

HOTEL

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Brand management



As executive VP of **Carlson Hotels Asia Pacific**, Paul Kirwin is in charge of 42 hotels across five brands in the region, with another 14 scheduled to open this year

By Fred Tibbitts

Branding is so important for success today that you must spend a great deal of time communicating the positioning of your brands to your employees. How do you vary the wine selection to reinforce the different brand positioning? Is it by region or country or by property or a combination of all of these factors?

It is very difficult to equate wine selection to brand positioning as you will have customers staying in one of our 4-star properties who will still demand a wide and varied wine selection. Obviously, with our luxury **Regent** branding, we stock a wider selection of premium wines and champagnes but, generally, customers' tastes and demands are not restricted or governed by hotel branding and star ratings.

Do you leave the wine decision-making to the management team at each hotel or do you have a core programme that promotes a sense of comfort and consistency for your frequent guests, yet permits some local options as in the US?

We seek a balance between the benefits of a core programme and local autonomy. Where we can achieve benefits in consistency, pricing and convenience from a core programme, we use that approach while still providing our local management teams with the autonomy to select wines that meet their local tastes, preferences, and/or pricing opportunities.

Do your guests in Asia Pacific prefer the new world wines over the old world, or does it vary by country? Our approach is dictated by the consumer profile at each hotel. If a hotel has a significant European customer base, then it needs to offer a "balanced" wine list featuring both old and new world wines, to meet this customer demand. Generally, our Asian hotels, which serve a wide variety of international clients, offer a wide variety of wines, while our Australian hotels, with the exception of Champagnes, offer a large number of Australian and New Zealand wines and a lesser number of old world labels.

Do you find your guests to be more wine knowledgeable in some countries than others and, if so, to what would you attribute it?

Because of the wine culture in Australia, wine knowledge is extensive among consumers but in Asia, particularly in China, wine has not been a primary alcohol beverage. But that has been changing, and wine knowledge is increasing at a rapid pace.

What kind of increases in wine sales are you seeing in China now, and how long do you feel it might take to materialise on a grand scale?

Demand for locally produced and imported wine has been increasing and will continue to do so. We are seeing a significant increase in wine consumption year on year in China.

What wine trends do you see emerging in Asia Pacific, and how do you intend to exceed your guests' expectations with regard to wine selection, service and training?

In Asia, as wine knowledge increases and locally produced wines become more sophisticated, an expanded product range will be necessary to keep pace with consumer expectations.

Similarly, the requirement for server wine training will increase and it will be a requirement of the retailer to not only buy the wine from the producer/distributor, but to also expect that the producer/distributor will form an integral part of the training process.

Which of your competitors in terms of chain hotels with three to five stars across Asia Pacific do you see as having the best overall wine programme?

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