feet must only intermittently scrape terra firma. Tibbitts is literally out there, a strategy that has made him unique in his niche of the wine business. Dial his 800 number, and you're as likely to reach him in Singapore, visiting an f&b director of the world's largest hotel chain, or on the South African veldt, negotiating a deal with a vineyard, as in his main office at the top of **The Roosevelt Hotel** in Midtown Manhattan. But since the same number rings his cell phone direct in any of 86 countries, you can be pretty sure of reaching him wherever he happens to be.

"I use every technology that's available to be connected to the people who need me," explains Tibbitts. "My willingness to be available without barriers, without qualification, is one of the reasons we're so successful and why we are global in the real sense. I've always said that if it's important enough to call me at two in the morning, it's important enough for me to answer the telephone. I have no office hours because my heart is open."

A businessman with an open heart? Sounds like a new concept, indeed. To really understand what sets Tibbitts apart in his business is to recognize that behind his peculiar brand of global capitalism lurks the Buddhism that he "stumbled onto" one day—quite

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appropriately—in the San Francisco Airport. A book picked up while waiting for a flight sparked his interest in Tibetan Buddhism, opening a path that eventually led to a monastery in Woodstock, New York, where the abbot told him that he had practiced Buddhism in another life and the moment had come in this one for him to pick it up again. "At the time, it was pretty striking news to me," says Tibbitts, who nevertheless eventually moved into the monastery part-time and gave away all his possessions—except his suits, which he still needed for work. "If you want to know why we're successful," Tibbitts explains, "it's really the spiritual side of me: understanding first that we're all connected, and then realizing that that means the world is one place, and then, from a marketing perspective, that it's one marketplace. We bring together the latest in communications and computer technology with the theme of one world and one marketplace and so have a single philosophy that marries the eternal and the technologically cutting edge." Tibbitts is living proof that with the right tools, one man's Buddhism can be another's wine program.

Still, at first, it is a bit of a trick to get a handle on just what Tibbitts does. His transcendental/technophile mindset, what you might call his Buddhist business sense, has allowed him to breeze through the normally perceived boundaries of the supplier-client

relationship. "See, the key is that the world is now one marketplace. You can divide the world any way you want," he explains. "It doesn't matter. It's only in your head that it's divided up." Tibbitts has a long history in foodservice, stretching back to when he was 16, working at his family's business distributing Land O' Lakes butter—as well as eggs, cheese, and turkeys—to customers within a 100-mile radius around Albany, New York. After earning degrees in economics and psychology, he worked his way up from editing an operations manual for **McDonald's** to, eventually, becoming East Coast director of sales for Joseph E. Seagram & Sons, and, in 1990, director of national accounts at Kobrand Corporation. But Fred Tibbitts as we now know him only came into being when he finally broke out and started Fred Tibbitts & Associates.

"In 1992, I started my own business to capitalize on my years of experience in the foodservice industry, particularly the wine business but also beverage alcohol in general, to provide a service that I did not see being provided," he says. "I knew how many millions of dollars it took to run a national accounts department for a wine or spirits producer, importer, or distributor. With corporate downsizing and the trend toward outsourcing services, I saw a niche." That niche was to do it for them, to represent—that is, sell—their products to chain hotels and restaurants. "Now," Tibbitts says, "Fred Tibbitts & Associates is the foremost independent national

accounts sales and marketing agency in the country representing importers and producers of, primarily, wine and spirits."

Tibbitts credits the company's global approach with putting it on the map. "We truly now are approaching national account sales and marketing globally, and we're the only ones doing it. That means we're the only agency that is truly calling on the chain hotels and restaurants wherever they're headquartered in the world. If you want to succeed today, whether you are marketing to a city block or a community or a region or a state, your mindset has to be global. There's this common expression, 'Think globally, act locally.' Wrong! Think globally, act globally! What that means is that you understand that we now, more than ever, inhabit one world community. If you understand that the local is the global, you act appropriately. You want to welcome the world. You don't want to say to the world, 'You must like what we've been doing and what we intend to keep doing.'

"Increasingly, the customers in the chain hotels and restaurants are coming from everywhere; you have to create an environment that is friendly to the whole world. You see articles about the challenge to French cuisine, French wines to satisfy world menus. People are interested in Cuba—anything Cuban. Five years ago no one knew what a Cuban sandwich was. Today it's on many menus



and it's very tasty. There's no end to it. People are traveling, coming together on the Internet, and you can go into a restaurant and almost not know what the cuisine is. There will always be a specialty, but increasingly the cuisine is going to be of the world. If **Peninsula Hotels** is headquartered in Hong Kong and opens hotels in the United States, or **TGI Fridays** is headquartered in Dallas and opens restaurants overseas, it doesn't matter. Everyone is doing the same thing."

