

LEADERS IN *Hospitality*

“Considered Moments”

An Interview with **Spencer H. Wadama**,
General Manager, The Surrey

EDITORS' NOTE Prior to joining *The Surrey*, Spencer Wadama spent 18 years with *The Ritz-Carlton* at locations including, most recently, *Osaka, Japan* and *Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt*. Hotels under Wadama's management have achieved some of the most prestigious awards in the industry, including the *Mobil Five Star* and *AAA Five Diamond*. He has also overseen the hotel openings of the *Bulgari Resort in Bali*, the *Sharq Village & Spa in Doha Qatar*, and 11 *Ritz-Carltons* around the world. Wadama majored in business at *San Francisco State University*.



Spencer H. Wadama

PROPERTY BRIEF Built pre-war in beaux-arts architectural design, *The Surrey* (www.thesurrey.com) evokes the ambiance of a residential townhouse and is situated on the Upper East Side with direct access to *Madison Avenue's* upscale boutiques and restaurants, *Museum Mile*, and *Central Park*. The property features 190 salons, including 30 suites, a *Penthouse*, and a *Presidential suite*, and is also home to *Daniel Boulud's Café Boulud*, as well as a spa, a fitness center, and a 2,200-square-foot *English Roof Garden* overlooking *Central Park*.

Following the renovation and the re-launch of *The Surrey*, how do you define the product and what is the target market?

The market is always going to be an Upper East Side market – people who understand quality and luxury. There are a lot of native New Yorkers who come back for the holidays to visit, and because we're in a much more residential part of town, we have a lot of people who come back to the neighborhood and want something special.

How much of a focus has the spa been for the property?

It has been tremendous. The hotel didn't have a spa before, and the spa has not just been built for the hotel – it has been built for the neighborhood. It puts us at the same level as our luxury competitors, and re-defines what this hotel is supposed to be. Opening up to the community also shows a great respect for the neighborhood and for the Upper East Side.

Many refer to the challenge of being successful in the restaurant part of the



business. How have you benefited from the partnership with Café Boulud?

The reputation that *Café Boulud* brings to *The Surrey* is unsurpassed. *Café Boulud* has been a mainstay in the neighborhood for over 10 years and they have an extremely loyal following. They're very proud to be part of the hotel and we're very proud to be part of them. The value of the relationship is mutually beneficial as we share the same customer base. In addition to eating at *Café Boulud* or having

a drink at the new *Bar Pleiades* that's located in the lobby of *The Surrey*, it's also great that our hotel guests can enjoy *Café Boulud* in the privacy of their own guestrooms. *Café Boulud* provides cuisine to all of our in-room dining options and the menu is reflective of what they serve in the restaurant. In addition, should a guest of theirs want to host a private catered event in a more residential setting, they can do so in one of our suites. Our relationship with the general manager and *Gavin Kaysen*, the executive chef at *Café Boulud*, as well as with mixologist *Cameron Bogue* at *Bar Pleiades*, has been really fantastic, and it's a great added-value to the *Surrey* guest.

You have also put an emphasis on the bar product. How do you define that product?

People on the Upper East Side wanted something new, a bit more contemporary and relevant, but not over the top. Because of the design of it, there is still a great feel for history. With prohibition being the theme for the bar, it brings people back to a different time, yet it is still a warm and inviting place to be. We play jazz at night, and the ambiance of the bar is much more exciting than what I've seen so far in the neighborhood. Our mixologist, *Cameron Bogue*, is an amazing addition to the team. He takes such care and really is an artist with his creations. From making his own cranberry juice to discovering and introducing local and regional liquors, he has transformed our bar into a true neighborhood gathering place.

In addition, how have you implemented art within the product?

That was curated by *The Surrey's* interior designer, *Lauren Rottet*. The Upper East Side is filtered with galleries and museums, and it's a convergence of art and fashion, so *The Surrey*

echoes that feeling of a high collection of artwork and is also very fashionable in terms of it being highly stylized and drawing inspiration the way that one drew inspiration from the '20s and '30s.

From the mosaic-tile floor to the video art in the lobby, this is really an art gallery hotel, and it goes all up to the rooms. There are a lot of little touches in the hotel, everything from the carpet in the hallway to the chandeliers to the Art Deco light fixtures in the wall.

Did you know early on that the hospitality industry was where you wanted to be? How did you end up in the business?

I was looking for a job, and *The Ritz-Carlton San Francisco* was conducting a mass hiring. I applied for a position with the front desk, and they said they were only hiring people with experience, and asked if I was interested in housekeeping. I was 23, and I gave it a try. I started out in this business as a housekeeping night cleaner.

Do you ever get the chance to really turn the business off?

No, but I'm passionate about this business. The staff and leaders need to know I'm there for them, and that I stand side by side with them to make things happen. I want my staff to know that when I ask something to be done, it's like asking a friend a favor. If you're doing something because your boss told you to do it, you're going to give it maybe 50 or 60 percent of the effort. What I want is that when I'm asking for it, it's a 100 percent emotional engagement – I achieve that through building relationships. I've had team members that feel terrible, not so much that they made a mistake but that they let me down. It's a great opportunity for me to pick them up and say, we're all going to make mistakes – it's fine. And it continues to solidify the relationship. That is my style.

In an industry where everybody talks great service, can you really show differentiation?

We do. We're new, but it started before the hotel opened with the training. We talk about “considered moments.” It's about trying to find out the person behind the name. There are a lot of hotel companies that do this, but what we're trying to find is, what the guest really wants, why he's coming to New York, what's important to him, and what will build brand loyalty for him and make him feel like he's coming home. ●

Model guest room sitting area (left); *The Surrey* marquee (right)