

For Hotel, Resort, and Casino Food & Beverage Professionals

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TEAM THE VENETIAN LAS VEGAS BUILDING

(L-R) Tamir Shanel, director of food & beverage; Olivier Dubreuil, executive chef; Pete Boyd, VP food & beverage; Paul Pusateri, senior vice president and 2005 IFMA Silver Plate Winner; and Robert Gerst, VP human resources—the Venetian Las Vegas



APPLAUD OUTSTANDING EMPLOYEES. ENTER 2007 SILVER PLATE AWARDS, P.71

The World of Wine

BY FRED TIBBITTS



Fred Tibbitts, the Globetrotting Wine Guy

Interview with Lisa Impagliazzo, Executive VP of Operations, Denihan Hospitality Group

Fred Tibbitts: What hotels are in Denihan Hospitality and the Affinia group?

Lisa Impagliazzo: Denihan Hospitality Group (DHG) is a Manhattan-based, privately owned company with more than 40 years hospitality management expertise that operates two brands: Affinia Hotels and the Benjamin. They also manage several independent hotels in Manhattan. There are five Affinia properties: the Affinia 50, Affinia Dumont, Affinia Gardens, and Affinia Manhattan, all in New York City, and our newest property, the Affinia Chicago. Each Affinia property has its own distinct brand position-



Lisa Impagliazzo

ing to offer an array of options to suit particular lifestyle and travel preferences, while the Benjamin provides an experience of luxury with the highest level of service in an intimate boutique-style setting.

FT: What does the future look like for Denihan Hospitality?

LI: DHG's future is bright. We are laying the groundwork for expansion, with a long-term goal of becoming a national brand with properties in the top 25 U.S. markets. We hit a major milestone in April with the purchase of our first property outside Manhattan, the Affinia Chicago, formerly the Fitzpatrick Chicago Hotel. We're continuing to seek out properties in other major markets, including Boston, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, and San Francisco. We've done extensive research to determine locations that meet our guests' leisure and business travel needs, and we're moving in the right direction as Affinia brand awareness grows.

FT: Tell us about your educational background and how it prepared you for this industry, as well as your present position in senior operations management.

LI: I went to school at the University of Wisconsin-Stout, majoring in hotel and restaurant management. I worked my way through school in the hotel industry and was blessed with great mentors, leaders in the industry. There is no better education than the hands-on approach. I have been fortunate to be at the right place at the right time, which gave me opportunities that might not have been there in another situation. That being said, it was also an education of trial and error, and in some cases not knowing how to reach the end result was the greatest learning curve of all.

Having worked with some great industry leaders over the years, it is a nice notion that you can pick up the phone and talk to someone who might have been in a similar situation and can share experiences, both

good and bad. At the senior level you must understand where you came from and that there are GMs and junior managers who will need to pick up the phone and ask questions. The philosophy at DHG is that there will always be someone available to answer that question.

FT: I understand you are launching a dynamic, two-year Beer, Wine & Spirits policy. Tell us about it.

LI: Yes, we are. We reviewed what's available, what's "hot," and then we looked at beer, wine, and spirits companies and decided with whom we would partner. You never know that you made all the right decisions until it plays out, but we feel it's going to be very successful. We will learn from the next two years' experience and then go back to the drawing board in late 2007 and design an even better program that's right for 2008-2010.

We looked at the beer category and saw that customers are looking for more flavorful brews, not popular or mass offerings. So we partnered with most of the big names, but Boston Beer showed us the most of what we felt we were seeking.

For spirits, we recognize that at some hotels we must be competitive with our pouring prices, so we opted for a Future Brands value well with brand names in Scotch from Grant's and cordials like Bols and the DeKuyper Pucker flavors. For the premiums and super-premiums we went all over the board, but we tried some new brands that are hot, like SVEDKA Vodka.

As far as wines, we knew we wanted to be a leader because we are in New York City and Chicago, and offering a red, white, and white Zinfandel with maybe an imported trade-up is a formula for disaster today. We wanted our servers and bartenders to be proud of our wine list, so we went by the taste, by the glass, and by the bottle across the boards. This lets us offer wine flights, one of the fastest-growing trends in bars and restaurants with smart wine programs. Customers want to be educated and entertained, so we are stepping up to the plate.

FT: An adult beverage program is only as successful as its weakest link, and we know server training is one of the corner stones of every successful beverage program. How will you ensure that you provide excellent training for excellent results?

LI: We have two very experienced and talented beverage specialists, who help manage the program. I have the front-of-the-house person in Chicago at our newest hotel property, and our banquet person is in New York City. Together they cover every outlet at every hotel and are managing training. But being a small operation, as chains go, we rely on the winery that has our base tier pouring business to propose the wine training outline, which we review to be sure it fits our needs 100 percent, and we share it with our other wine partners for their input. So, at the end of the day, we will have a wine training program we know is right for us but that we have outsourced to specialists.

FT: Wine preservation plays a vital role in successful wine programs because with more and more wines being demanded by the public to be available by the glass, the risk of serving a bad glass of wine increases exponentially as well as the risk for wine waste. What is your program for wine preservation?

LI: We went with the Le Verre de Vin system. We like the under-the-counter model because our bars differ

greatly in design, and space is tight in a couple of our hotels. We like the ease of operation and the fact it can keep an open bottle of wine fresh for up to three weeks. It's not a display cabinet. It's simply a wine preservation system, so there is no limit to the number of bottles it can service per day or week or month.

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FT: What is an example of a beverage-related innovation you are incorporating into the program in terms of hi-tech systems?

LI: We are testing the Beverage Metrics Third Generation Wireless Internet Inventory and Revenue Enhancement System at the Benjamin. But all indications are it will be a great innovation, and, when we confirm that it delivers as promised, we expect to use it at all locations. It is said to increase beverage revenues 20+ percent immediately by eliminating the "bartender's share," and it provides a variety of management reports that will let us be more efficient and profitable from the start.

FT: Are you in favor of server incentives? From your experience, what kinds work best?

LI: I am in favor of server incentives, and they have changed. Years ago, we were under the impression that money talks, and for a lot of servers it still does. But that is not enough. Servers and the workforce in today's markets are well-educated and very astute in their chosen professions. So, although having a contest to see who sells the most bottles of wine on a Friday night or in a monthly program are still fun and create a healthy level of competition, there are other ways as well.

I prefer to see a manager send a server out to dinner at another property with our compliments. They can take their significant other and enjoy a great meal, great company, and have a bit of pride in doing so. We want them to see what is going on in the market and in turn understand how valuable they are. I have sent servers on wine outings to learn more on styles coming on the market. The more educated our servers and bartenders are the easier it is for them to sell the product. We are highly motivated to make sure our servers are comfortable approaching a guest with a new flight of wine. That is almost a guarantee sell.

FT: What are your favorite wines and why?

LI: That is a loaded question... but I will be politically correct on this one. I love all the varietals. I am excited to see new vintners coming up with great new wines, and I am happy to see a greater production coming from Chile, Argentina, South Africa, and here in the United States. The wines today are fantastic, and I am glad to see consumers more willing to experiment. ●

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