



A Commitment to Quality

An Interview with Alex Attia,
General Manager, The Charles Hotel, Harvard Square



Presidential Suite (left); The Charles Hotel exterior (above)

EDITORS' NOTE Prior to joining *The Charles Hotel*, Alex Attia was General Manager at *The Jefferson* in Washington, D.C. Previously, he served as General Manager at the *Loews Hotel Vogue* in Montreal, as well as Executive Assistant Manager at the *Loews New York Hotel*. Attia worked with *Omni Hotels* and *Sheraton Hotels*, as well as an independent property in Chicago, before joining *Loews Hotels* in 1993. Attia, a native of Tunisia, was educated at the *University of Villetaneuse* in Paris and graduated with a bachelor's degree in 1981. He is fluent in French and Arabic.



Alex Attia

PROPERTY BRIEF Next door to Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and just steps away from the university's storied quads, *The Charles Hotel* (charleshotel.com) opened for business in 1984 and, over the past 25 years, has welcomed everyone from Barbra Streisand to His Holiness the Dalai Lama. *The Charles* is a member of Preferred Hotels and Resorts and an AAA Four Diamond award-winning hotel, and boasts 295 guest rooms, 46 suites, and one presidential suite. With its classic New England design, sophisticated service, technology, and one-of-a-kind accommodations, *The Charles Hotel* is ideal for business and leisure travel.

What makes *The Charles Hotel* a leader in the market?

As an independent hotel, the ownership continues to show the commitment to reinvest in the property during good and bad times.

They really understand the importance of making sure the product is in good shape – because that's the only way you can show the ability to deliver a consistent product and service.

Who is your clientele?

Harvard University is the number-one producer of room nights and fills up the restaurants – *Henrietta's Table* or *Rialto* – so it's popular if you're coming to do business with Harvard, and MIT as well.

Venture capitalists are strong in the Cambridge area, and we're seeing more Chinese, Europeans, and South Americans coming in to look at the start-ups in the area. Cambridge is seeing an influx of investment.

How broad is your suite offering?

The feel is consistent throughout, but the ratio of suites to rooms is very high. That has been very effective because recruiting for Harvard University is a huge business for us, and most of the firms prefer to interview in suites, and they like to have small receptions in suites. It works because we can have 45 different firms in-house at the same time.

What makes a hotel restaurant successful and what do you offer?

Over the past 15 years, we have stopped looking at a restaurant as an amenity – it's a business.

If you're running an independent restaurant, you find the right chef and offer a menu that fits the community – not what you had in Paris or London.

You then make sure you have the talent to deliver a consistent product, and make sure the community is attached to the concept.

What works beautifully for us at *Henrietta's Table* is our relationship with local farms. In 2009, we had our best year ever since the community realized that they needed to continue to support us because they were also supporting farmers.

It's also important to make sure you are investing in promotions for your restaurants.

Do you need to offer a spa at a luxury property today?

A spa is a nice service to have available in business hotels. Our average stay is 1.2 nights, so most travelers do not have the time for that.

However, if you're coming with your significant other, you want them to have something to do. We re-did our spa two years ago for exactly that reason.

How do you offer the latest technology while maintaining the human touch?

A lot of hotels are going to curbside check-in. We want to have that time with you and remember your favorite room and floor – this is what makes us unique.

However, we're looking at getting away from paper. We just introduced a paperless transaction at the front desk. You can sign your registration card on an iPad, and our key system now allows you to check in with your smartphone.

Part of being environmentally friendly is making sure we're using less paper and less energy.

We're not looking to stop staff interaction but to make it more efficient.

What service standards have you put in place and how critical is employee retention to maintaining them?

Our best investment is the time we spend with the employees before we put them in front of customers. We want to make sure that they know the menu, but also who is cooking; that they know where we get our lettuce from, for instance.

We take the management team to the farm we do business with for an employee outing. We go through the fields with the farmers and help them for the day and see how they plant an onion, for instance. This is part of our investment in training.

New employees need to clean a room so they know how to interact with the housekeeper, because if you don't do it, you'll never know what they go through. You need to spend a day in the kitchen to see, for example, that it's more than just one person producing soup.

How critical has it been for you to have an owner that continually invests?

Having an ownership that is committed long term shows the commitment to the employees and the customers. Creating an atmosphere at the hotel which the employees are proud to be part of is crucial to the overall success of the business.

Are there benefits to being independent?

It's much tougher. Some of us are big enough to have affiliations with groups like Preferred Hotels. But for those that can't, it's much harder.

In many cases, the brand doesn't pay off because you will be working for them rather than working for yourself.

Depending on the market and location, some products do well as independents and some don't. It requires hard work.

What does the role of GM entail today?

You have more of a finance focus, but customers still want to be recognized and acknowledged for giving a place business.

One can issue that strong message from the front desk person, but it's also a great feeling when the GM is waiting for you in the lobby and welcomes you back. It means a lot to the VIP but also to any individual. It's how loyalty is created and maintained. ●