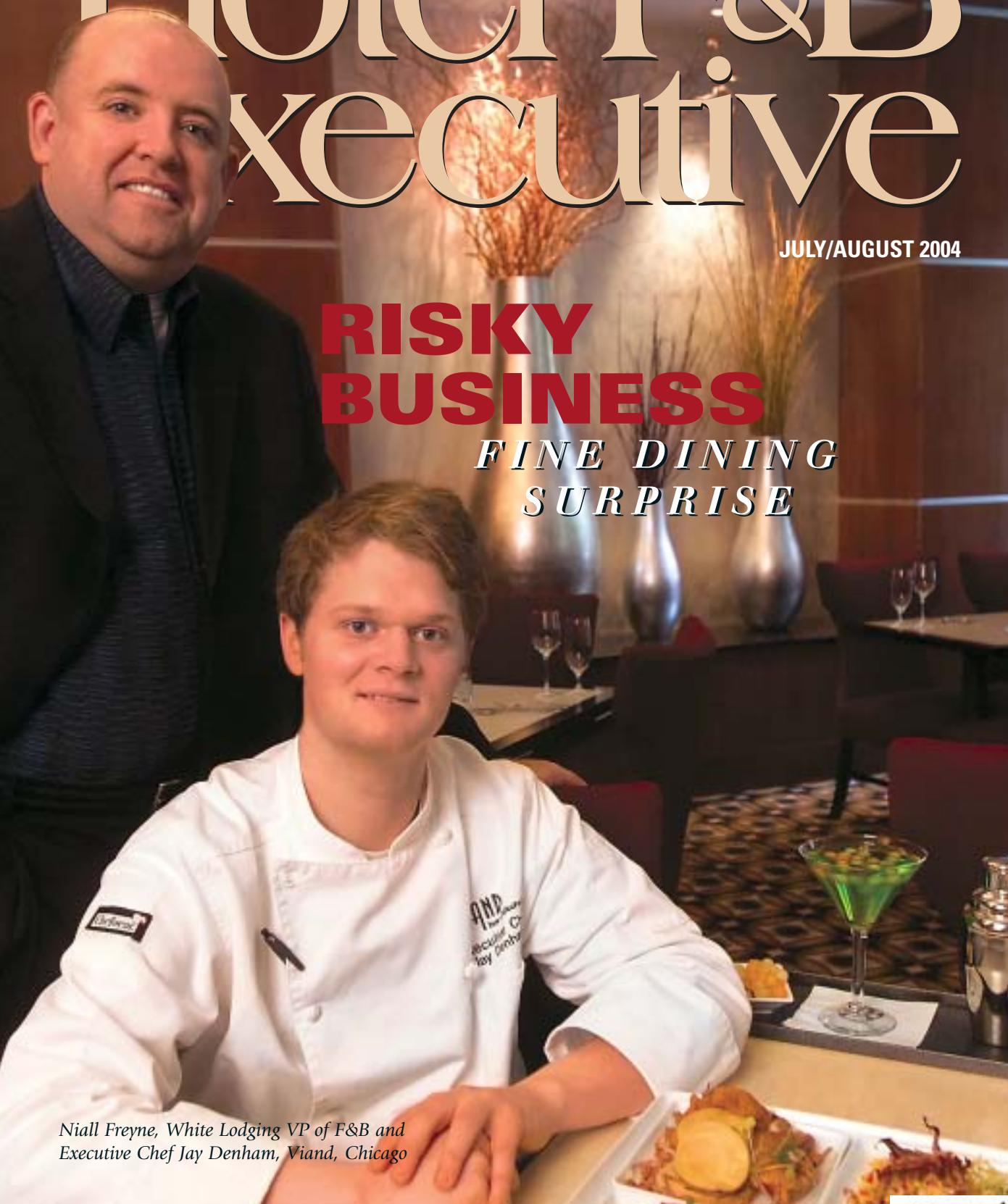


The Magazine for Hospitality Food & Beverage Professionals

Hotel F&B Executive

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Niall Freyne, White Lodging VP of F&B and Executive Chef Jay Denham, Viand, Chicago



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Wine Strategies

OMNI

Fred Tibbitts talks wine with Fernando Salazar, Director of Food & Beverage Operations, Omni Hotels.



The Globetrotting Wine Guy



Fernando Salazar

What are the most important factors influencing how you structure your wine program?

Quality first, followed by price/value relationship, and finally availability in markets where Omni does business. Just as important is the potential to develop a strong partnership with quality-minded wineries and importers, companies with goals and business practices mirroring ours. If all things are equal—price, quality, availability—priority consideration is given to a wine from a long-term partner. However, this does not mean a small winery with a quality product cannot be part of our program. To the contrary, it's an opportunity to develop new partnerships and create depth and balance in wine lists. What's most important is to provide guests with wines with a solid reputation in the market.

How do you maintain significant points of differentiation from key competitors like Starwood, Marriott, Hyatt, Wyndham and Hilton?

These companies pretty much look for the same thing in wines. Our main point of difference is the intensive training we provide at the property level. With Omni Wine University, every front-of-the house F&B associate—whether in banquets, bars, guest-room dining, or restaurants—completes an intensive wine training course. F&B and catering/convention services managers complete it as well. They are recertified annually. We complement this with daily reinforcement and monthly training updates.