To support this approach, he explains, "We work on agreements that say we represent the producer for the world—if we're working for an importer, then it may only be the United States, but generally it's the world." Tibbitts represents vineyards from most of the world's major wine-producing areas, a full range of premium spirits, plus tea, juices, and sparkling water. Increasingly, he also represents foods. He's working, for example, on agreements with a Chilean company, Aquafarms, to provide farm-fed salmon direct to hotels and restaurants without a middleman, and with a Chilean fruit and vegetable cooperative, Agricom, to do the same. Then there's equipment: he finds cutting-edge technology like super-automatic espresso machines and pasta makers or new induction cooking systems and represents them as well.

Essentially, Tibbitts provides one-stop shopping for f&b directors of chain hotels and restaurants. And to accomplish this in the most global manner, he presents his wide portfolio of wine, beverages, spirits, food, and equipment (You want Cuban sandwiches? Done: he represents a line of *panini* presses.) not to a single unit of



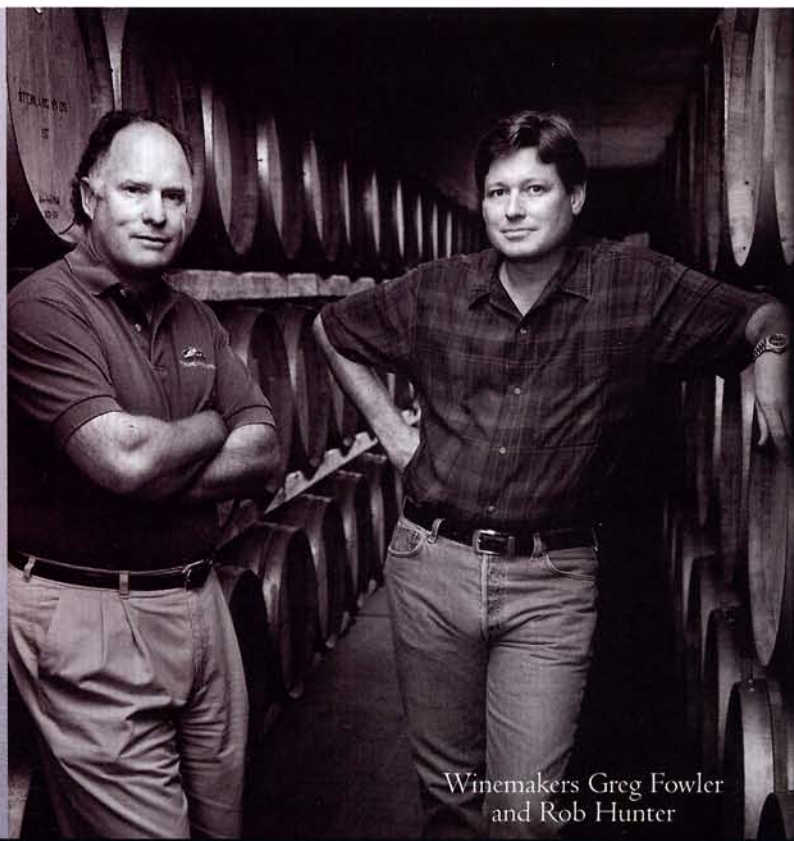
Tibbitts in Bangkok with Tom Cole of Benchmark Hospitality International (left) and at his biannual saturnalia (right) with (from left) f&b directors Mark Shuda of Starwood, Dieter Hannig of Walt Disney World, and Paul Ryan of Promus.

a chain or even to all the units in a single country, but to the person making decisions for all units worldwide.

And that's just the half of it. "We have another aspect to our business," says Tibbitts, "which grew after we started our national accounts marketing agency. Somebody said to me: 'You know, since you grew up in the foodservice business and you understand the restaurant and hotel business and you know so much about beverages, with all the downsizing, a lot of corporate offices don't want or feel they can justify a beverage director: *you* could be their beverage director!' And this is now the fastest-growing aspect of our work. Increasingly, I'm considered one of the best beverage consultants in the world. You can't buy that designation and, quite frankly, I didn't seek it."

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AS MUCH AS IT DOES  
THE PEOPLE  
WHO MAKE THEM.



Winemakers Greg Fowler  
and Rob Hunter

It takes passion, as well as talent and dedication, to create wines of elegance and





Next stop: meetings at Vinexpo in Bordeaux with John Gay and Keith Lambert of Rosemount Estate wines (left), and Philippe Manfredini and Beatrice Cointreau of Champagne Gosset & Cognac Frapin (right).

