



Americano at the Hotel Vitale, San Francisco



Bar 888 at the InterContinental San Francisco

STAY AWHILE

by Alia Akkam

Through Innovative Beverage Programs, Hotels Strive to Keep Customers On Property



Domasoteca at the Hotel Palomar Arlington, Rosslyn, VA

Businessmen nursing martinis on leather bar stools. Transient jet-setters swapping tales with a bartender they'll never lay eyes on again before rushing to the airport to catch their planes. Solo travelers flipping through the pages of novels, buoyed by the companionship of an ice cold beer. Hotel bars of yore may connote glamour but unfortunately not all of these establishments around today live up to their sophisticated past. Many a bar has been plopped into a hotel lobby just for the sake of having one on property, to attract the business traveler cramped for time and the tourist who doesn't know any better to pony up to the bar and order a drink (an overpriced one at that) in an uninspired setting in the name of convenience.

In recent years, though, savvy hoteliers are realizing that it behooves them to provide their guests a distinctive hotel bar, one that is stylish and offers a stellar wine list and signature cocktails, an experience that can compete with on-premise opportunities waiting outside the hotel's doors. Not only do F&B profits get a boost by keeping guests happy, but because these distinctive hotel bars popping up across the country are such well-planned concepts, even locals are impressed, making them regular spots to hang out in. In other cases, hotels have gone one step further, implementing beverage programs that directly engage their guests, like wine hours and mixology classes. If a hotel wants to stay afloat today, they know beefing up their beverage component is essential.

STEP 1: PUT THE GUEST FIRST

Every evening, all **Kimpton** hotel lobbies are filled with enthusiastic guests where they have the chance to personally meet the GM during a social wine hour, a nice, personal touch. Mingling aside, they also get to sip wines, one white, one red, that change each month through the pioneering boutique hotel chain's Wines of the World program. Leslie Sbrocco, the San Francisco-based noted wine author and TV personality, personally selects the wines for Kimpton. "Kimpton Hotels has been an innovator in creating programs to celebrate their guests. For the Wines of the World hosted wine hour program – one of the first of its kind – hotel guests enjoy complimentary glasses of wine each evening," says Sbrocco. "We highlight affordable and interesting wines that celebrate things such as women in the

wine business, unique worldwide varietals and brands with an organic and sustainable focus. For example, in April, we're partnering with *Cooking Light* magazine and Cavit in Italy to offer a Pinot pack of Pinot Grigio and Pinot Noir. In May, we're showcasing the organically-grown wines of Carmen in Chile including their delicious Carmenère while in December we raise a glass with Segura Viudas Cava."

Kimpton's ingenuity can also be seen, for example, at its newly opened Hotel Palomar Arlington in Rosslyn, VA. There, **Domasoteca**, an inviting wine shop heavy on Italian and local Virginia wines is located on the ground floor. On Thursday evenings, guests (and locals, too) can partake in wine tastings and stock up on Italian-made chocolate and even wine glasses. Christianna Sargent, who runs the shop, says: "Domasoteca offers a whole new meaning of room service. Guests can phone the shop, order a

bottle of wine and have it delivered to their room with cheese and freshly baked bread without having to pay the outrageous room service prices. Have you ever walked into a hotel room after a long day in a strange city and you simply wanted to enjoy a nice bottle of wine, but you open the mini fridge to discover half bottles for \$35? Those days of gnarly price margins are over at the Hotel Palomar Arlington. Guests can choose from over 450 bottle selections at retail prices, as if they were just a block away from their neighborhood wine shop."

On the cocktail front, Kimpton also shows its devotion to guests. Jacques Bezuidenhout, Partida Tequila's Cocktail & Tequila ambassador, serves as Kimpton's cocktail consultant as well. He created the "Million Dollar" cocktail for Harry Denton's Starlight Room at the Sir Francis Drake in San Francisco and has helped Kimpton Hotels with its beverage programs in New York, San Francisco, Chicago, Washington DC, Seattle, Dallas and Boston. "You want to give guests a very comfortable and stylish place to enjoy themselves. It must be as appealing, or even more so, than the bar down the road," he says. "Our return guests should always want to return to say hello to the staff and the staff should also remember our return guests. That way they feel like they are at a home away from home. My cocktail lists are always a combination of some very basic fresh cocktails and some more complex drinks. You give the guest a chance to order in their comfort zone and then when you gain their confidence you can recommend some of the bolder drinks."

