

## Article for Club Managers Association of Australia Magazine

### Results of the 2007 Profitable Hospitality Chicago & Las Vegas Tour

Italian, Mexican, Spanish, Irish, French or American? Food concepts, food courts, food trends, fast food, food to go, fine dining, famous clubs and bars? Whatever their interest, it was there for the taking when 37 Australians joined industry expert Ken Burgin on the recent 2007 Profitable Hospitality New Trends Study Tour to Chicago and Las Vegas.

Attracting Australian hospitality professionals at the leading edge, the experience brings together like-minded peers from across the industry. In May 2007 twelve dynamic personalities gave a face to the club industry, joining the group of restaurant owners, hoteliers, food and beverage / kitchen / purchasing managers, bar managers, marketers and suppliers who signed up for nine days non-stop getting 'behind the scenes' to see how modern restaurants, bars and venues in the US really operate.

"Themed venues – the themes start from your view from the street – from the appearance of the venue, to the staff's attire, to the décor, to the menu, everything is designed and coordinated to enhance the experience (at times you felt like you were in another country altogether)" said Michelle Foster marketing manager Canley Heights RSL, who was joined by Mark Baxter CEO and Mark Gavinel, executive chef.

"From a marketing perspective - BIGGER IS BETTER in the US and everything is very EYE-CATCHING. The use of plasmas and signage is outstanding and if there is something going on, you are sure to know about it," she said.

As a provider of management and marketing resources for the hospitality industry, one expression of Profitable Hospitality's business vision is the New Trends Study Tour to the US. Now in its fifth year, Ken Burgin conceived the trip as a way to benefit from the company of like-minded peers and maximise the value gained from a visit to Chicago for the NRA Show.

The four day annual National Restaurant Association (NRA) Restaurant, Hotel-Motel Show 2007 is the largest hospitality show of its kind in the Western hemisphere. Attended by an estimated 75,000 hospitality industry professionals and boasting a record 2,140 exhibitors, the NRA Show gave our group an opportunity to discover cutting-edge equipment, innovations in technology and the hottest menu trends.

The jam-packed tour program includes a three day extension to Las Vegas, numerous back of house tours meeting with chefs, managers and marketers to determine just how they operate so effectively.

Craig Robertson, Head Chef from Twin Towns identified a revealing visit to Ben Pao's Asian concept restaurant and behind the scenes look at the McCormick Place Convention Centre as stand outs and convinced him that Twin Towns is right on track. Since 'Robbo's' return, Orient, the Club's own new asian concept has opened its doors and, operating along very similar lines to Ben Pao, is catering for a full house every night. Robbo attributes its success to stunning theming, delicious food and a focus on excellent service – and best of all price is no issue!

The tour also identified the difference in our workplace environment, regulation compliance and duty of care.

"The Australian club industry has to comply with many government restrictions, particularly compared to Las Vegas, which to me seemed like a lawless state" said Michelle Foster. "The laws in the gambling establishments are very different to ours, from dress code to providing patrons with free alcoholic beverages if they play maximum credits on a machine, to the advertising on outdoor signage such as 'Cash your paycheck and you could win a cruise to... Cabo San Lucas, Mexico!"

Whilst meeting on the other side of the world, without doubt, the unique blend of varying hospitality backgrounds, wealth of experience and different perspectives of fellow Australians on the tour, and the ensuing camaraderie was an invaluable outcome. Every year many sustainable friendships are forged and in some instances professional partnerships have been established.

In what can at times be an isolating profession, the chance to share experiences and ideas, and to be inspired by the initiatives and successes of others, was a highlight for all.

“The people were simply the greatest group of people that instantly blended together,” said Wayne Abrahams, food & beverage manager at North Ryde RSL Community Club. “It really does show what our industry is all about when you can put together a group of people from many different sectors of the industry that are able to work together from day one, and after a few days be a group of great mates that relate and support as if they were old friends.”

### **Hot trends**

The show's top trends included innovations in technology, decrease in carbonated drinks and bottled water on the rise, green products, trans-fat free cooking oil and international goods and services.