Some are born beverage consultants, some become beverage consultants, and others have the status of beverage consultant thrust upon them. Tibbitts has been lucky in this respect, counting among his consulting clients major hotel chains like **Starwood**, **Omni**, and **Ritz-Carlton**. He credits his company's allure to the network he's created that not only allows him to connect with his clients on both sides of the business, but also allows them to connect with each other, whether electronically or at his host-with-the-most, fearlessly eccentric networking parties. Fred Tibbitts & Associates is, in terms of the number of people it employs, a small company but one that spans the globe. Beyond its main office in New York City, it also has offices near Albany, New York, in Scottsdale, Arizona, as well as shared offices in Bangkok, Hong

Kong, Buenos Aires, Santiago, Brasilia, Sydney, Johannesburg, and—by October 1—London and Paris.

"Yes, I have a lot of experience and we are unique and we've discovered a niche, but companies like Starwood come to us because we understand that the world is one marketplace and we work it as such," says Tibbitts. "Starwood knew when they acquired **Sheraton/Westin** that there were many hotels around the world that they needed to service and they didn't have the in-house expertise to do so. They knew I was traveling and that we'd started shared offices around the world, and they said, 'You're the guy.'"

Although the company can't afford private offices in every port, Tibbitts finds shared offices through The International Hotel & Restaurant Association or associations like it. "I say, look, I need an office where when I'm in Hong Kong I can actually work, and I need a point person and an address so that we can write wine and beverage programs and the units of the hotel or restaurant in the region don't feel they have to call New York for customer service. In North Asia they call Hong Kong, in Southeast Asia they call Bangkok, and they can say, 'Is Fred Tibbitts there?' And, probably, Fred Tibbitts is *not* there, but there is a person who says, 'We'll get the message to him right away.' And they e-mail me and I get it right away. If they feel it's urgent, they'll call or fax. And this way the client gets the feeling that we *are* really there."

This "presence" is part of the synergy that allows Tibbitts to create exciting international wine lists for his clients. In creating the wine program for Starwood's Asia-Pacific hotels, for example,



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he decided on a list made up mostly of wine from within the sphere of the Pacific Rim. “The most logical approach was a New World wine program with wines from Australia, New Zealand, Chile, maybe Argentina, South Africa, California, and perhaps Oregon and Washington State,” says Tibbitts. “Better values come from the New World rather than the very good but expensive French wines, which are even more difficult for people in Asia to afford right now with the lingering ‘Asian Flu.’ But, that’s true only on the still side. The program needs French Champagne because in Asia they still consider Champagne Champagne.”

To create such programs, Tibbitts often steps through the seemingly sacrosanct barrier between the two sides of his business. “In some cases I write a policy,” he explains, “and plug in some, or in some cases, most—if not all—products I represent. But I only do that if it fits, because the integrity of what I do is more important than anything. If my name is mentioned in every sphere as synonymous with integrity and honor and hard work, then I have a business. So, I would never plug in something simply because I need to sell it.”

It’s a strategy that not only benefits Tibbitts but also allows him to create a more seamless network between producer and user. The same sensibility that built the rounded portfolio of producers and importers he represents builds the wine lists he is asked to create. Why introduce others? In fact, in order to have the right products to plug into his lists, he has courted producers—as, for example, when he recently signed a deal with a group of South African vineyards. “And there’s another side to this, Tibbitts explains. “If you are doing a beverage program in Asia, for example, understanding the logistics of distribution becomes very, very important—bringing the hotel and the suppliers together—and because of the other half of our business, representing products, we understand and know how to do that.”

To increase the sense of connectedness, Tibbitts is having a World Wide Web site built by an accomplished British firm that has created sites for much larger businesses like British Airways and Reebok. The idea, Tibbitts explains, is, “After we go to the corporate office and satisfy their needs, it’s the units of the chains that might have product questions, that might say they’re not getting delivery, or might ask how do you pair this wine with food, or whatever. They will be able to go into the Web site and get the information they want and there will be links to all the vineyards’ Web sites. It’s another way we can be global and yet have a local presence, which really makes a difference.” To benefit the producers and importers it represents, the company is also creating a computerized database mapping the locations of the world’s chain hotels and restaurants—information available piecemeal but never before in one place.

“When you’re a small organization you have to leverage technology better than the big guys because it’s the equalizer—the one place where you can be on a plane with them, and even ahead,” says Tibbitts. A complete absence of corporate bureaucracy and red tape allows a small company like Tibbitts’, as he likes to say, “to learn about a new technology in the morning and implement it in the afternoon.”

