

LEADERS IN *Hospitality*

Reinventing The Colonnade

An Interview with David J. Colella,
Vice President and Managing Director, The Colonnade Hotel



EDITORS' NOTE A graduate of the Isenberg School of Management at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, David Colella is Chairman of the Greater Boston Convention & Visitors Bureau and Vice President of the Massachusetts Restaurant Association. He also sits on the boards of the University of Massachusetts Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management, the Copley Society of Boston, and Skal Club International, Boston. He has held his current post since December 1992.



David J. Colella

PROPERTY BRIEF The Colonnade Hotel (www.colonnadehotel.com) is an independently owned and managed luxury property located in Boston's Back Bay, featuring 285 sophisticated rooms and suites with 21st-century comforts and high-tech amenities. The Colonnade Hotel is home to the city's only rooftop pool and Brasserie Jo, one of Boston's most popular restaurants. Founded in 1971 by Bertram Druker, the hotel is overseen today by his son Ronald Druker, President of The Druker Company.

What impact have current economic conditions had on Boston and The Colonnade?

This area has been affected like so many others. We started fairly strong in 2008, but as we moved out of the first half of the year, we saw a fall-off in travel. It's that way in most major cities throughout the country. However, the strong first six months and the increase in international visitors will help us in terms of the overall year.

How do you handle rate pressures while maintaining brand integrity?

It's very difficult because you want to remain competitive, but you also have to balance the fact that by lowering the rates, you're weakening your brand. Having just completed a \$22 million renovation of The Colonnade Hotel, we've been holding firm with our rates and we intend to continue doing so, going forward. Instead of lowering our rates, we have chosen to offer value-added inclusions – special packages designed for both the business and leisure traveler.

Is the property where it needs to be?

We've just completed the largest renovation in the history of this hotel, spending \$22 million in the past year and a half. We can always say there is more ahead, but the renovation we undertook was, in reality, a total reinvention. We

spent almost two years determining what we wanted The Colonnade Hotel to be once the renovations were completed. While cutting edge, the design will stand the test of time. The product is smart, comfortable, and functional. You have a sense that it will still feel that way many years from now.

In terms of other areas within the hotel, the grand ballroom and our meeting space were recently upgraded. Brasserie Jo still continues to draw from a broad market as a legitimate brasserie with strong value and

true Parisian roots. The lobby and hallways have been redone. There hasn't been an area of the hotel that we haven't improved, and that includes all back-of-the-house areas as well. The Colonnade Hotel is set for the long term.

What has made Brasserie Jo so successful in your community?

Brasserie Jo has resonated with the local community in a number of ways. It was built and designed to be a stand-alone restaurant, both in its positioning off our lobby, with its own entrance, and in the way we market it. We just celebrated our 10-year anniversary, and the restaurant's popularity is as strong as the day we opened. Perhaps part of that is being a legitimate French brasserie and staying true to that concept. The pricing and value of a brasserie will work in almost any economy, so we're fortunate from that standpoint as well.

How important is it to offer a full spa facility, and how does your rooftop pool fit into that offering?

Our rooftop pool, or RTP, as it is referred to by Bostonians, differentiates us and is unique to Boston. It has been recognized as one of MSNBC.com's "Top 10 U.S. Hotel Pool Bars", *USA Today's* "10 Great Places Built for Making a Splash," *ShermansTravel's* "Top 10 Urban Hotel Pools," *Street Smart's* "Top 8 in the World" in 2008, and *Playboy's* "Top 10 Sexiest Pools 2007." RTP, coupled with our new state-of-the-art fitness facility that is affiliated with a nearby spa, gives us a competitive edge.

Are you able to offer technology without losing the human element?

Technology has become such an important component in serving our guests, but it has to be balanced with hands-on service. In the end, it is still about human contact – that will never change in this business. Our focus has been and

always will be on dealing directly with guests, and yet technology has improved our ability to serve them better. Whether it's for the leisure or business traveler, directly in the front of the house or as support services behind the scenes, hotels need to be up-to-speed. We built all the latest technology into all areas of the hotel to ensure we could compete with anyone. Our 24/7 IT concierge supports that initiative.

How broad are your event offerings?

We have 12 meeting and function rooms, the largest accommodating up to 600 people. All of our meeting rooms have been redesigned and renovated and they all provide the latest technology. Plus we have an on-site team of audiovisual managers to assist guests. We can handle anything in this 285-room-and-suite hotel, whether it's a silver plate social event for 400 people, a cocktail party for 600, or a boardroom setting for six. We have the facilities and staff to do it well.

How critical is the owner/hotelier relationship to the success of the hotel?

The relationship between the on-site manager of an independent hotel and its owner is very different than one within a chain. We deal on a direct one-to-one basis. There is a relationship, a bond, and a trust that is built when you speak often and directly. The hotel manager becomes a human asset in the overall investment, which is essential. My relationship with Ronald Druker is terrific. We're similar in many ways to begin with, so that's one of the reasons it's been a successful relationship, and it begets an even better relationship as you go forward.

After many years in the business, are you still enjoying it?

I enjoy it thoroughly. This is a 24-hour business – sometimes things do go wrong, but the beautiful thing is you're right there and you have the ability to correct the problem and turn someone who might be unhappy in that moment into a customer for life. This downturn in the economy shall pass. In the meantime, we need to work hard, stay on our game, and stay the course. It's really easy in times like these to drop rates and move away from the goals you have set, but you can't give up on your objectives and your goals. During these tougher times, it's important to keep your expectations in perspective, and to continue on the path you have set. ●

The newly renovated lobby of The Colonnade Hotel