

Speakeasy Salon II: the renaissance of hotel gastronomy



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Speakeasy Salon participants (from left) Claudia Johannsen, Philip Borckenstein von Quirini, Jean-Georges Ploner, Horst Rahe, moderator Rolf Westermann, Michael Struck, Andreas Schmitt, Christina Block and Peter Joehnk

November brought the second edition of JOI-Design’s newly-launched “Speakeasy Salons”, our regular series of debates where important hospitality leaders gather at our 1920s villa to freely discuss emerging topics in the hospitality industry.

Moderator Rolf Westermann, editor-in-chief of industry magazine Allgemeine Hotel-und-Gastronomie-Zeitung (AHGZ); Claudia Johannsen, division manager of the foodservice and hospitality trade show INTERNOGA; and I invited a variety of experts to consider whether a renaissance in gastronomy is on the long-term horizon for hotels, or if it is just a fleeting trend.

The additional thought-leaders participating in our debate were Philip Borckenstein von Quirini, general manager of the Empire Riverside Hotel and the Hotel Hafen, both in Hamburg; Jean-Georges Ploner, founder of food trend agency F&B Heroes and owner of Ploner Hospitality Consulting, both in Frankfurt; Horst Rahe, owner of financial and property consultancy Deutsche Seereederei in Rostock (DSR); Michael Struck, founder and CEO of Ruby Hotels located in Germany and Austria; Andreas Schmitt, director and vice-president operations of Althoff Hotels which has properties in Germany, France and the UK; Christina Block, entrepreneur and shareholder of restaurant consortium Block Group; and, naturally, co-founder of JOI-Design (and my wife!), Corinna Kretschmar-Joehnk.

Rolf Westermann launched the discussion by reminding everyone about the attitude hoteliers used to take, which is essentially, “the best hotel restaurant is no restaurant”). He asked: is it still a “must” for a hotel to include a restaurant, or can they abandon this service? Are gastronomy experiences in hotel settings going through a renaissance? What do guests expect and what are hoteliers observing? Here’s a summary of what was forecast:

Corinna Kretschmar-Joehnk offered her thoughts first, sharing her perspective as an interior designer. In today’s hotels, the public areas have merged into one open plan, with lifestyle hotels becoming destinations because of their great restaurants. However, properties aimed at younger markets often break traditional rules by offering quite limited choices. The emphasis of “F&B” is shifting more and more to “B&F”. **Ploner** pleaded for the importance of atmosphere, proposing the phrase “F&B&D” (D for design), and the provocative remark, “Hotels without F&B can only blame themselves if they fail.”

Schmitt rebutted, emphasizing that integrating gastronomy is no “must” – it depends on an in-depth analysis of a hotel’s target market to develop a targeted response to those guests needs.

Struck, no advocate of mandatory dinner service, has done exact this. Through research he found that “gastronomy is not only a restaurant”, which led him to concentrate on breakfast and the bar. “The bar is the core of each Ruby hotel, with the aim of being the hotspot of the city. This is space we invest in.” One reason he has decided against evening gastronomy is to minimize fixed costs. Struck knows he can only be successful with this concept since all his hotels are in top locations with numerous restaurants around the corner. However, it wouldn’t work in neighbourhoods where there are no alternative dining options, which means hotels must provide menus suitable for the masses.

Horst Rahe also saw high fixed costs as one of the factors that determines a hotel’s profitability. He expressed that, of course, it’s essential to meet guests’ expectations; those staying in a luxury hotel such as the Louis C. Jacobs in Hamburg expect top gastronomy and they will get it. Nevertheless, there are possibilities to reduce fixed costs. For example, he foregoes having a large kitchen, storage rooms and lots of personal space. He also works with partners who offer high-quality yet convenient food and has reduced his suppliers from 800 to 80. As a result, his operations are increasingly driven by demand, faster, more environmentally friendly, and cost-efficient. **Johannsen** joined the conversation, saying that due to a shortage in skilled labour, modern-day hotels need to make efficient use of their kitchen resources. Convenience products that years ago would have been hidden are today regarded as being highly helpful.

Returning to the topic of hotel gastronomy, **Struck** doubted the sustainability of these concepts and countered, “How many restaurants out there become classic destinations that remain popular? In three to five years, the crowd will go somewhere else.” **Christina Block** chimed in, “Hotel restaurants are not sexy; but with separate entrances and their own addresses, they can work.” In addition, she argued that in order to be successful, gastronomy needs to extend in some manner into the hotel and bring a little extra value for guests. This is what she realized with her father at the high-class steak restaurant “Theo’s” located next to the Grand Elysée Hotel in Hamburg. During the last year, it has built up its name and dissociated itself from the hotel, establishing success in its own right. **Borckenstein von Quirini** counts on the renaissance of hotel gastronomy. He just opened the newly renovated fish restaurant Waterkant in the Empire Riverside Hotel in Hamburg. With an entrance on the first floor, he attracts attention through high-class, quality ingredients and details such as specially developed fish knives and specific fish oils. Although its focus is quite specific, the venue has little competition and he plans to establish it as an “in” place for both Hamburgers and tourists.

And lastly, I shared my view that the image of hotel restaurants is much more positive in metropolitan places such as New York, London, Hong Kong and Singapore. A concept that is well-realized can become one of the city’s “in” spots even when, absurdly, the focus is not necessarily on the culinary experience. What is more important in determining its hip image is the atmosphere, the scene and the

feeling of being part of a cool moment. For me, gastronomy is absolutely essential and the soul of a hotel.

So, is hotel gastronomy here to stay?

Our salon concluded that this is truly possible, provided it is done the right way. A restaurant integrated within a hotel's overall concept needs to add its own distinct focus that makes it more desirable. Rather than blending in with the masses, the aim is to create a specific concept acutely designed to respond to its target market and uniquely position the hotel.

No matter how comprehensive a hotel's menu may be, it must always be realized with high-quality food. Inferior products will be quickly exposed, so using untrustworthy suppliers is not sustainable. Guests are seeking a gastronomical experience, a story they can take home, which means a restaurant needs to elevate the hotel in order to enjoy its own success. And a practical tip: a separate entrance and name help position the restaurant as an independent venue. Sometimes simple strategies like these can be highly effective.

Peter Joehnk – 18th December 2017