

Hospitality

Defining Hospitality

An Interview with Arthur F. Backal,
Chief Executive Officer, Backal Hospitality Group



Apella event and meeting space, located within the Alexandria Center for Life Science, New York City

EDITORS' NOTE *Celebrity event planner/hospitality consultant Arthur Backal has, in the course of his two decades in the industry, managed more than 20 event spaces in New York. He has consulted and participated in the development of new hotels, restaurants, and event spaces around the world. His hospitality company, Backal Hospitality Group, serves as a vehicle through which to implement his hotel, restaurant, and lifestyle projects, while his thriving event management firm, State of the Art Enterprises, Inc. has, since its 2002 premiere, provided Backal with a personal creative event outlet stamped with his innovative, signature style. Backal was appointed Consulting Director of Catering for the Mandarin Oriental's New York flagship hotel in February 2003. He graduated from the Hotel and Restaurant Program at Michigan State University, and worked from the onset of his career with some of New York's most renowned hoteliers, from Leona Helmsley at The Palace to Donald and Ivana Trump at The Plaza. He was in charge of the re-opening of the majestic St. Regis, overseeing the entire food and beverage operations, and was also credited with restoring The Pierre to its legendary grandeur during his time there as Director of Catering. Stints at The Waldorf-Astoria and The Rainbow Room rounded out his successful career. Backal is a leading philanthropist for several major charities including Food Allergy Research and Education, City Harvest, National Jewish Health, and several others.*



Arthur F. Backal

COMPANY BRIEF *The Backal Hospitality Group (backalgroup.com; BHG) is designed to meet the discriminating needs of individuals, groups, or corporations who simply want the best of hospitality, restaurant, hotel, lifestyle, and event offerings. The company develops and provides a wide range of exceptional venues; launches premiere hotels, restaurants, clubs, and lounges; targets and invests in new projects; produces large scale, sensational events; and consults on the organization, staffing, marketing, and branding of luxury hospitality ventures around the globe.*

How did the company come about?

I was working with a few great New York properties right out of school when an opportunity to be in charge of food and beverage came along at the St. Regis. I worked there for eight years. I developed a lot of experience but also

found that what drives me is trying to find talent and build a group to make everything that much more successful.

I was becoming restless and wanted to go out on my own, and then I got an opportunity to revamp the catering operation at The Pierre hotel. During those years, along with what I had been doing at the St. Regis, I met and worked with some of the great business leaders and social clientele in the marketplace. It rounded out my hotel, food and beverage, and hospitality experience.

It was then that I decided to start my own group to fulfill my love of putting together grand events and also to lend more of my experience in operations, development, and management in various hospitality projects.

My first company was State of the Art Enterprises, which is mostly for consulting, event-planning, and production.

Almost simultaneously, the Mandarin Oriental, New York came up on the horizon, opening in the Time Warner Center. It was a perfect fit for all parties involved, I joined the team and continue to oversee the catering operation.

Shortly after Mandarin, I was approached by the Cipriani group to start growing their hospitality group, focused on venue development and catering operations. I started developing that operation, which has a multitude of premiere venues, but also balancing my consulting, event-planning, and production business, which started to become known in New York.

How did you become involved in the Apella, Event Space at Alexandria Center?

In 2010, I was approached by Alexandria Real Estate Equities, which was launching a new project and needed an operator to run their event and conference center in a developing part of New York City on 29th and First. I had heard they were developing a unique space and I was excited to work with like-minded people to deliver this project.

It has been going on for four-plus years. It can be taxing from inception but it's also rewarding to go through a whole construction process. We developed the physical plant and helped with the appointments and the brand, and in bringing in the right group of people to develop and operate it.

This has been done under Backal Hospitality Group and Backal Management Group, which

took the direction of my company into a different platform. It was not just being built around myself and what I would lead, but also involved my key leaders and our people to help develop these projects and properties, and then oversee them.

It's thriving; a new building has been added to the complex and it is bringing more demand into that whole area. It's interesting to see how it has developed as not only an amenity to the buildings that are there for the life science community, but it has found a niche in the market as a great place for all types of events.

How challenging is it for a hotel to do well in the food and beverage arena?

Some of the top hotels in New York have looked to the outside for great chefs or restaurant operators who are experts in that area and who have the ability to provide efficiencies that certain hotels can't provide themselves. The most recent downturn changed the way people operate their properties, and efficiency and managing costs have never been more of a top priority.

Hotel food and beverage is an area where profit margins are not always high. With profitability being challenged more, they need to bring in experts who can not only run that aspect of the hotels but who can also try to minimize the risk and allow the hotels to concentrate more on the rooms business or other areas that provide the highest returns.

Will the New York market remain your priority or do you see opportunities outside of the area?

I have had a lot of opportunities to move into other cities and there is a lot of crossover, especially in some of the major cities where the clientele and the customer base is almost shared.

Hopefully, we will look at some other developments outside of the New York area, while continuing to develop our strong infrastructure in terms of human resources and operations. We are looking at creating and investing in new projects that will complement our existing business and make us stronger as a company.

New York is such a thriving place that I still have a lot on my plate and there are still other opportunities here. I have a family and am always trying to balance everything. This has become more of a priority. I'm trying to not be away as much, except for traveling, exploring, and experiencing what this world has to offer us. ●