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ABOVE: Alohilani Resort Waikiki Beach will offer two venues from celebrity chef Masaharu Morimoto.

LEFT: Jose Garces is the F&B headliner at Luma Hotel Times Square in New York City.

Hotels turn to star-powered F&B concepts to attract guests

By Nicole Carlino
Managing Editor

NATIONAL REPORT—Gone are the days when going to a hotel restaurant meant business travelers in rumpled suits ordering unappetizing burgers and lackluster fries. You can still order a burger and fries, of course, but today, that burger is more likely to be gourmet and the fries will be truffle, garlic or parmesan—or, perhaps, all of the above. This even rings true for properties below a luxury price point. Moreover, that burger is more likely to be the creation of a celebrity chef.

Over the years, hotel bars and restaurants have evolved to become a place to see and be seen—guests and locals alike use them as meet-up spots, ready for conversation over craft cocktails and appetizers made with locally sourced ingredients. And—thanks to the Food Network and like-minded shows on other channels that bring world-renowned chefs directly into the home—culinary experts that also happen to be household names add star power to hotel venues aiming for experiential.

It's no surprise, then, that celebrity chef-driven restaurants are opening in hotels all over the world.

"There has been a renaissance in hotel dining as of late. Chefs and restaurateurs have combined forces with some of the top hoteliers in order to up the ante and create relevant and innovative dining options. Having a top restaurant within a hotel helps add to the overall experience for hotel guests," said Patric Yumul, president of the Mina Group, a San Francisco-based restaurant management company led by award-winning chef Michael Mina. "In the past, locals would shy away from hotel restaurants, but now it has become a place that drives value within the community and provides a place to connect."

"People want fresh, they want local, they want creative," said Rob Robinson, general manager of Waikiki's Pacific Beach Hotel, which is undergoing a \$115-million redevelopment to transform into Alohilani Resort Waikiki Beach. "That's become the expectation, especially in destinations like Hawaii where there's such a great culture to celebrate."

"The hotel dining experience has evolved immensely over the past 10 years. Originally, hotel restaurants were more formal, and now guests are looking for a more approachable setting where they can socialize," said Kate Martin, general manager at Luma Hotel Times Square, a boutique NYC hotel that is currently accepting reservations for next month.

Those two identifiers—boutique and New York City—make an elevated F&B presence a must, which is why the hotel partnered with James Beard Award winner and Iron Chef, Jose Garces. "As an operator, a celebrity chef appeals to both in-house guests as well as the local community. If we're able to drive locals to the restaurant, it makes it much more attractive to guests staying at the hotel because they also want to feel like an in-the-know New Yorker during their travels," said Martin. "There's also a sense of familiarity and intrigue with a celebrity chef such as Jose Garces. Guests are much more savvy now and they're looking to travel for the 'dining experience' now more than ever; we definitely see this trend continuing."

Martin noted that the hotel wanted to "create a beautiful and intriguing space within our hotel that both locals and our guests would want to experience." Ortzi, the offering from Garces, brings a taste of Spain's Basque region to New York, according to Garces. The

chef continued, "Ortzi focuses on dishes cooked in a *cazuela*, a traditional terra cotta bowl, which reflects the overall feeling of a rustic warmth you find through the restaurant. We also have an adjacent bar with signature cocktails and a robust Spanish wine program so that whether you are a visitor or a local looking for a quick respite or a full meal, we've got you covered."

Marlene Poynder, general manager of the Waldorf Astoria Chicago, which recently partnered with the Mina Group for two dining venues—Petit Margeaux, a patisserie on the lobby level, and Margeaux Brasserie—noted, "Both luxury travelers and locals alike expect an approachable experience, as well as a more formal choice. Our Waldorf Astoria Chicago residents and Gold Coast neighbors can anticipate to be impressed and impress when dining in the sophisticated comfort at our two new Michael Mina restaurants opening in late spring... The restaurants will combine the culture and feel of dining at a Parisian cafe with elevated French cuisine utilizing locally sourced ingredients."

Poynder cited evolving guest expectations as a reason to partner with the Michelin Star and James Beard award-winning chef. Yumul said, "Margeaux transports guests to a classic brasserie that you would find in the city of lights. We celebrate a love affair with French cuisine. It really is a perfect match." Poynder added, "Our competitive advantage is this is Mina's first Chicago restaurant and the only celebrity chef within a luxury hotel in the historic Gold Coast featuring two French-inspired restaurant concepts."

For Alohilani Resort Waikiki Beach, which is being designed to pay homage to Queen Lili'uokalani and Hawaii's rich cultural heritage (the property resides on land formerly held by the Queen Lili'uokalani Trust), a dining experience that complemented the hotel's new approach was a must. Two new Asian-fusion restaurants—both from Iron Chef Masaharu Morimoto—are being developed: Morimoto Asia, which will serve as the signature restaurant that integrates Western and traditional Asian ingredients; and Momoan Waikiki, a more casual dining experience with yakitori, ramen and a wide variety of small plates for lunch and dinner, along with a tropically landscaped beer garden.

"For us, the resort is a brand new project, but it's also a brand new name, a new hotel," said Robinson. "We looked at a partnership that would reflect the brand we're trying to create. Plus, Morimoto's caliber is where we needed to be as far as operating at a high level; it's a very reputable brand."

So how do hotels navigate the fact that the property has its own branding—whether it has a flag or is independent, it still has its own aesthetic—and celebrity chefs—by virtue of who they are—also have their own branding? The idea is complementary, but not too similar. "It's important to treat the restaurant as its own separate entity, but also as a synergistic partner with the hotel," said Martin. "With Luma's central location and Jose Garces' celebrated cuisine, our main goal was for Ortz to feel like a place where New Yorkers would want to dine regularly and Luma guests would want to experience when they visit the city."

Keeping the individual in mind is key. Yumul said, "You always have to consider who is the guest? Who is staying in the rooms? Who is in the community? What do they expect? What do both want and need? Our goal is to create a restaurant that is relevant to the local community and becomes a gathering place, while also extending warmth and hospitality to the hotel guests."

Robinson agreed. "In looking at the Hawaiian market itself, about 80% of people who travel here come from Japan and America," he said, noting that the Morimoto brand is very strong in these two countries. "It made a lot of sense for a partnership."

According to Poynder, the overlap of the brands was in mind when the Waldorf Astoria Chicago, owned

by Geller Partners, teamed up with the Mina Group. "Uniting our brands, both known for maintaining high standards, will resonate with our similar demographics conveying

authenticity to guests seeking an unforgettable dining experience," she said.

Robinson also highlighted that point. "Throughout the resort, we're going to tell a very local

story, and the waters of Hawaii are a natural tie in," he said, noting that the property has a 280,000-gallon oceanarium, which will reinforce that story. Morimoto is a Japanese chef,

but one who will focus on local ingredients—like those found in Hawaii's waters. "That story we're going to be telling is a good match with what he's trying to accomplish," he said. **HB**



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