

HOTEL

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For hospitality professionals



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HOTEL Asia Pacific

Renovation frenzy



Thinking global, acting local

As GM of **The Westin Kuala Lumpur** and chairman of **Starwood's** Asia Pacific F&B council, **Martin B. Jones** has plenty on his plate

By **Fred Tibbitts**

S **TARWOOD IS ADVANCING** across Asia Pacific, especially in China. What effect has this expansion had on your division's F&B operations?

We have some very exciting projects coming up in China over the next few years, predominantly with our **Sheraton** and **Westin** brands, but also with **W** and **Four Points**. This means we are really able to show what we can do in food and beverage. We don't have to copy our competition in any way, so we will be introducing some of our already successfully operating concepts, as well as a few new ideas into this market.

It seems that the predictions that the various hotel tiers would segment in Asia Pacific to better target the best customer bases in each country has occurred. Have you found this, and do you plan to further segment on a county-by-country basis or on a divisional basis? How does China fit into the segmentation evolution?

Starwood is lucky in that we have a number of brands that allow us to be in most markets. We also have great owners who invest to ensure that, whatever brand we are developing, we are sure it will be a first-class product. Most of our brands are growing throughout this region and are being very well received, and this allows us some very exciting and varied F&B products. We are constantly developing these to suit the brands, as well as the location and market.

More and more chain hotels in Asia Pacific are getting serious about directing their wine programmes with core wine lists and wine-by-the-glass programmes. Is Starwood going to follow the same route?

We all know the importance of wine in our business and emerging markets, including China, are also growing in wine consumption. Wine by the glass is an excellent opportunity for our guests to experience a wide variety of grape types and brands. Our own wine-by-

the-glass programme is now available in most Sheratons and Westins in the region, with an excellent and diverse selection from across the world. This is also extended to wine by the bottle, which allows favourites to be purchased this way. We also have local representation for Indonesia and China, giving the programme a truly global appeal.

Do you find most of the wine volume is by the glass or by the bottle, and in front of house or banquet? Does this depend on the country?

This obviously varies greatly country by country or even city by city. For example, a hotel in Australia that has large banqueting business could easily sell most of its wine by the bottle at functions, while hotels in China or Thailand may sell more by the bottle or glass in restaurants. I don't think there is a firm pattern – the most important thing is that we are selling wine in most locations and it is growing all the time.

What kind of wine training do you organise on a division basis, and what part of it is the responsibility of each property to manage with the local wine importers? Do you train the trainers for wine, or is it a hotel-level responsibility?

We develop the wine-by-the-glass programme, we engage the wine partners and then we encourage our hotels to individually deal with the suppliers and wine partners for training, dinners, tastings and the like. We encourage our hotels to prioritise with our wine partners and we generally

see excellent results. There is, without doubt, an overall improvement in guest satisfaction.

Many wine producers think that Starwood Worldwide dictates its wine policies from its world headquarters at White Plains, New York. However, as I understand it, each Starwood divisional office sets its own wine policies, though loosely in accordance with the group's *Wines of the World* programme. How

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does it all work and why?

We create our wine programmes divisionally, not globally; the world is too large and diverse to do anything else. European hotels have different lists and mixes, as do our Australian and Asian hotels, so we need to cater to the local market as well as our international visitors. The programme has a great deal of flexibility with some minimum requirements, but with each hotel deciding which labels they like. Our wine partners generally build a relationship with the hotels individually for special promotions.

What is the most important aspect of your divisional wine programme and why? Do you see this remaining the same indefinitely, or could priorities or the vision change over the next few years?

Flexibility, without doubt. Our partners are extreme-

ly positive and understanding, and willing to support us even though it is never easy to implement such a programme over so many brands, in so many countries. We feel it will remain the same with the same partners for the near future. There are always ways we can improve but, right now, the formula seems right so we will push on forward.

What are your favourite wines and why?

I'll drink pretty much anything! I'm a self confessed New World Wine drinker, but I'm very happy to try and enjoy anything. □



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