

Hollywood Glamour with a New York Touch

An Interview with Peter Walterspiel,
General Manager, Warwick New York Hotel



The Randolph Suite living area

EDITORS' NOTE Peter Walterspiel has held his current post since May 2013. From November 2011 to January 2013, he was the General Manager at PUBLIC Chicago. Prior to this, he was Managing Director of Operations and Transitions as well as Area Managing Director for Richfield Hospitality. He also held roles as General Manager for Sheraton Universal; Vice President of Hotel Operations for Olympia Gaming, LLC; Vice President of Residential Development for Edge-Star Partners, LLC; Assistant Vice President of Hotel Operations for Wynn Las Vegas; Vice President of Hotel Operations for The Venetian Resort Hotel Casino; Area Director of Six Sigma for Starwood Hotels and Resorts Worldwide, Inc.; General Manager of The St. Regis Washington, D.C.; and Resident Manager of Turnberry Isle Resort & Club.



Peter Walterspiel

PROPERTY BRIEF When newspaper giant William Randolph Hearst commissioned Warwick New York Hotel (warwickhotels.com/new-york) for his love, Marion Davies, he created what has become Midtown Manhattan's refined jewel. At the time, it was an immediate hit with high-society guests and was even used by Paramount Pictures as a headquarters for stars who were filming in the city. Today, it sits opposite the Museum of Modern Art, mere blocks from Central Park and the best attractions, and exudes European elegance and vintage charm.

This property has a unique history. How has this been incorporated into the current product?

The property dates back to the mid-1920s. It was built as the East Coast refuge for the Hollywood crowd that came to New York. Hearst's partner had the Ziegfeld Theater and the Ziegfeld Follies, which was then right across the street, so it all tied together.

Marion Davies had an entire floor of this hotel. It was an apartment hotel, which is why the lobby is still small with a residential feel; the elevators are sized as they were in the 1920s.

We clearly make reference to the history by the fact that we call our bar Randolph's.

We now have completed renovation of every room in the hotel and the style takes some inspiration from Hollywood glamour but puts a sensible New York touch to it – references to Hollywood are shown in artwork.

We have some specialty suites that were completed recently that pay homage to some of the stars of the past: the Randolph Suite; the Jane Suite, named after Jane Russell; the Marion Suite; and the Cary Grant Suite, because he lived at this hotel

for 12 years. There is a constant reminder of the heyday of Hollywood.

What is your vision for the food and beverage component and how challenging is that part of the business?

It's extremely challenging. Many hotels have decided to walk away from food and beverage. However, as a full-service hotel, we still need to make it available. So the challenge becomes one of making our offerings appealing not just to hotel guests but to locals and/or guests at other hotels. Generally, a hotel guest won't eat at his hotel's restaurant but he might go to another hotel restaurant if they did a good job at establishing their own non-hotel related identity. We are attempting to do that here.

We just hired a new chef. We recently introduced new menus in a style that hasn't been seen at this hotel in a while, which will also have an impact on the bar and the drink menu – it will all tie together.

When you look at the state of the market today, there is significant new supply coming onboard. How hard is it to gauge the market and has it truly recovered?

The market remains relatively unpredictable, especially the longer term predictions. People are booking with extremely short booking windows. Promotions drive more advanced bookings, but generally, they also involve discounting.

If we look at our booking pace year-over-year, things have changed. Last year, we were sitting at a certain level of occupancy and average rate, but we don't see that today. We have changed our attitude knowing that the New York market generally runs in the 90-some percent occupancy

range. Even during the summer, we're trying to take advantage of some of that built-in market strength.

Has the role of a GM become more business than hospitality today?

The business role has taken on a whole level of importance but, in our world, this has not come at the cost of hospitality – if anything, we all do more on the business side but the hospitality aspect remains as important as ever. Rooms still have to be inspected, training still has to be conducted, and we still have to be out and present, greeting guests. However, we also have to interact with the financial people and the revenue management side to maximize the topline and make sure that as much of that as possible flows to the bottom line.

What should young people do early on to get on the right path for a career in this industry?

They shouldn't think they're getting into a 9-to-5 Monday-Friday world. A lot of people don't understand the nature of hospitality as a true 24/7 business. Even if that doesn't mean you personally have to be awake and around all the time, someone has to be. This is one of the few businesses that, once you open, you will rarely close.

Very simple advice is, if you're not afraid of long hours and hard work, a career in hospitality can be very rewarding.

How critical to your success has the owner relationship been?

If the owner's views are opposed to or completely different from what real life shows, or vice versa, this has to be addressed. It makes for good owner relations if there is a dialogue that addresses what your staff who deal face-to-face with the guests are hearing. This guides us to do what our guests want us to do, rather than to do what we think our guests want.

Do you ever take the time to enjoy the small wins or are you always looking at the next challenge?

If there is a win, we need to take pride in that win and celebrate and enjoy it. Then we say, let's duplicate this in another area where we have another challenge. We can't rest on our laurels, because even with a renovation where you have a brand new room, after the first visit of a guest, it's no longer brand new – you might have to start touching up already. ●