

The Academy Awards of the Food World

An Interview with Lee Brian Schrager,
Vice President, Corporate Communications & National Events, Southern Wine & Spirits of America, Inc.



Lee Brian Schrager (right) with celebrity chefs Guy Fieri and Rachael Ray

EDITORS' NOTE Lee Brian Schrager joined Southern Wine & Spirits of America, Inc. in 2000 and oversees projects for the company in all 35 states in which it does business. Schrager's extensive resume includes his creation of the South Beach Wine & Food Festival®. His first book is titled, Food Network South Beach Wine & Food Festival Cookbook (Clarkson Potter). In October 2008, in conjunction with many of the same partners that support the festival in South Beach, Schrager launched the inaugural Food Network New York City Wine & Food Festival, which benefits both the Food Bank For New York City and Share Our Strength®. Recently, Schrager collaborated with Barneys Creative Director Simon Doonan to develop the "Have a Foodie Holiday" campaign for Barneys New York at their flagship Madison Avenue location. Prior to joining Southern Wine & Spirits of America, Schrager spent 17 years with InterContinental Hotels. He studied at the Culinary Institute of America and at the School of Hospitality Management at Florida International University.

COMPANY BRIEF Southern Wine & Spirits of America, Inc. (www.southernwine.com) is the nation's largest wine and spirits distributor with operations in 35 markets. On a national basis, Southern Wine & Spirits of America, Inc. employs more than 11,000 team members.

How has the business fared during these trying economic times?

I wish I could adequately describe what it's like working for a company like Southern Wine & Spirits. It's the nicest, most professional environment you could work in and a place where no one resents working hard because you know the owners are working even harder. The owners value and respect the partners they do business with and their employees, and that has to be a part of why they're so successful – they genuinely care. I used to say I was shocked that Southern was still such a mom-and-pop company considering they dominate the industry, but in the 12 years I've been with Southern, they've seen incredible growth – when I joined them, they were in 14 states and now they're in more than 30 states. It has been extraordinary to watch what the next generation, Wayne Chaplin, has done for the company. It has been overwhelming to see what a leader can do when he empowers the right people to make the right decisions.

Have you seen volatility in the market today and is there opportunity for growth?

There is opportunity for growth, but the past several years were tough for everybody. During these difficult years, I was lucky to be in this end of the industry because wine and spirits have evolved to where they are no longer a luxury. People view wine as a necessity – you can't have a good meal without a bottle of wine, or a cocktail beforehand. We're fortunate in that regard. I believe that everybody at Southern worked harder during tougher times. And the results are reflected in the numbers.

You created the food festival concept. What made you feel there was a need for it and how did it evolve?

What I saw was an educated consumer, and that education came from things as basic as the Food Network bringing great people into your home every night and teaching you how to cook. It was also fostered by the consumer having more opportunities through all these independent wine shops popping up, as well as supermarkets and gas stations having great selections of wine. So it was more readily available and an educated consumer is the best consumer. I saw that, in the home, everyone wanted to cook and enjoyed cooking, and everyone wants to sample and learn about wine and spirits.

What does the South Beach Wine & Food Festival® experience entail?

It's the Academy Awards of the food world where every great chef and food personality,

and winemaker and distiller, is involved in a great event taking place on one of the most beautiful beaches in the world over a four-day period in the middle of winter.

Are there plans to expand the festivals?

New York City is in its fifth year and it has been incredibly successful. We're advising on a major event in L.A. called The Taste of LA that we're partnering with the *LA Times* to produce. There is probably a need for a festival in every market that Southern is in.

When the opportunity to join Southern presented itself, how did you know it was the right fit for you and has the experience been what you expected?

I didn't know what to expect. I had dealt with Southern Wine & Spirits my entire professional career. The one thing I knew about Southern is that everyone who worked there had been there for years – no one seemed to leave.

I knew the owners and had done work with them. I wrote them a letter on my 40th birthday 12 years ago, in which I wrote, I have had an amazing 20-year run at InterContinental Hotels; I can stay here the rest of my life but if there is something bigger and better, and if you need me, let's get together. A few weeks later, I got a call from Wayne Chaplin, the President and COO. We got together, and a few weeks later I got a phone call asking when I was starting. I wasn't even offered a job and they said, Wayne said you're joining us. I had no description or job title. When I showed up for work the first day, I didn't even have a desk.

Is it tough to differentiate among the larger players in your industry since they all talk about offering similar service and having great people?

It's all about service and added value. Southern has added on master sommeliers and master mixologists. We provide an incredible service to the industry – really helping educate our customers.

In every market, we're personally involved in the community and that also makes a big difference.

No matter how large this company gets, it seems to retain a family feel. How is this achieved?

I don't know how people like our leaders Mel Dick, Wayne Chaplin, and Harvey Chaplin always manage to make everybody feel important. I'm always amazed at how much the owners and senior management care about everybody – but that is the secret to their success. ●