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Salon de Ning gives the Peninsula in New York City a contemporary look



STEP 2: USE F&B AS AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL

Understanding that today's guest doesn't want to just order cocktails, but actually learn more about what they're drinking, some luxe **Ritz-Carlton** properties offer mixology classes. At the Ritz-Carlton Amelia Island, each Wednesday Salt Lounge is the destination for guests who want to interact with bar chefs and prepare seasonal cocktails using fresh, natural ingredients like the "Lavender Sidecar" with Courvoisier, Cointreau, lavender honey and lemon juice. Likewise, at the Ritz-Carlton Marina del Rey in California, guests can take a cocktail class with Fran Adams, fourth generation bar-



El Gaucho, downstairs from the Inn at El Gaucho in Seattle

tender and 12 year-vet of the hotel's Jer-ne Bar. They then have the chance to work behind the bar and mix for fellow students during a "graduation" cocktail hour.

Another chain with impressive beverage programs is **InterContinental Hotels & Resorts**. Jean-Pierre Etcheberrigaray, VP of Food & Beverage says it simply: "We're a liquid-driven F&B company." Many of InterContinental's bar concepts are complete successes, marrying quality with creativity. Take Sushi-Teq, for example, the bar inside the InterContinental Boston that opened on the city's growing waterfront in 2007, pairing sushi with vintage tequila. Or Bar 888 at the new eco-friendly InterContinental San Francisco. Often misunderstood grappa is the focus of this bar, the first of its kind in the U.S. While one can order other liquors here, food & beverage director Sean Olmstead says the mission of the bar, which stocks over 100 types of grappa, is to educate their customers on the pleasures of the obscure Italian liqueur. "When people walk into the lobby and see the beautiful displays, they are intrigued. As far as food and beverage, we need to be the pioneers of education. As people are educated, they realize grappa is not as harsh as they think, but that there are many different nuances, like limoncello and chamomile," Olmstead explains. "We need to define our hotels by food and beverage. People don't want to sit in stuffy restaurants. Our idea is to redefine what people think a hotel should be."

Across all InterContinental and Crowne Plaza properties in North America, guests can now sample popular zodiac cocktails, the brainchild of Etcheberrigaray who worked with master mixologist Francesco Lafranconi of Southern Wine & Spirits of America to create

a memorable cocktail for each astrological sign, using products from vendors across the spectrum of the program's beverage portfolio. "It's a feel-good campaign," notes Etcheberrigaray. "It's really the primary connection to engage the customer with the bartender. Engagement was the motive and tagline." Up next? Look for the "Twisted Horn", Aries' cocktail made with Captain Morgan rum, Grand Marnier and Angostura bitters and Taurus' "Barcelona Sunset," made with Maker's Mark, Monin pure cane syrup and Elixir G.

STEP 3: FIND A BALANCE BETWEEN TRADITION AND INNOVATION

The rooftop bar at the **Peninsula New York** was always a classic spot to meet for a drink, but then Peninsula Hotels decided to roll out a new group-wide bar concept: Salon de Ning, taking a nod to 1930s Shanghai opulence. New York was chosen as the debut destination and Alpan Keskin, director of food & beverage, agrees it was time for an overhaul. "There was a need to update the overall decor and feel of the rooftop bar and terrace. The fantastic views are clearly the focal part of the bar, however, we recognized

that a fresh new look would take the bar to the next level," he explains. Guests still know they can rely on the city views and Peninsula's level of service, but now they enjoy contemporary signature cocktails like "The Ning Sling" with Absolut Mandarin, Soho lychee liqueur and fresh mint leaves.

Whereas some hotels have the problem of adapting their restaurant and bar to best reflect their hotel brand, for the **Inn at El Gaucho** in Seattle, the challenge was reversed. A northwest tradition for over 50 years, El Gaucho has a solid reputation. When the steakhouse decided to open an upscale, intimate inn upstairs, they tapped into their already strong brand identity to make it happen. "We revel in creating a night to remember and our guests see that commitment in the restaurant and it has carried over to the Inn," notes Cooper Mills, El Gaucho Seattle's GM. While El Gaucho has a very classic appeal, Mills doesn't just rest on its gloried coattails. "We focus on service and the entire El Gaucho experience, and that has been what has made us successful for over 50 years. We don't chase the next fad. This is not to say we haven't evolved," he points out. El Gaucho prides itself on interacting with its guests. When a regular guest suggested a drink reminiscent of summer, the bar came up with the "Ruby Sparkle" made with Ruby Red vodka, cranberry, triple sec and topped with Lucien Albrecht sparkling rosé. Bartenders pick a new cocktail to highlight each night at happy hour, often times with the input of guests. Throughout the year featured winemakers visit the restaurant as "guest sommeliers", engaging diners with first-hand insights into the wine they're drinking. As Mills says: "The balance is achieved because our guests trust us and we them. We try to never stray from what brought us to the party: our superior food, beverage and service."

