

USA Tour wrap up for Open House Magazine – July 2006

Around 30 Australian hospitality professionals from the restaurant, hotel and club industries have returned from the third annual Profitable Hospitality New Trends Study Tour to the US, inspired and re-energised.

Led by industry expert Ken Burgin, whose passion is effecting hospitality profitability and efficiency for his customers, the 11-day trip included a visit to Chicago's National Restaurant Association Restaurant Hotel-Motel Show, the largest single gathering of restaurant, foodservice and international hospitality professionals in the world. With almost 2,100 exhibitors, the 2006 Show attracted more than 75,000 attendees globally. No matter what facet of the Australia hospitality industry members of the Profitable Hospitality delegates represented, more than 60 educational seminars and thousands of stands had something for all.

This was an opportunity to explore cutting edge concepts, discover new technologies and keep abreast of new developments in food and beverage that haven't yet reached Australian shores. The emphasis this year was on all things organic and nutritious, with many food suppliers conscientiously addressing growing international health concerns, through their products and services.

Innovative visual merchandising and packaging was also very prominent on the Show floor. At \$100 US "Bling H2o" is the world's first ever water to come in limited-edition, frosted, corked bottles hand-decorated with genuine Swarovski crystals.

Twelve months planning and a collaborative relationship with the National Restaurant Association in the US ensured that the Profitable Hospitality tour offered exceptional value. Numerous behind-the-scenes tours of leading restaurants and catering venues such as Fox & Obel Foodmarket, McCormick Place Convention Centre (home of the NRA Show), Charlie Trotters and the House of Blues in Chicago fuelled the Australians with many new ideas. The whirlwind stop in Las Vegas included a full day of insightful front and back of house tours of some of Nevada's premium casual and fine-dining venues including Metro Pizza owned by Sam Facchini, NRA National Director and our host for the occasion. Paymon's Mediterranean Café and Hookah Lounge (ranked on the top ten restaurants in Las Vegas for 16 years in a row), Commander's Palace in the Aladdin Hotel and Casino, and a visit to the Culinary Institute of Las Vegas, all offered much 'food for thought'.

Commitment to staff, systems and training were obvious priorities. Without exception, the paramount role skilled staff play in the success of these progressive foodservice operations was obvious. The successful operators

were the ones that are dedicated to ongoing training and staff professional development. Whether a casual food market like Fox & Obel, or an exclusive fine-dining institution such as Charlie Trotter's, staff training was never compromised. Keeping staff informed is an utmost priority, and this was certainly reflected in the general morale, and more importantly, in the customer service. The use of technology has also streamlined the training process in the US with many foodservice operators providing staff with training information and induction on iPods.

According to Ken Burgin, "No matter how simple or complex, large or small your business, the value is not so much the investment in innovative systems and technology, it is putting these into action! Successful catering facilities and food service operations back in Australia have one thing in common. Effective and structured systems, which increase efficiency and profitability. This in turn can support staffing levels, staff training and development."

In the US, staffing structures also allow for waiters to be more effective sales people. "There are a lot more staff on the floor, including 'bussing' staff who clear and deliver plates, leaving the waiters free to sell and care for the customers," observed Fel Bevacqua, owner of four Brisbane restaurants including the well-known Vroom. "In Australia it's easy for wait staff to get bogged down in all the tasks." And while there is a tip culture in the US, surely we can do more in Australia to encourage the focus on customer service, especially through slick add-ons and superior service.

Once again, a common observation of all delegates on the tour was the value of networking and sharing with Australian hospitality industry colleagues. "This tour gave me the chance to listen to the views and questions of other hospitality professionals from Australia. The breadth of experience and also the different perspectives were invaluable," said Robert Sawkins of The Coffee Club.

R&CA was very visible on the tour again this year. Restaurant & Catering Australia CEO John Hart attended for the third year, and Restaurant & Catering South Australia CEO Sally Neville also joined the group. Both were an invaluable resource. Access to their depth of knowledge and that of Ken Burgin, meant there was much productive group discussion about what improvements could be made to the restaurant industry in Australia, and more immediately, to individual businesses.

A final wrap-up seminar on the final day in Las Vegas ensured that everyone had the benefit of revision, and reinforcement of the ideas and inspirations that could be implemented on their return home.

To express interest in the next tour visit www.profitablehospitality.com or call 1800 001 353.

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