

LEADERS IN *Hospitality*

Creating a Buzz

**An Interview with Dominique Piquemal,
Managing Director, The London NYC**

EDITORS' NOTE After a five-year stint as Director of Banquets and Special Services for The Peninsula Beverly Hills, Dominique Piquemal joined Starwood Hotels & Resorts' Luxury Collection in La Jolla as Food and Beverage Director, where he spent four years. He then left for the University of Southern California to become Director of Retail. Rejoining Starwood, Piquemal moved east to the Westin Copley Place in Boston as Food and Beverage Director and was later promoted to Hotel Manager. After four years in Boston, he went to Houston and the Four Seasons where he served two years as Hotel Manager before joining Blackstone's LXR in New York at The London NYC as Managing Director.



Dominique Piquemal

PROPERTY BRIEF The London NYC (www.thelondonnyc.com) is one of Manhattan's newest luxury experiences surrounding guests with some of the largest and most glamorous accommodations the city has to offer. Mere steps from Fifth Avenue shopping, Broadway theatres, Carnegie Hall, and Central Park, the property is located at 54th Street between 6th and 7th Avenues, a spot that affords rare and stirring views of the city skyline. The accommodations are comprised of a variety of suites that are both elegant and range in proportion and appointment, from the London Suites to the stunning London Penthouse. The London NYC fuses unobtrusive service, sophisticated style, and livable comfort with interiors by renowned designer David Collins and dining – from restaurant to room – by Michelin-starred chef Gordon Ramsay. The London NYC is part of the LXR Luxury Resorts & Hotels collection.

Travel and tourism, like all industries, has been heavily affected as a result of the downturn. Have you seen a major impact in the New York market, and how much did it affect The London NYC?

The changes in our economy have caused everyone to readjust their needs, spending, and perception of value. We looked at the current conditions and decided we either had to adjust our rates to the market and secure business or maintain elevated rates that the market could not absorb. Our primary objectives were to retain our staff and ensure the consistency of our product

and experience. The market tells you if your rates are too high because you can't maintain sufficient occupancies. Although we see a decline in profit from 2008 – which was a good year – I can't complain. We are still at the same occupancy levels we achieved last year. Achieving these occupancies is also important because a full hotel creates a buzz and a perceivable energy. Nobody likes to stay in an empty hotel or dine in an empty restaurant.

With so many great stand-alone restaurants in New York, how challenging is that part of your business, and how critical has the Gordon Ramsay relationship been to your success?

It's a tremendous challenge. In New York right now, you see a lot of independent restaurants going out of business, so the market is telling us we have too many restaurants. For us, Gordon Ramsay has been an integral part of the property because his consistent quality emanates throughout the hotel. He's well known and brings a lot to the table, and people who come in leave with an understanding of the quality and the nature of this business, so they keep coming back.

Today, with technology like express check-out via TV, some feel the personal touch is being lost. Is it tough to balance the availability of technology while maintaining personal hospitality?

Check-in is completed by our team within 30 seconds, so you may lose some of the intimacy but you gain efficiency. To a business traveler, where time is money, a level of efficiency is an integral part of their experience. Recognizing a guest's name and welcoming them back continues to be important – that is where we seek to incorporate a personal touch. After having waited in airports, on security lines, and for cabs, they don't want to wait for their room.

During the past year, how critical was it for you to communicate with the employees on the status of the property in order to put them at ease?

It was critical. We told them that we had anticipated the current conditions, and that while we were still busy, we knew January, February, and March were going to be slower. We explained that we were realigning our rates to gain market share so that we could keep our employees as busy as possible and not lay off many people. Most of our personnel reductions

were accomplished by attrition. In the end, we have been able to keep our occupancy relatively stable because of our rate structures, which we review on a daily basis.

With all the aspects of running a hotel that a general manager has to consider today, how has the role changed, and how critical is it to maintain the guest interaction?

It's critical. I still spend at least three hours a day walking around the lobby to give me a sense of what's going on. With e-mail and instant communication, I'm now constantly engaged with guests, which is different than in the past when we would occasionally receive letters from guests. Now our surveys are done through the Internet and feedback can be available as soon as a guest checks out. We read each of the completed surveys, and I always respond to them, which leads to a different level of engagement with our guests than we had before. When I started in this business, the general manager was more the maitre d' of the lobby, and now with the financial risks that are involved in hotels, we have to watch for everything on a daily basis. We monitor what the markets are doing and how we will react, and with technology, we can see everybody's rates and track competitors. We monitor this almost on an hourly basis.

How did you end up in the business?

I grew up in the business. My father was a chef and I worked in the kitchens. Early on, I knew hospitality was in my blood. I always dreamt about being a diplomat and my degree is in political science, but I use that more in this kind of business than I thought I would. It's very satisfying because every day is different and you get to choose how to react to it and how to best influence guests and employees. There are a lot of great aspects to it, and if it's in your blood, it's in your blood.

Do you personally have the ability to turn off the business, and how hard is it to find some type of balance?

My personality is such that it's a little hard to turn it off. But it's important to have balance. It's important for my managers who deal directly with guests to have balance. Their work weeks are a lot shorter than they were when I was in those positions, but it's a different generation coming through the ranks now and giving them time off is important. ●

The London NYC on Manhattan's 54th Street (left); the spacious lobby (middle); London Atrium suite (right)

