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SIMON DEWAR: INNKEEPER & GENERAL MANAGER, THE WEEKAPAug INN

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My NativeAdVice:

Bio:

Having lived and worked in England, Germany, Belize, Brunei, Hong Kong, Bosnia, Ireland, Cyprus, Hungary, The Falkland Islands, Canada, South Africa and The United States, Simon Piers Dewar comes to the shores of Quonochontaug Pond with well-honed hospitality skills and world traveler's wisdom, to ensure the continued top-tier level of hospitality that our guests have come to expect and enjoy. During his time in the Army, traveling around the globe, Simon developed a profound love of wine and food. He received proper culinary training in the UK and in the US as a commis chef at a five-star Relais & Chateaux property in the Berkshires, head chef at a country club and sous chef at an acclaimed restaurant in Harrogate, Yorkshire UK. Most recently Simon served as General Manager of Blantyre, a perfectly restored, late 19th century estate in the Berkshires that is, like the Inn, a member of the distinguished Relais & Châteaux group. In 2013, Blantyre was again awarded Five Stars by Forbes, as well as the Wine Spectator Grand Award.



How did you get into the industry?

I fell into the hotel industry much by mistake. I had just finished culinary school and was staging at Blantyre, a luxury hotel located in Lenox, Massachusetts. I became an (unpaid) intern in the kitchen and then line cook. While I was attending a staff retreat we looked at some of the hotel operations using S.W.A.T. analysis, which I had a lot of experience with in my previous life as an Infantry Officer in the British Army where I managed, planned and executed operations. The late Ann Brown, owner of Blantyre took notice of my leadership skills and asked me if I would be interested in leaving my culinary life behind me to manage the property. After eight months back in the UK working as a sous chef I returned to the helm at Blantyre, a Forbes Five Star Relais & Châteaux property. Ms. Brown believed in me and gave me an opportunity to lead an incredible property which eventually led me to another incredible property and part of Ocean House Management – The Weekapaug Inn.

Any emerging trends?

I'm not sure if it is a trend, however, I've observed in the last three years that guests and, particularly families, really embrace shared experiences away from technology. Often they don't realize this until it just happens. So that at the start of a stay they will all be sat at a meal with phones and iPads and by the end of the stay they will be conversing and talking about their experiences that day. In a world where technology plays such a huge part of our daily living sometimes going off the grid is a welcome change. I truly believe that the properties that can create these memories will stand out amongst their peers. At the Weekapaug Inn we have our own resident naturalist who connects guests with the nature and outdoor activities that we offer. Similarly our sister property The Ocean House has a food forager who takes guests on a culinary journey. We want our guests to have a great stay but also take away the memories which can last a life time.



Any industry opportunities or challenges?

Talking to colleagues I don't think we are alone in the fact that one of our biggest challenges is recruitment of staff who are willing to embrace the demands of the hospitality industry. And whilst it is a little unfair to label them all as millennial, nonetheless, I have experienced this as a growing problem that is unlikely to go away. I feel that it would be remiss of us not to address it head on—potentially seeing a huge change in the dynamic (or way) that we employ staff. The real opportunity is for those who find a way to embrace this change – perhaps stepping away from the traditional organization and work routine because the person that cracks the code will have the advantage of attracting the talent first. Much like in the early 80's when women were reentering the workplace

Most of us (myself included) tend to be a little conservative (with a small c), however, I think none of us can afford to ignore this (phenomenon) change in culture.

Inspiration for the business idea, and your vision for the business?

Weekapaug Inn, being a historic property that was constructed as an Inn, has a sense of place. Post renovation the desire of the owners and the management team was to create a luxury experience without the formality that often goes hand in hand. We are very fortunate to have natural beauty, access to the water both on the pond and the Atlantic Ocean, a naturalist on property and true coastal barefoot elegance just a two hour drive from New York City. We are incredible lucky to be part of a collection of properties under the guidance and direction of Daniel Hostettler, the OHM director. This not only really allows us to punch above our weight (in terms of our market exposure, public relations

and the administrative support) but it also helps with the staffing challenges as mentioned previously in that we are greater than the sum of our parts in that we are able to not only share staff but recruit and train centrally.

What's next for the business in the near future?

We are looking at potential expansion to provide us with a purposeful event space both for weddings (currently a marquis area) and for corporate business which is vital for the seasonality of the inn.

Your key initiatives for the success of the business?

Within my first few months at the property I was able to bring Tesla® on board to provide us with a vehicle charging station. This not only was popular with many of our guests who drive Tesla vehicles but also has helped cement our position in the market as an environmentally conscious and focused property. Whilst not particularly tangible in terms of increased business, it is remarkable how many of our guests now own electric powered vehicles.

The other initiative that has really paid dividends is not a new concept at all– it is a return to true hospitality. We have gone back to basic. Relais and Chateaux describe it as the soul of the Innkeeper. Taking the time to speak to and thank every guest for choosing the Inn as their destination. It was very humbling this year when Weekapaug Inn, having only been open post renovation for three years, was voted 27th in the World in the Travel + Leisure readers choice awards.



Your most difficult moment at the business? What did you learn?

I am very lucky that I often look at every day as a success when everyone is safe and unharmed – it is a throw back to my first career where that was not always the case. The "challenge" is always the tradeoff between keeping within budget whilst ensuring that we maintain our high standards both in terms of the fabric of the building and the staffing levels. Summer is always a challenge as our rates are higher and that brings, quite rightly, huge expectation on the part of the guest. I keep my old regiments Motto "Nec Aspera Terrent" (difficulties be damned) taped to my computer screen.

Ideal experience for a customer/client?

I think every client (guest) has a different expectation of the ideal experience. For us, at Weekapaug Inn, we strive to provide every guest with a sense of importance and calm attention to their needs. We want them to feel well cared for, relaxed and spoiled. We want them to leave feeling as if they are recharged. For some guests that means taking advantage of every opportunity we offer, from exercise, yoga paddle boarding to nature walks. For others it means sipping a glass of wine and reading by the fire. I will often reflect upon how much people are willing to invest in a place to spend their precious time away from work. I feel that we truly have a responsibility to be honest, sincere and most of all grateful to them for their patronage.

How do you motivate others?

I lead by example. If I am unmotivated I cannot expect my colleagues to be motivated. I keep a sense of humor. I will not ask anyone to do a job that I would not do myself. I clean the rooms, help in the kitchen and park cars, etc.

I've been incredibly fortunate to have worked with some very brave and committed men and women. Their expectation is example in that I would never ask someone to do something I'm willing to do myself, integrity, honesty, respect and remaining humble are key to leading a team.

Enthusiasm is infectious. I truly believe that praise and encouragement is far more important than Draconian discipline. I always try and make a point of thanking staff before they depart for the day, spending a few moments with them, talking about things outside of work like their families, aspirations, etc. With the Inn management team, I make the point that we spend more time together than we do with our own families. And whilst we don't need to be best friends we absolutely have to be respectful with one another. Fortunately I'm lucky enough to have a team where I also enjoy good friendships.

Career advice to those in your industry?

It is very glib to say be guest focused but particularly for the younger individuals coming into the industry- don't worry about what your colleagues are doing- worry about your own performance. Try to find that wow moment with guests. Don't worry about what you or your colleagues are earning in comparison to you- be willing, able to turn on the charm and success will follow. Remember "Nec Aspera Terrent"

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