

He's a one-man whirlwind who is helping some of the region's top hotel chains to reshape Asia's wine-drinking tastes. [He's also *HOTEL Asia Pacific's* new wine correspondent]

■ By Steve Shellum

ASK Fred Tibbitts about wine trends in Asia Pacific, and you're in for a good old-fashioned ear-bending. A couple of hours later, your ears are burning red as he just begins to get into his stride.

So who, you may ask, is this man Tibbitts, and why should I give a proverbial?

Tibbitts is the head of the eponymously named, New York-based Fred Tibbitts & Associates (FTA) – a one-man whirlwind who conceives and executes cutting-edge wine programmes for some of the world's leading chain hotels and restaurants.

His client list is growing fast in Asia Pacific, with Starwood, Raffles International/Swissotel, Pan Pacific Hotels & Resorts, Accor [Sofitel and Novotel], Sino Hotel Group and Banyan Tree Resorts & Spas taking advantage of his encyclopaedic wine knowledge and legendary contacts.

He is also testing a wine programme for Le Meridien, which he hopes will be launched regionwide.

"FTA is the foremost, global adult-beverage consulting agency in the world, working worldwide with chain hotels and restaurants at their headquarters to benefit all concerned," says Tibbitts over a glass [or three] of Champagne in the Grand Hyatt Hong Kong's Champagne Bar.

Well, that just about sums it up nicely – thanks Fred. Erm, not quite ...

"I see so many people reading the latest best sellers on long flights, as I am struggling to do the job of five, and I know I am on another plane."

Pardon?

Another Tibbitts "incarnation" takes over the conversation, explaining how his deep Buddhist beliefs drive both his professional and personal lives, and brought him "back" to Asia – even though he had never set foot on the continent until five years ago.

"I first arrived in Asia in this life in August 1998. It took me but a few days to remember that I was home again, for most of my reincarnations have been within Asia."

So, Fred, what are you doing for your various hotel clients in Asia Pacific right now?

He switches back to his second most favourite subject – wine.

"Starwood and Accor are leading the way in the region by offering their guests a superior selection of New World wines at affordable prices," he enthuses, while stressing with commendable honesty that both groups are his clients.

"Starwood's *Wines of the World* programme leans heavily to the New World, with great success. While continuing to offer the classic elegance and consistency of world-class Champagnes, it also features one of the best examples of the New World style – but as a Spanish *cava*, produced by Chandon and marketed as *Eclipse by Chandon (Spain) Brut Cava*."

Accor – having seen the success of the Starwood programme and others like it – is currently testing a wines-by-the-glass programme at Novotels in Bangkok [for Southeast Asia] and Hong Kong [for North Asia].

Douglas Barber, recently appointed GM of the Sofitel Ambassador Seoul, is also working with FTA on putting together the first such programme for Accor's top-tier brand.

What's the reaction so far to Accor's new programme?

Switch to Maarten Boers, GM of the Novotel Century Hong Kong, who says: "The selection needs a little more fine-tuning, but already the programme is highly appreciated by both our international and local guests."

FTA'S ANNUAL INDUSTRY DINNERS IN HONG KONG and Singapore have become legendary affairs, and are attended by a veritable *Who's-Who?* of the region's leading hospitality professionals, as well as an assortment of ambassadors and consular officials. Unlike many other industry events, they are anything but "dry" – in any sense of the word.

Tibbitts' punishing schedule [he flies an average of 200,000 miles a year], passion and expertise have won him many admirers among the region's hard-to-please hotel professionals.

"Fred's an extremely endearing, big-hearted



Who on earth ...



... is Fred Tibbitts?

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– Kevin Murphy
VP, Langham Hotels & Resorts

and generous man whose sole mission clearly sets out to appease the wine needs of hoteliers around the world,” says M.S Puri, **Raffles International** stalwart who joins the **Peninsula Group** in June.

“And he undertakes this with absolute dedication, bounding enthusiasm, great vigour and personal involvement – no matter what time of day or which time zone he happens to be in.

“Without a doubt, Fred would certainly get my vote for any *Mr Congeniality* accolade held within our industry.

“But beyond all that, FTA possesses the expertise, experience and international reach required to successfully develop, launch and manage global wine programmes for hotel and restaurant companies – small or large scale.”

Accor’s senior VP for Asia, Reggie Shiu, concurs. “Fred is one person you would call a people’s person ... he connects people from all parts of the globe.

“The man is a citizen of the world, with a very fine Asian taste mixed with the sophistication of the West, which makes him an ideal person to bridge the East and the West.”

Over to Kevin Murphy, VP marketing and development for **Langham Hotels & Resorts**.

Best value

“Fred’s efforts on behalf of hoteliers looking for the wider options and best value in their wine service offerings to customers have been unflagging in recent years, regardless of the region where he operates.

“His system of bringing hotels together with responsible, top-quality wine suppliers has been one of the more consistent and successful elements in our changing operating environment today.

“His success in that area has been what many of us were hoping would also have happened with other product lines – that the combination of purchasing strengths in entities formed by many of the multi-brand companies had been expected to deliver.

“While that overall promise is still eluding many of us in some cases, Fred has consistently delivered in his area of speciality.”

One of the first F&B professionals in Asia to work with Tibbitts was **Pan Pacific Hotels and Resorts’** Yim Choong Hing.

“Having worked in the US and experienced the tremendous advantages of working directly with the wine producers via



Fred Tibbitts: a spiritual man of the world.

their national-accounts specialists, yet continuing to buy through the appointed local distributors, when I came out to Asia I was amazed that I had no national-account representatives knocking down the door for my business.

“I met Fred in 1999 at HOFEX, and he explained that he was a global wine consultant from New York and that he was looking to work with the chain hotels and restaurants in Asia Pacific, as he was already doing in the US and elsewhere around the world.

“The minute he opened his mouth, although he didn’t know it, I knew exactly what he was going to propose and I said to myself, ‘At last!’

“Since then, I have been working with Fred to connect directly with the major, as well as some of the boutique, wine producers to guarantee the best pricing, ensure excellent training for staff and to see that the valuable marketing support flows directly via Fred’s agency to the benefit of Pan Pacific Hotels and Resorts.

“The purchasing transparency provided by these programmes are extremely beneficial to any organisation.”

The last word [almost] goes to Starwood VP David Shackleton. “Fred’s impact on the education, appreciation and enjoyment of wine in Asia has been profound.

“He is a man of vigorous determination, boundless energy and a deep and abiding dedication to the wine industry. He is an example to us all.”

The man could not have put it better himself [well, maybe], so it’s only fair that we allow Fred Tibbitts the last word.

“I don’t look at time as we know it in terms of a life, but in terms of eternity, which is why I am forever reminded that our purpose is to serve others, rather than ourselves. It is to be reunited with the whole, which can only be accomplished by ...”

Thanks, Fred. ■

• *Winning Wines*, page 55