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HOSPITALITY EXPERIENCE & DESIGN

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Meeting...  
Trevor Horwell

Relying on a devoted fanbase with an enduring appetite for Chef Nobu’s Japanese-inspired restaurants, Nobu Hospitality converts long-term diners into hotel guests. CEO Trevor Horwell explains how.

Words: Nicola Titman

EXPANSION DURING CONTRACTION

Despite the challenges of 2020, Nobu Hospitality managed to launch not one but three multi-million-dollar hotels, with Nobu Hotel Chicago, Nobu Hotel Warsaw and Nobu Hotel London Portman Square, the second London site for the brand, which already has a presence in Shoreditch. While these properties didn’t suffer any major pandemic-related opening delays, there was a wave of stops and starts from ever-changing restrictions to contend and Horwell was pleasantly surprised by the reception when the doors opened. “We couldn’t believe the number of bookings we were getting from locals,” he says of Warsaw property, the brand’s first hotel in Eastern Europe; and it was the same in other markets, with even Chicago’s outdoor rooftop restaurant turning over 150–150 covers per day in freezing December temperatures. “Despite everything, we were very encouraged, which gives us confidence for the future. We know that when our venues are fully open, they will perform well,” he predicts.

Local restaurant business has always been key to new openings and has added initial triumphs. “Sometimes, hotels don’t stabilise until the third or fourth year,” Horwell explains. “We’re very fortunate because once we open the doors of the restaurant, we build a significant local following. Around 70–80% of our restaurant business is from locals, and we’ve been able to convert some of these customers to stay with us too. A lot of hotel companies lose money in food and beverage, but that’s a strong element of our business model.”

GLOBAL RECOGNITION, LOCAL APPEAL

The fact that locals are coming into Nobu hotels also adds a native infusion into the global brand’s identity. “It’s the locals coming in that creates a different experience, which in turn brings a different type of customer into the hotel, it becomes a 360-degree holistic experience.”

With this in mind, Nobu Hospitality hires its back- and front-of-house team from the community: “We bring in local employees to drive what the local experience is about. If you go to Cabo for example, you want to live the Mexican experience; we do this by adding local dishes to the menu and programming site-specific events with the help of native curators. Even the music is selected according to the destination.”

And yet, while each property has its own character, Horwell stresses that the hotels must be definitively and immediately Nobu: “This is largely achieved via coherent design. ‘We tend to work with a few select designers for all of our projects. Rockwell Group designed the Las Vegas projects currently in development around the world; Studio DB designed the Tokyo hotels, Studio Delta designed the London hotels, and Studio Collins Studio designed our newest London property. ‘It’s always good to build from scratch because you can create exactly what you want,” says Horwell. The upcoming Nobu Hotel & Residences Toronto, the first residential-offer from the brand, is one of the more ambitious newbuilds. “We’re developing twin towers which will feature 560 residential units and 37 hotel suites as well as a lifestyle space known as Nobu Centre,” he says of the Triple Architects-designed project. A podium at the base will retain the classic brick façade of the original Pilkington Glass Factory while the two 45-storey towers rise above. Though it’s still under construction, the project is already hugely successful: “We sold all the residences within three months, probably at some of the highest prices ever paid per square foot in Toronto,” Horwell notes.

FUTURE FACING

Along with Toronto, Horwell says there are ten projects currently in development around the world including Riyadh, Tel Aviv, São Paulo and Atlanta. One of the most anticipated is the brand’s entry into Africa. Nobu Hotel Marrakech is located in the Hivernage district, steps from the historic heart of the city, and will house 71 guestrooms along with a variety of dynamic food and beverage prospects. The venture is a collaboration with Hivernage Collection and MC Hotels, the latter being co-owners of Nobu Hotel Ibiza Bay. “An increasing number of hotel owners today want to maintain the integrity of their properties whilst having an appetite to work with us to enable complete differentiation, revenue advantage, and leveraging our food and beverage prowess,” says Horwell. “The global health and economic crisis have underscored this, and with Nobu’s strong appeal to the local market as well as the international traveller, we are pleased to provide such advantage.”

Having planted flags in the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia, the group plans to bolster its presence in key destinations. New markets are determined by economic prospects (for example, in some European submarkets average room rates are just too low to be considered desirable), and also by the restaurant’s viability. “The restaurant has to work,” says Horwell. “We don’t want to open a hotel in a city where we’re not going to get local F&B business; that’s the starting point for everything we do.”

The restaurant-first approach plots the course for the future growth of the hotel business. “We hear 45 restaurants in 20 countries, we’re aiming to get to the same level with our hotels within the next five years or so,” says Horwell. It’s an ambitious plan in the current climate, but one that the team are deeply committed to. “As for that impressive revenue projection? $600 million is what we can achieve, but for us, it’s really about each hotel being successful and achieving its potential as a standalone, and that’s how we’re moving forward as a brand.”

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