



Creating a Lifestyle Brand

An Interview with John Inserra,
President and Chief Operating Officer,
Cooper's Hawk Winery & Restaurants



Interior of the Cooper's Hawk on International Drive in Orlando, Florida (left); exterior of the Cooper's Hawk in Oak Lawn, Illinois (above)

EDITORS' NOTE Throughout his career, John Inserra has held senior leadership positions with The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, Kimpton Hotel and Restaurant Group and, most recently, as the Chief Operating Officer of The ONE Group, leading the international restaurant brand, STK. A graduate of Cornell University, he has served on the board of directors of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless and was on the inaugural board for Got2Run.



John Inserra

COMPANY BRIEF Redefining the modern casual dining experience, Cooper's Hawk (coopershawkwinery.com) is a unique combination of restaurant, winery, Napa-style tasting room, and artisanal retail market. The concept partners with some of the best grape growers in the world to craft the award-winning Cooper's Hawk wine collection. Additionally, Cooper's Hawk is home to one of the country's largest wine clubs, a lifestyle driven monthly affiliation offering exclusive wines, events, and privileges. Cooper's Hawk was first uncorked in Orland Park, Illinois in 2005. Operations have since expanded to 20 locations throughout Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, Ohio, Virginia, and Wisconsin, with three additional units slated for construction through early 2016.

What excited you about joining Cooper's Hawk and made you believe it was the right fit?

First and foremost, I have a lot of respect for Tim (McEnery, Founder and CEO) and what he has accomplished. He reminds me a lot of my career early on and some of the things I tried to go after.

I love The ONE Group and it was hard to leave them, but I looked at what was best for my family and me, and to be based in Chicago and work with Tim was the luring bait.

Just getting to know Tim and to understand what he was trying to accomplish in creating a lifestyle brand through Cooper's Hawk Winery showed me that it's a special model, and it has a unique place in the market. In the restaurant industry, we have the opportunity to change people's lives every day, be it the employees or guests coming into the restaurants. Tim fosters that approach. What he's accomplished with the winery and how that funnels into the

restaurant experience is a formula for a great future. He has a strong commitment to people and to learning and development. He has done a lot already in the first 10 years' history of Cooper's Hawk, to put the right people in place to create a structure that can support significant growth over the next 5 to 10 years. He has surrounded himself with top professionals and there are strong Midwestern values present. Together, this translates into business and into the overall running of our model.

There is much more he wants to accomplish and he needed someone with the bandwidth to support the operations and overall vision of a lifestyle brand.

What is your vision for growth of the brand?

Cooper's Hawk is redefining modern casual dining. It's a great combination of a restaurant experience with a Napa-style tasting room and a really cool artisanal retail market in each restaurant. It's an innovative concept that partners with the best great growers in the country, from California to Washington State to Oregon to New York. Over the past 10 years, Tim has crafted some outstanding award-winning wine – it's a great collection.

When one walks into a Cooper's Hawk, the energy from the tasting room at the entrance is welcoming and the merchandising is displayed in an appealing way. This creates many reasons for guests to come into Cooper's Hawk and creates a real sense of community, which is the overall vision and purpose of our brand.

The next stage of growth will encompass places like Ashburn, Virginia, and Jacksonville, Florida, with Naples after that. There are scheduled openings in Annapolis as well. The ideal platform for growth incorporates cluster cities such as going into Tampa initially and then expanding to Orlando. There is a strong cluster in Illinois as well. We have opened in significant suburban markets and have had some great density there, and in Indiana. Our growth goal is about five restaurants a year over the next five years.

There is great value in the concept which connects to a wide base of diners both for lunch and dinner.

When you enter, do you know right away you're in a Cooper's Hawk or are the properties specific as to the different markets?

There will never be a cookie-cutter design and construction, but there are some key elements that will be consistent at each Cooper's Hawk. The tasting room is upfront as a guest first enters in every restaurant. They have created some great merchandising there, and it's very inviting.

The restaurant itself is different across each market. It's a combination of booths, high-top tables, freestanding tables, etc. Each has a bar element and a restaurant area. The kitchen line is not full exhibition but is part of the restaurant and creates energy for it. There is also private dining and a barrel room in every restaurant for anywhere from 40 to 100 people depending on the available space. We're looking to incorporate more private event space. The patio is a key element now with the ability to enclose the patio when weather requires.

How critical is it to retain the culture as you grow?

The foundation of Cooper's Hawk is the culture that has been created. It is paramount to our success.

Some key elements for the future will be hiring smart, enthusiastic people and training them well. Tim is fully committed to learning and development so there is a strong team in place and there are some unique things being done. As an outsider, I can see things with fresh eyes.

Tim has built a structure for this company that will allow it to grow, so I don't need to create it. We will need additional people and will continue to improve the learning and development, but the foundation has been laid that will allow us to remain focused on keeping the culture intact. We will maintain a balance between promoting from within and bringing in external candidates.

Do you still have a strong passion for this business?

My personal thinking is that we can change people's lives through the restaurant business. In what other industry can you go from being a dishwasher to a CEO based on hands-on education in the field? We also genuinely connect with our guests, even if it's just for one hour at lunch. I think that creates the passion. With Tim's concept evolving, the human connection is super important and that's what people are seeking out when they choose a dining experience. ●