Another point of difference is how we approach promotions. We do about three a year and all include intense training and incentives such as trips to wine regions to learn how wine is made. Last year, we took 46 F&B managers and chefs to Italy to study Chianti Classico. Wine seminars and cooking classes were organized to expose them to the nuances of food and wine pairing. This year, we're taking a group to Chile to immerse ourselves in the country's food and wine.

Do customers understand New World and Old World? Do they sense why the wines of some countries seem to taste and are priced exactly as they want?

Absolutely. The American wine consumer is well educated in wines of the world. They have discovered the excellent quality of New Zealand and Australian wines and the exceptional value and quality of Chilean wines. They know Chianti does not equate to low-quality wine in a straw-covered flask. Our 2003 Sumptuous Flavors of Italy promotion featuring Chianti Classico and

Parmigiano-Reggiano helped consumers rediscover Chianti and see how far it has come in the last 20 years. They experiment but are faithful to U.S. wines, particularly California wines because there are many good ones and they're comfortable ordering them. The other reason is perhaps a patriotic one and may be why French wine does not sell as well anymore.

How do you involve key F&B directors and chefs in the decision-making process of developing core wine lists and wines by the glass?

They get very involved. I've implemented an annual F&B directors conference as well as a separate Omni chefs conference, the most recent in June at the Omni at CNN Center, Atlanta. They discuss F&B division business, and we spend a great deal of time discussing and selecting wines. The 78 Chianti wines featured in the Sumptuous Flavors of Italy promotion were chosen by F&B directors/managers. At the conference last month, F&B directors/managers tasted at least 200 wines from over 40 Chilean wineries and picked those to be featured in an upcoming promotion, The Luscious Flavors of Chile.

Last year's trips to Emilia Romagna and Tuscany were tremendously educational. Everyone returned with a better understanding and appreciation for Italian wines and food, particularly Chianti wines and Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese. This year there will be a repeat of the experience but to Chile. We'll visit major wine regions, such as Casa-Blanca, Maipo, Colchagua, and Curico Valleys and go south to the salmon region where millions of pounds of salmon are harvested annually. I'm working on the 2005 F&B promotion and trip associated with it. I don't remember the last time a major hotel or restaurant chain took 46 F&B managers and chefs to Italy or Chile for F&B education. I don't know of another brand doing so. Our commitment to education and training lets us better serve guests.

Once you have determined the wines for your program and notified producers and importers, what do you expect from them in terms of educational support for restaurant and bar servers?

Expectations are high. The partners chosen for a core wine program must commit to participating in staff education and developing and/or updating Omni Wine University's educational modules. Specification sheets on each wine and a history of the winery and its philosophy are forwarded to corporate where a training manual is produced and sent to each property

for training. We ask winemakers or winery principals to participate in Vintner's dinners and special events. Educational opportunities at participating wineries or another venue must be made available for staff training.

How do you determine your program is a success?

Most important is guest satisfaction. This translates in the variety and availability of quality wines at an affordable price for their enjoyment. Obviously, wine sales and profits are important, as well as increasing associates' wine knowledge. This works to produce more sales and improve guest satisfaction.

What is the next very hot wine trend we should expect to experience first at Omni?

I don't know if we can call it a trend, but we will expose hundreds of thousands of Omni guests to two Chilean products not yet well-known. One is Carmenere from Chile. This grape varietal, which for many years was confused with Merlot and arrived in Chile from France during the pre-Phylloxera era, is in my estimation ready to strike gold in the United States and around the world. Just a few Carmenere wines have made it to the United States, and only a handful of consumers have tried it. Chilean wineries still are mastering the vinification of this varietal, but a few very good Carmenere are being produced. We will feature these during our Chilean food and wine promotion, The Luscious Flavors of Chile. Others on the horizon are from the Limarí Valley, Chile's northernmost wine region. There were less than 10 wineries in this valley last January, and the wines I tasted were among the best Chilean wines under \$10 I've encountered.

With **OMNI WINE UNIVERSITY**, every front-of-the house F&B associate completes an intensive wine training course.

What are your favorite wines and why?

My favorite is Pinot Noir. I'm always on a quest to find the best Pinot Noir at an affordable price. Domaine Drouhin, Etude, Rochioli, Archery Summit, Gary Farrell, Panther Creek, Longoria, and Patz & Hall are solid producers. Carneros and Russian River Pinots offer a good value; La Crema, Iron Horse, and Benziger are Pinots I drink regularly. For Bordeaux-style wines, I like Cain Five. I've followed Cain Vineyards since their first vintage in the early '80s. Cain consistently produces wines of high quality. Due to my profession, I have, from time to time, opportunities to attend vertical tastings of outstanding wines including Domaine de la Romanée Conti, La Tache, and Romanée St. Vivant, among others. I feel very privileged to work in this field. ☺

Fred Tibbitts, senior vice president, Fred Tibbitts & Associates, Inc., is the foremost global wine-by-the-glass consultant, working with on-premise chains around the world.