

Speakeasy Salon III: Where Next for the Wellness Wave?



From left to right: Alexander Aisenbrey, Peter Joehnk, Michael Altewischer, Rolf Westermann, Claudia Johannsen, Corinna Mühlhausen, Markus Doleschal and Dietmar Müller-Elmau

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The third edition of our “Speakeasy Salons” took place last month where once again a group of influential hospitality leaders gathered at our 1920s villa to exchange opinions and views on a topical industry issue.

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 hosted a number of experts to consider where the wellness trend is heading next.

They were: Dietmar Müller-Elmau, managing director of Schloss Elmau/ Orania Berlin-Kreuzberg, Alexander Aisenbrey, managing director at Der Öschberghof, Donaueschingen, Corinna Mühlhausen, trend researcher, Dr. Markus Doleschal, global tenant relationship manager hotel at Deko-Immobilien and Michael Altewischer, managing director, Wellness-Hotels & Resorts.

The topic for this Speakeasy Salon “Where Next for the Wellness Wave?” was expected to garner many different viewpoints. What was clear from the outset was that wellness is an important, integral part of modern society. With today’s world becoming increasingly fast-moving, urbanised and digital, the need for peacefulness, biophilic connection and digital detoxing is increasing in equal measure. How can these developments be brought together? Can the need for wellness really be satisfied by staying at a high-end wellness hotel that invests vast amounts of money keeping up to date with the latest trend? Is the word “wellness” really just another word for “relaxation”? What part play outdoor activity, people’s

own healthiness, nutrition or sports? These are just some of the questions we were hoping to answer.

What is Wellness?

Michael Altewischer kicks off the session by sharing his definition of wellness as “A feeling that requires release.” **Dietmar Müller-Elmau** adds that “Wellness is about getting out of one world and stepping into another. It is about stopping the clock, peacefulness and calmness, about escaping the moment. Wellness is about having space. In the old days, people had to go into a church in order to escape for a while – today they do it through wellness.”



According to renowned trend scout **Corinna Mühlhausen**: “Wellness is much more than an escape into the church.” Wellness today also integrates people’s own healthiness. Not too long ago, the definition of healthiness was the lack of sickness; today personal well-being is a synonym for healthiness. A feeling of wellbeing that can be released through sports, good nutrition or time spent outside in nature. What is most important is the authenticity.

Alexander Aisenbrey the general manager for 16 years of the hotel ‘Der Öschberghof’ which is undergoing a major renovation at the moment, relates the topic of wellness to the offer of luxury relaxation and fitness facilities in his hotel. “For me wellness isn’t a trend but an important component that will help us to achieve 85% occupancy rates following the renovation,” he says.

Mühlhausen adds that wellness is in fact a defining trend that results from basic societal needs and therefore has longevity. “Trends form society and are not the same as fads. Every trend comes together with a countertrend. Today’s society is increasingly urbanised, digital and faster which feeds a need for escape, a need to do something good for our body, a need to spend “me time” outside in nature with an absence of any digital devices,” he argues.

Where will the Wellness wave head next?

The demand for wellness is high

“In Germany there were three million wellness travellers in 2017, reflecting an upward trend and confirming that there is a definite demand for wellness in hotels,” says **Altewischer**. “Yet despite this demand, financial experts are not easily persuaded to invest in wellness projects

due to maintenance costs being significantly higher in comparison to other buildings and hotels,” states **Dr Doleschal**.

Wellness in the city versus in the countryside

Peter Joehnk makes this comparison: “In the past every city hotel needed to have a pool, today it needs to have a gym and the pools are being filled in to make way.” Nowadays, the type of city wellness required is different to that of the countryside. In a location far away from a city, guests are probably looking for a “relaxation type of recovery whereas in a city hotel they may be looking to recover through a work-out following a stressful business meeting. **Müller-Elmau** however presents a counterview. In his hotel ‘Orania’ in Berlin-Kreuzberg, he has managed to create an oasis of tranquility that offers its guests a “maximum distance between the inner and the outer world” even though the guests are in the middle of the city due to the hotel’s location.



Wellness within a hotel versus wellness in nature

Mühlhausen does not differentiate between wellness in the city or wellness in the countryside either but between wellness within a wellness hotel and wellness in nature far away from cities and hotels. She says: “There is a growing group in society that will even avoid wellness hotels because of their high energy consumption and would rather recharge their batteries by going on a hiking tour or horse riding – far away from heated pools.” Rather uniquely, **Müller-Elmau** is able to offer his guests a solitary wellness experience as he guarantees that they can swim alone in a pool even when the hotel is fully booked.



Where will the wave head now? It probably won't be in any specific direction. But one thing is certain: Wellness, however applied, is here to stay in today's world. Time-out from fast-moving and digital everyday life is important and people like to take it. Hotel managers are in agreement that wellness execution has to be both credible and authentic. Managing a wellness-hotel is a big job according **Müller-Elmau** who advises every hotelier or hotelier-to-be to think very carefully whether the effort required can and will be applied. Half-hearted concepts don't work. **Aisenbrey** agrees: "The holistic impression of a hotel has to be very positive and the Spa area is just as important as the restaurant. All spaces the hotel provides need to work perfectly in order to get long-term buy-in from guests. It's a case of having the perfect hardware but not entirely convincing software, the overall hotel experience doesn't deliver creating positive, memorable guest memories. The spa can be beautiful, clean and practical but when a guest does not feel comfortable during a massage, the hotel experience is not good enough."

This highlights a tremendously important part: employees. It's vital to find ways of valuing and integrating employees so they feel a connection to their employer. Hotel 'Der Öschberghof' provides its employees with a certain amount of money that they manage by themselves and can spend on small gifts for guests. This initiative motivates employees to listen carefully, so they can identify specific interests and passions and come up with unexpected, memorable gifts that create a sense of joy.

Our third Speakeasy Salon was a truly interesting talk with very different opinions and several philosophical touches, that shed some light on today's views and potential future development of the wellness wave. We look forward to the next Speakeasy Salon in June on the topic "Art versus decoration".

Peter Joehnk, 27th March 2018