

Hospitality

Timeless Hospitality

An Interview with Abraham Merchant, President and Chief Executive Officer, Merchants Hospitality, Inc.



Merchants River House in Battery Park (left); Philippe Chow Downtown (above); Savanna Rooftop in Long Island City (below)

EDITORS' NOTE Abraham Merchant is a real estate developer and a multi-branded restaurant owner who founded Merchants Hospitality in 1986 with his partner, Richard Cohn. He serves as Managing Director to each restaurant and Merchants Hospitality's affiliated properties. Merchant has opened and operated properties over the past 30 years and leads an experienced management team and a staff of over 1,500 employees. Some of his earlier successes include Anaconda, Art Bar & Lounge, Chicago Blues, Merchants NY Chelsea, Merchants NY Columbus Ave, Merchants NY Cigar Bar, Southwest NY, and Merchants Café. In the early 1980s, Merchant served as Regional Director for Riese Restaurants. Merchant has co-developed properties and restaurants in New York City and Miami in partnership or association with the New York City Economic Development Committee, and other major institutional and governmental groups.



Abraham Merchant

with myself and my partner, Richard Cohn, with whom I have remained partners for the past 30 plus years. Over time, we started acquiring real estate, especially over the last six to ten years when we became involved in various other parts of the market segments from owning properties to owning and reselling properties to putting together assemblages.

Is brand awareness important for Merchants Hospitality or are you focused on building awareness for the individual brands?

We debate about this all the time given there are very few companies that do all the things we do. We try to keep Merchants Hospitality in the background because we want each restaurant to feel independent. We want each experience to be independent because when you come to one of our properties, we want you to have a unique experience, not a corporate experience.

years. We try to be consistent in what we provide. We make sure our staff is happy. People are creatures of habit. They will work for a company for a little less than what a competitor is offering if they are happy in their work environment. We try to create a great culture and a great work environment.

We try to stay ahead of the trends. We try to be timeless in many aspects so we're not creating concepts that are only good for this year or next year. We are creating concepts like Treadwell Park where if you are 12 years old, we have something for you, and if you are 40 years old, we have something for you.

We are trying to build brand loyalty and earn your respect.

How critical is it to provide career opportunities for your employees in order to retain talent?

When it comes to our career-minded employees and management team, I like to say that what we do is give them golden handcuffs. We pay them above market rate because we want to retain the best talent.

I never like to use the word "employee." I like to use the word "staff." Most of our management staff has been with us for 15 plus years.

Our objective is to make the workplace an engaging workplace in order to get the most out of our staff. We have to ask for more. When you expect less, you get far less. When you expect more, most people will surprise you and deliver.

How has your role evolved as Merchants Hospitality has grown?

The key is time management. I try to organize my time very effectively. The more structure we have around us, the more availability it gives me. My hardest time was when I had one restaurant. The more restaurants we have, the more structure I have around me. I'm surrounded by very smart people and it gives me an ability to do what I do best. My focus is to visit restaurants, to say hello to guests and my staff, to see how the restaurants feel, how the music sounds, and make sure everyone is having a good time. ●

COMPANY BRIEF Founded in 1988, Merchants Hospitality (merchantshospitality.com) and its principals have owned, operated, and developed a number of luxurious properties, hotels and restaurants. Properties have included hotels and residential condominiums such as Cachet Hotel in Manhattan, the Z Hotel in Long Island City and NYC's famous Pier 15 at South Street Seaport to name a few. Merchants also owns 18 premier restaurants in NYC including Philippe Chow, Playboy Supper Club, Treadwell Park, Ophelia Lounge, Sugar East, Industry Kitchen, and Merchants River House. Merchants Hospitality's principals Abraham Merchant and Richard Cohn have been industry leaders in the real estate and hospitality space for over 30 years and have been honored by multiple charities across the country.



It is a fine balance between marketing the restaurant versus marketing the parent company, but we generally see our properties as more independent and we want people to have a one-on-one experience with our brands, not with the company.

What are the keys to remaining relevant and having longevity in the industry?

We are one of the few companies that have been around in a sizeable form for the past 30

What is the history and heritage of Merchants Hospitality?

Merchants Hospitality started in the late 1980s predominantly as a restaurant company