The sale of bottled water in restaurants has increased by a significant 57% over the past 12 months and Iced Tea was another beverage readily available. “Iced tea is a real hit in America. Served fresh it is an item which I feel would really take off here (especially in our multicultural society), and obviously is a profitable item to include on the menu,” observed Michelle Foster.

Club restaurant managers are becoming more interested in business intelligence, as is the hospitality industry across the board, and there were more technology exhibitors at this year's show than in the past.

“People want great products, great service and great value. And for us in the hospitality industry excellent technology and systems are essential if we are to achieve that,” said Ken Burgin. “Today's advancements in technology offers a great opportunity to assist us to offer a high level of customer service. Clubs often have to deal with large crowds and long lines, and there were many smart solutions identified for taking orders and getting food to the plate more quickly.”

Simon Skelton, Head Chef at Wests Ashfield in Sydney, has already committed to revolutionary technology, prompted by innovation discovered at the show. “Speeding up and streamlining our processes, from point of order to table service is always a priority,” he said. “The potential capabilities of a system such as Micros are immense.

The Micros Kitchen Display Systems utilise colour touch screens to display orders for the kitchen, identify the status of each table and issue warnings if time standards are not being met. All data is captured for real-time reports on kitchen performance and other service parameters. This creates a positive customer experience.

For Troy McCooke, food and beverage manager at Albury's SSA Club, one of the seminars brought to his attention the possibilities of an integrated computerised kitchen management system. “Allowing lights, equipment, coolrooms and programs to be managed independently – activated and de-activated at predetermined times through an integrated computer program – I would expect the potential energy savings would make the investment well worthwhile” said Troy.

A back of house visit to Metro Pizza in Las Vegas, and generous sharing of information by the restaurant manager was also an eye opener. “The integrated till system and its comprehensive clock in-clock out functionality is impressive. Information is programmed in according to management's specification, staff clock in - through the till, it gives you up to minute data on wages/sales ratios, manager's can track what is selling, who is selling it and how much of it are they selling. While it may sound a bit like Big Brother, it's actually just a very efficient way of being able to access an instant snapshot of what is happening with your business on a right here right

now basis” said Troy. “In food service, the more quickly you can identify problems the less fall out there is, tomorrow is too late to try to rectify the challenges you are facing today!”

## **Green**

Green was obviously on the map much more this year with biodegradable packaging, compost equipment and environmentally safe sanitation products very visible. A Green Pavilion was also an interesting addition – somewhat undersubscribed but definitely an indication of things to come. This was one of the areas where Australian visitors noticed that we were well ahead of our US counterparts. In daily eating and drinking our travelers were alarmed at the amount of throw-away packaging used – even finding a real cup for your morning coffee was a challenge!

## **Trans fats**

A special invitation-only international forum was convened for Profitable Hospitality delegates, where the 2007 NRA Industry Forecast (which surveyed over 1,000 chefs) was presented for discussion. Bite-sized desserts, flatbread, Mediterranean cuisine, local sustainable (organic) produce and bottled water topped the list of ‘what’s hot’, while the topic of obesity and trans fats was hotly debated.

New cooking oil products were in abundance at the show, as the industry moves toward trans fat-free foods.

“It’s not hard to go to zero trans fat, but it’s not easy to go to quality zero trans fat,” said Kevin Mitchell, marketing manager for Cordova, an ACH company.

According to NRA industry veterans, supplier companies are focussing on healthier alternatives — products using high oleic sunflower or cottonseed oils.

National restaurant chains and states have banned trans fats from the majority of their items. Baked goods – a high sale item – are the exception, and for which an alternative is being sought. Bakeries in New York must be trans fat-free by the summer of 2008.

## **International products**

US and International suppliers flock to the NRA show. Hospitality operators are increasingly becoming time poor, and the industry recognises the importance of such opportunities for suppliers to get one-on-one time with operators/restaurateurs.

Australia was prominent again this year with its Austrade stand representing more than 20 Australian products.

Savour Australia, an Australian Tourism/Restaurant & Catering Australia/Qantas brand was a new exhibitor, promoting a culinary tour to Australia in conjunction with Profitable Hospitality in 2008. The Savour Australia Tour is designed to offer US hospitality professionals a unique taste and behind the scenes experience of Australian culinary expertise.

The 2008 New Trends Tour is now open for bookings

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