

HOTEL



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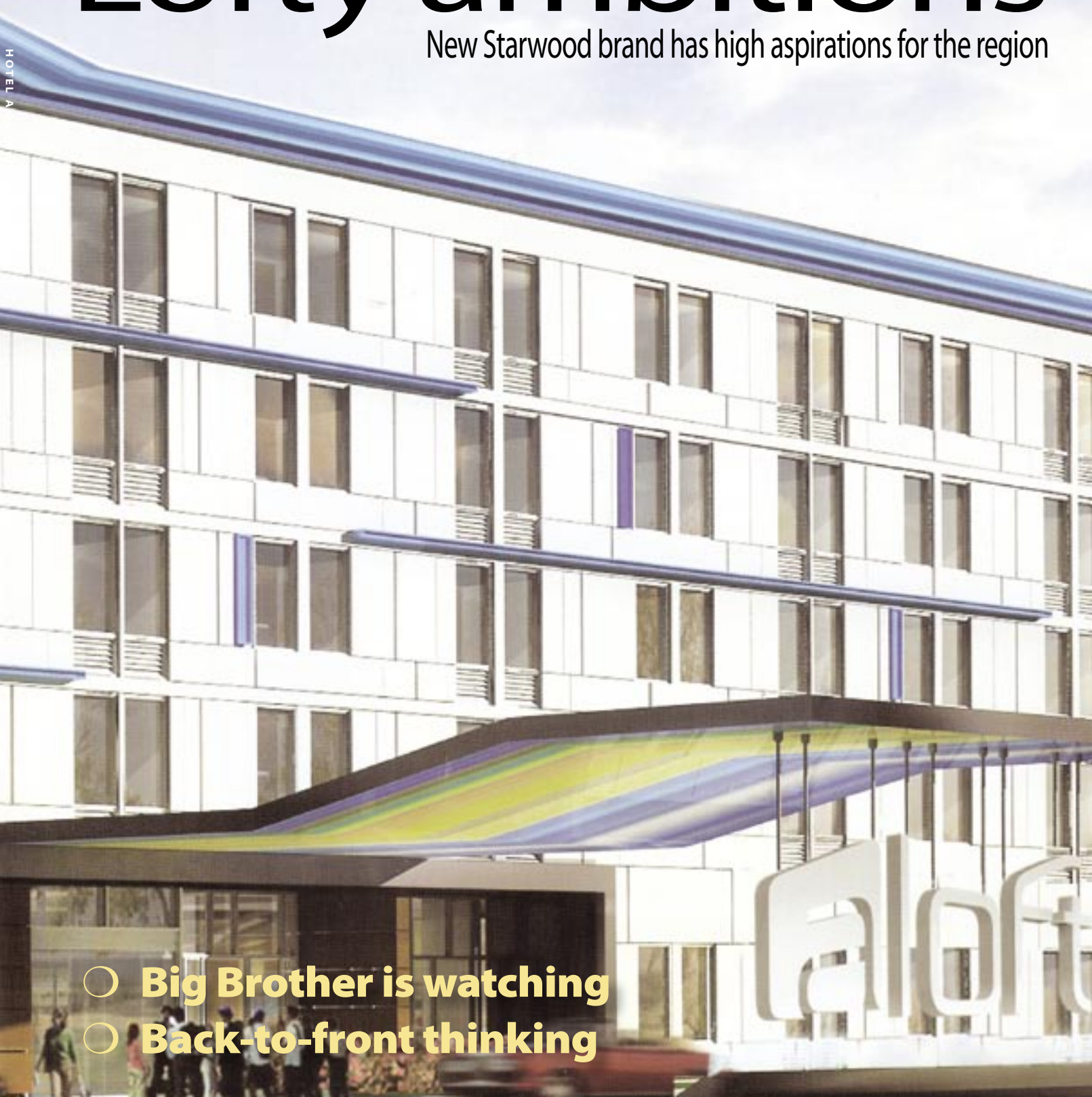
A S I A P A C I F I C

For hospitality professionals

Lofty ambitions

New Starwood brand has high aspirations for the region

HOTEL A



- Big Brother is watching
- Back-to-front thinking

He's got his work cut out

Finding the right calibre of staff is a major challenge for **Wyndham Hotel Group** VP **Stephen Young** as he drives the brand's expansion in the region

By **Fred Tibbitts**

You have had a very interesting career in the hospitality industry in Asia. What is your background?

