

For Hotel, Resort, and Casino Food & Beverage Operations

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The World of Wine, Beer & Spirits

BY FRED TIBBITTS



Fred Tibbitts



Ellen Van Slyke

KEEPING THE BALANCE

Ellen Van Slyke, corporate director of F&B, Loews Hotels, celebrates the past and the future—while respecting the locale of each hotel.

What inspired you to enter the hotel food and beverage business?

I grew up in a large family and began my catering career around the age of 12, cooking for my nuclear family of 14. My parents enjoyed fine food, so we dined at five-star restaurants and traveled extensively as kids. My first hospitality job, at age 16, was as a waitress in a mall, serving ice cream sundaes and grilled cheese sandwiches. And I worked as a waitress at a Marriott during college summers to put myself through school.

What makes a beer, wine, and spirits program successful?

There are three basic constructs for a successful program: diversity, profitability, and training. The emergence of New World wines and the rebirth of the cocktail have made the beverage program very interesting in the past few years. To meet the expectations of our guests, we need to know what to offer them and in what format. We also need to

know how to price things so we are profitable, but also so that the guest has options. Lastly, we need to train staff to deliver the product with intelligence and finesse. Loews is the first hotel company to offer a banquet wine-by-the-glass program, serving three tiers of six wines on all of our banquet bars.

What levels of premium beer, wine, and spirits do you mandate at Loews Hotels?

As we are a luxury hotel chain, we begin with a premium level and offer three tiers in all of our outlets including banquets, restaurants, bars, and in-room dining. Prices vary based on markets, but there is always a reasonable choice, a more refined selection, and a luxury level of each spirit, wine varietal, domestic beer, and import beer.

Do you have a national drinks menu, or do you specify certain drinks and recipes and let each hotel design and produce their own menus?

What about drink promotions?

One of the tenets of Loews Hotels is our belief in each individual location and the sense of place derived from the food and beverage experience. Each property has a Loews signature cocktail that represents their unique location. From Loews Miami Beach, we have a "Caribbean Sunshine." We have a "Madison Martini" from our Washington, D.C., property, and there is a "Tennessee Fruit Tea" from Loews Vanderbilt in Nashville. Each drink uses appropriate liquors and flavors to give guests a local cocktail. It's Bacardi Cocom Rum in Miami, Absolut Vodka in D.C., and Jack Daniel's in Nashville. These cocktails have been created and perfected at each of our 18 properties, and the collection is shared with every Loews Hotel. In addition to the bar menu at each property, we offer our collection of Loews signature cocktails at all Loews Hotels. It is a great way to cross-market our sister properties and to offer an exciting cocktail menu to frequent-stay guests.

What is your wine and food flights program?

As each property is distinctive, we have different programs in our bars and specialty restaurants. At Mistral in Loews Coronado Bay Resort, we offer wine flights in the restaurant and on our gondolas. We have Venetian gondolas that float through the Coronado Cays with a series of wine flights and antipasti, conducted by Director of Wine Kevin Brady. At SoleFood in Loews Philadelphia, Director of Wine Andrew

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Bar Inventory Tracking

Nielsen creates seasonal flights to accompany the ever-changing menus. We also serve a lot of wine flights in our banquet departments, where properties design flight stations and pair three bites with three wines, based on the various themed menus.

What is your approach to wine training?

Training is done at the property level, managed by our talented team of F&B directors. We also do national training in wine education for all our managers in food and beverage, conference management, and sales. This program was created by Irwin Fisher, VP of sales administration and training, and our F&B director from Loews Vanderbilt, Johannes Diele. We are very committed as a company to training at every level.

How do you approach wine preservation, and do you find that one solution fits all?

Again, each property is so unique that we do not have one solution to fit all. Loews Ventana Canyon Resort has an exquisite wine room in its five-diamond restaurant, the Ventana Room. The redwood wine room has temperature and humidity control and seats six. Other properties have wine rooms, cellars, Cruvinet systems, or good old-fashioned VacuVin stoppers. All wine is stored with reverence and care.

As food and beverage continue to become more defined

AS AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE AMERICAN CULTURE, we will see the subsequent evolution and exploration of all things intoxicating.

What is special about your beer program?

Again, we love to create a local experience for our guests. Our beer program specifies that each property carry mandated American, imported, and microbrew beers, including local microbrews. We feel micros and craft brews are continuing to grow in importance. Depending on the property, local brews can be a major player. At our Flying V Bar & Grill in Tucson, where temperatures often reach well over 100 degrees, we offer 14 different beers on draft, ranging from Guinness to local microbrewery Nimbus Monkey Brew. Light beers are hot, and we recently added Heineken Light and Corona Light to our pool program.

Five and ten years from now, how do you see hotel wine, beer, and spirits programs changing?

I think as food and beverage continue to become more defined as an integral part of the American culture, we will see the subsequent evolution and exploration of all things intoxicating.

What are your favorite wines and why?

Long before Sideways, I was a Pinot Noir girl. I grew up on the East Coast and was introduced to French Burgundies at an early age. Thus, my palette has been influenced by that chalky soil and French acidity. I also love Brunellos, Chiantis, Rhônes, and Riojas—wines with lighter body and that sexy suggestion of spice. I think these are all great food wines, and for me, there is no greater way to spend an evening or afternoon than being surrounded by people I love, eating food made from the heart, and drinking wine that's good for the soul. It's why I ended up in the hospitality business. ☺

Fred Tibbitts & Associates Inc. is a leading wine-by-the-glass consultant, working with and promoting chains around the world. Contact Fred at fredbev@fredtibbitts.com.

IN THE BLACK

An extensive bar inventory is typically a benefit for customers but a headache for everyone else.

Ted Rein, director of finance at the Four Seasons Hotel, Boston, has been pleased with the way their AccuBar beverage tracking system has streamlined the hotel's beverage operations. "It's not just an inventory system," Rein explains. "It's very flexible in that it gives you the ability to place and receive orders, keeping a perpetual inventory balance."

Rein also enjoys the way that data collected by AccuBar's handheld barcode scanners can be analyzed easily. "It doesn't just give you canned reports. It allows you to structure them to how you want to see them," he says.

What's more, anytime Rein and his staff aren't sure how to use a particular feature of the product, they know they can rely on ready phone support. "We've been extremely satisfied with the support," says Rein. "A lot of times you deal with some of the big hospitality companies and kind of get lost in the shuffle. The guys who pick up the phone [at AccuBar] are basically the programmers."

But the most important benefit Rein sees has been on the bottom line. After switching to AccuBar from an old DOS-based inventory system last year, Rein has the ultimate praise: "We're actually beating beverage costs this year." —JM

CONTACT: 800-806-3922, www.accubar.com



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