## **Omni Hotels** Wines-by-the-glass program

### **Champagnes and sparkling wines**

Gosset Grand Millésime  
Gosset Brut Excellence  
Domaine Chandon Brut Cuvée  
Grandin Brut  
Cook’s Imperial Brut (catering only)

### **Domestic wines**

**Tula Vista (California):** Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, White Zinfandel

**Round Hill Vineyards (California):** Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, White Zinfandel

**Louis Martini Winery (California):** Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot

**Rodney Strong Vineyards (Sonoma County):** Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Pinot Noir

### **Imported wines**

**Viña Santa Carolina (Chile):** Chardonnay Reserva, Cabernet Sauvignon Reserva, Merlot Reserva

**Van Loveren/ Montestell/ Landskroom (South Africa):** Colombar/Chardonnay, Chenin Blanc, Merlot, Pinotage

**Rosemount Estate (Australia):** Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz

**Chateau La Joya (Chile):** Chardonnay Gran Reserva, Cabernet Sauvignon Gran Reserva, Merlot Gran Reserva

## **Starwood Asia-Pacific** Selected wines from the by-the-glass program for Sheraton and Westin hotels

**Rodney Strong Vineyards (California):** Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot

**Great Wines International (South Africa):** Van Loveren Colombar/Chardonnay, Montestell Pinotage, Lanzerac Cabernet Sauvignon

**Montana Wines (New Zealand):** Sauvignon Blanc, Reisling, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot

**Skalli Fortant de France (France):** Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot



Take Le Verre de Vin, a wine preservation system invented by a British company. They set up a distribution arm in the United States but found it impossible to crack the chain hotels. Then, someone suggested they talk to Tibbitts. "I was quickly convinced that they had the most revolutionary and sophisticated means of preserving wine, and one that would allow restaurants or hotels to extend the quality and quantity of their offering better than anything before," says Tibbitts. "The system allows you to replace a cork with a rubber vacuum stopper and in three seconds create a perfect vacuum that will keep a bottle of wine with the last glass as good as the first for 21 days. If you have 1,000 stoppers, you can offer 1,000 wines by the glass."

Tibbitts began representing Le Verre de Vin, and used it as a lure to convince hotels to do away with house wines and replace them with extensive by-the-glass programs such as those he's created with **Walter Staib**—another irrepressible foodservice consultant/guru—for Omni Hotels.

"Successful f&b consultants," Tibbitts intones, "are going to be those who understand the world is one marketplace, travel the world to understand cultural and regional differences, but bring the world closer together and market to the *whole* world—as opposed to one dimension of it—and create markets for the benefit of all concerned."

His willingness to harness new technologies notwithstanding, in keeping with his mantra that "it's all one," Tibbitts is essentially a networker establishing connective tissue between the far-flung elements of his world. The method may be old-fashioned, but there is perhaps nothing more purely Tibbittsean than the biannual "National Accounts Dinners" he hosts: in the fall at the Yale Club on the Tuesday at the end of the New York Hotel/Motel & Restaurant Show, and in the spring at the Union Club, both in New York City. At these quintessential networking parties the human element of Tibbitts' world collides palpably in one locale. He invites brass from the chain hotels and restaurants, suppliers, and a "buffer" of ambassadors, industry personalities, maybe someone like Robin Leach (onetime host of *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*), and a Tibetan monk for good measure. "The idea is to create a milieu so that everyone is really having a good time," he says. "There's always a theme [Toga, Toga, Toga; School Days; Phantom of the Opera], the idea is to have fun, to laugh at yourself. What most people in the food business don't need is a free meal. They need a reason to be there, and we give them a reason because of camaraderie, networking, fun."

Perhaps only Tibbitts could gather 200 of the industry's top players, dressed like Roman statesmen in togas and laurels for an ancient fête or in woolly initialed sweaters to sing old school songs and shout football attack-chants. "I keep the quality of the guests high, and the entertainment short and sweet," he says. "The mix of people is key." The parties may be the perfect manifestation of Tibbittan Buddhism: "I look for the real, unconscious need that underlies the business needs," says Tibbitts. "In a sense, our real business is healing the unconscious spiritual needs of our clients, bit by bit. It works as the best PR and gives a real feeling of satisfaction in doing business with us." ■



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Breads	Leslie Mackie, Owner, Macrina Bakery Amy Scherber, Owner/Baker, Amy's Bread
Chocolate	Elizabeth Falkner, Co-Owner/Pastry Chef, Citizen Cake
Desserts	Sherry Yard, Pastry Chef, Spago Beverly Hills Gale Gand, Chef/Owner, Brasserie T.
Winter Vegetables	Odessa Piper, Chef/Owner, L'Etoile
Asian Flavors	Barbara Tropp, Author, Chef, Consultant

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