I joined **InterContinental Hotels Group** in 1997 as regional VP for Greater China and was promoted to COO for Greater China.

I joined **Marriott** in 2000 and was VP Asia Pacific for the **Ramada** brand.

After the acquisition of the Ramada brand by **Cendant (Wyndham Hotel Group)** at the end of 2004, I joined the group and am now regional VP for East Asia and Indochina.

The Wyndham Hotel Group has been growing fast in China and is now the largest international hotel company [in terms of hotel numbers] with more than 60 hotels in operation.

Prior to 1997, my career was in consumer packaged goods and retail. I spent nine years with Jardine Wines and Spirits, the leading wines and spirits distributor in the region.

Wine is becoming increasingly important to successful F&B programmes for hotels and restaurants in the region. What has caused this development?

Asians, especially Chinese, enjoy and appreciate good food and there are many different types of cooking and cuisine.

There are also big Chinese banquets when they celebrate the many different festivals in the year, plus special events including wedding functions.

The establishment of more international hotels and Western restaurants in China has also increased the popularity of wine consumption.

Cognac consumption was high in the '70s and '80s in Hong Kong and China, and the region had the world's highest consumption per capita. But following the opening up and Westernisation of China, wine has overtaken cognac in popularity.

Red wine is far more popular in Asia and China than white. Do you see this trend continuing over the next five to 10 years, or will there be more of a balance in preference between red and white?

Though seafood is very popular in Asia and China, red wine is still far more popular than white. Chinese like the colour red, which represents good fortune and prosperity.

They also believe red wine has more medicinal value than white wine.

Wine has been traditionally consumed mostly by the bottle in Asia, although wines-by-the-glass programmes are becoming very popular. Do you ever see this trend eventually exceeding wine-by-the-bottle sales?

The new trend has been driven by the younger generation who appreciate Western culture following more exposure to the Western lifestyle.

But it may not exceed wine-by-the-bottle sales because Chinese parties and banquets are bigger in number and scale.

What do you see as the most important aspects of a successful wine programme for a hotel or restaurant?

A successful wine programme has to be supported by an exciting food menu, which requires selecting the right wine to match the menu.

The pricing level has to be attractive and create a value perception in the consumer. Training is obviously important, but we also need to promote the programme by advertising it, including placing tent cards on tables.

How do you approach wine training in your hotels? Does the turnover of wait staff interfere with your



wine training effectiveness or do you have ways of working around this ever-present reality?

Wine training is generally conducted by the restaurant or bar manager.

We need to run such training regularly as staff turnover is high, especially in key cities where there is high demand for qualified hotel staff.

The staff shortage is now serious in Macau, where there are many upscale hotels and casinos, and in key international cities like Shanghai and Hong Kong.

Many of the top hotel chains in Asia Pacific now have core wine programmes that ensure a certain degree of consistency and reinforcement of the brand positioning. While each hotel must decide its theme-restaurant wine lists by market, a carefully selected core of wines by the glass and by the bottle seems to have a very positive “comfort effect” for frequent guests and those familiar with brandname wines from around the world. When do you see your full-service hotels in Asia and China adopting such a programme as part of their brand standards?

The Wyndham Hotel Group bought the upscale Wyndham brand in end 2005, and we have plans to develop upscale Wyndham hotels in the Asia region, especially China. We will certainly consider this concept with our future Wyndham hotels.

What new full-service Wyndham properties might we expect in the region over the next five years?

We are targeting to open the first Wyndham hotel in China in the third quarter of this year and have aggressive plans to develop Wyndham hotels throughout Asia Pacific.

What are your favourite wines and why?

I like Californian whites and Australian reds in general as there are many good-quality products at reasonable prices. I am particularly fond of Gewurtztraminer by Hugel as it matches exceptionally well with Szechuen food. □



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