A hotel spot doesn't get more classic than that of the **Hotel Bel-Air** in Los Angeles, surrounded by dark wood and oil paintings. "When they come, people want a classic cocktail, but we wanted to do something more out of the ordinary," says Emmanuel Faure, wine director. He singles out the "Bel-



Scott Kerkmans, Four Points by Sheraton's chief beer officer



CLINK. at the Liberty Hotel, Boston MA



The Champagne Bar at the Hotel Bel-Air, Los Angeles

Air Blossom Martini” as something more exotic, made with Grey Goose Pear Vodka and lychee liquor, topped with blossom flowers. This cocktail is part of the luxury Dorchester Collection’s new signature cocktail and mocktail rollout; each of the seven hotels in the collection, also including the Beverly Hills Hotel and the New York Palace Hotel, stateside, now have a cocktail and mocktail attached to their bar’s brand identity. Along with the drink menus, guests can also partake in Personalized Mixology Classes, one-on-one customized experiences based on each customer’s preferences. The cocktail, designed with a Dorchester Collection mixologist, is also offered as a bar special for the rest of the day, allowing the guest to fully immerse themselves in the hotel’s bar culture. This addition is just the right balance for Faure, who says the Bel-Air’s history and the authenticity it’s known for is still paramount to its success. “I have four generations of bartenders behind the bar. People are coming just for the experience and find a magical atmosphere. Despite the economy, the bar is doing just as fine as last year because we know people recognize the quality. We are going beyond the fact we have guests; we have a family, making them feel so comfortable they want to come back.”

STEP 4: CREATE BUZZ

When the **Hotel Arista** opened in Naperville, a burgeoning Chicago suburb, director of marketing Melissa Duff Brown says they really wanted to personalize services, hence “personal hosts” at check-in instead of front desk agents. Next they brought in 42-inch televisions and Wii and decided to build a weekly ritual around the two: “Wine and Wii.” “Instead of just a regular afternoon coffee break, we said why don’t we do Wii breaks?” Duff Brown recalls. “Why

don’t we do something fun and interactive?” So now, every Wednesday from 5:30 pm-7:30 pm, beer, wine and cheese platters are served in the pre-function space outside the hotel’s ballroom while guests unwind with Wii. It’s also a great way to wait for a table at the hotel’s highly acclaimed Sugar-Toad restaurant.

Getting a table at **Americano** at San Francisco’s **Hotel Vitale**, a Joie de Vivre property, could be a bit of a challenge as it’s perpetually packed. But what’s interesting about the clientele here is that according to Matthew Stuhl, the hotel’s food & beverage director, the majority of those people drinking a signature “Americano” with sweet

vermouth from Italy, aren’t guests – they’re locals. “I think people still have that mentality about restaurants attached to hotels as a stigma. Unless you have a huge name attached to your dining room then it’s going to be hard to produce a nice buzz,” advises Stuhl. “So we’re starting with the bar.” The combination of classic cocktails with an Italian twist and stylish surroundings speak to both tourists and locals, and undoubtedly, raise its credibility among Hotel Vitale guests when they see how popular the adjacent bar is with locals who are in the know.

It’s a similar vibe over at Boston’s **Liberty Hotel**. When the former jail reopened as a luxury boutique hotel in 2007, it quickly gained the presence of a trendy, be-seen crowd, either hanging out downstairs at Alibi, or the bar of lauded restaurant Scampo. On the lobby level, Clink. holds court. Here, the line between guest and local gets blurred as the lobby overflows with revelers waiting to sip cocktails like an “Always in Fashion” with cherry-infused Knob Creek muddled with blood orange, bitters and sugar.

The affordable **Four Points by Sheraton** brand gets credit for implementing one of the most innovative beverage initiatives found among hotel brands. Capitalizing upon the craft beer trend, they hired Scott Kerkmans as their chief beer officer and launched the Four Points Best Brews program. Each property has a different range of craft and imported beers on offer, but all of them include at least four draughts, two of which are locally or regionally made. Each hotel also has a bottle selection of 12 craft beers, half that are local. “We focus on making sure our hotels have great beers and a great experience in that particular region so they don’t have to search the city for quality beer,” says Kerkmans. “It’s right there in their hotel.” ■

GUESTS AT NEW YORK'S PENINSULA HOTEL ENJOY CONTEMPORARY SIGNATURE COCKTAILS LIKE "THE NING SLING," MADE WITH ABSOLUT MANDARIN, SOHO LYCHEE LIQUEUR AND FRESH MINT LEAVES.