



Constant Reinvention

An Interview with Peter Simoncelli,
General Manager, The Ritz-Carlton, Chicago



The Ritz-Carlton, Chicago lobby (above);
the recently refashioned Navy Pier Suite (left)

EDITORS' NOTE Peter Simoncelli assumed his current role in December 2016. Over the course of his career, he served 14 years with Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, including his post as director of food and beverage, followed by executive assistant general manager at its Chicago property. For more than 15 years, he has been in Chicago where he served as General Manager of the Westin Michigan Avenue Chicago and Westin Chicago River North. Simoncelli graduated from Illinois College. He sits on the board of directors for the Illinois Hotel and Lodging Association and served as its Ambassador of Hospitality in 2013. He served as Chairman of the Magnificent Mile Association, the Development Board of St. Francis High School, and the Westin Hotels and Resorts GM Advisory Council.



Peter Simoncelli

PROPERTY BRIEF Among the skyscrapers of the Magnificent Mile awaits The Ritz-Carlton, Chicago (ritzcarlton.com/Chicago), a hotel located in the coveted Gold Coast neighborhood. The Ritz-Carlton, Chicago's 434 guest rooms, including 90 suites, each offer stunning views, spacious layouts and unimposing elegance. The property unveiled a new Ritz-Carlton Club Lounge, refashioned suites and a fitness center with city views at the end of 2016. The final phase of sophisticated updates debuted in the summer of 2017 featuring reinvigorated, modernized spaces including the lobby, restaurant and ballrooms that blend the charm of Water Tower Place with the rich history and architecture of the city.

Will you discuss the state of the hospitality market in Chicago?

Chicago had a great year and exceeded our expectations across the market, especially considering the increase in supply in past years.

This has been a nice surprise. Summers continue to draw in family travelers and the demand continues to increase year after year. The Chicago hotel market has tremendous upside as we have a world class convention center that continues to draw new customers, along with the traditional base of business.

Citywide, business was up this year but, for the most part, it is leisure travel that is really doing well.

With so much new supply coming online, how important is it to have ownership that continues to invest in the property to keep it relevant and competitive?

It is crucial in order to keep our edge in a crowded luxury marketplace. Those properties that have become tired and outdated will be put aside for the newer properties and those that are renovating and enhancing their products. However, the most important part of any hotel is always the service culture which is ultimately the ladies and gentlemen who deliver the success.

We just completed a major renovation in 2017, which is a big advantage for us. We will have another phase that will begin in December 2019, which will involve a total renovation of our guest room product.

What sets The Ritz-Carlton, Chicago's suite offering apart from the competition?

Our suites have some of the best views of the city, lake and skyline, if not the best, and are signature to this property as we are the only luxury hotel east of Michigan Avenue.

What is the secret to being successful in food and beverage at the property and how broad are the catering and banquet facilities?

A great restaurant and strong catering department can really differentiate a property. With our meeting space, we differentiate ourselves from other properties that don't have this kind of quality product. Our culinary team prides themselves on their creativity in offering an innovative dining experience. Visitors are able to sample the city's distinctive personality through our extraordinary culinary scene whether that be in one of our dining destinations or for a traditional holiday brunch. Additionally, our Executive Chef continues to enhance the social offerings with a reinvigorated South Asian menu featuring items from his heritage, recent travels and training. We've even revamped our food and beverage offerings for meetings with a more mindful approach on wellness.

The property is excelling in the catering and banquet area since we launched the new product. We have turned a very nice facility into an absolutely great one, particularly for our group customers. The way the current space flows is much improved from past years.

How much of a focus has been placed on fitness and providing wellness offerings?

Our Spa and Fitness Center is one of our biggest departments we continue to develop. Our fitness facility competes with any independent, particularly since it shares the same breathtaking views of the city, lake and skyline as our hotel suites do. It's a beautiful facility that has all of the equipment that one would see in a high-end health club.

The spa and wellness portion of our luxury facility is something that we continue to improve as demand increases. We look forward to growing our spa experiences and adding new treatments and products each year.

What defines a luxury hotel experience today?

Most hotels have great brick and mortar, so it's truly about the personalization of each and every stay. We have a relatively large luxury property with 434 rooms, but we pride ourselves in the ability to personalize each and every stay. The strength of our brand is rooted in our core value of putting people first. Our legendary address has welcomed travelers for over 40 years, and recognizing our guests' loyalty to the brand and hotel is of great importance.

True luxury travelers have high expectations when they walk into a building and they want the level of service to be top notch. The most important aspect of our guest's stay is our ability to recognize them, remember them and thank them for their loyalty to not only our hotel but the Ritz-Carlton brand.

Is it harder today to forecast when the booking windows have shortened?

Forecasting is becoming more difficult. There are times when we overestimate demand and there are other times when demand exceeds our expectations. We continue to modify our forecasting methods on a monthly and yearly basis to reflect the business needs and demands.

How critical has it been to keep the staff engaged and involved, especially as you introduce a renovated product?

Every day, we have to remember we are only as good as the last experience we delivered. There is so much competition that if we don't continue to reinvent ourselves and challenge ourselves to be better, someone else will take that chair away from us.

The ladies and gentlemen at the property have embraced the revitalization. I'm extremely happy with how our team has come together since the renovation and I am thrilled to continue to evolve and grow with them moving forward. ●