

Entrepreneurial Spirit

An Interview with Arthur F. Backal,
Chief Executive Officer, Backal Hospitality Group



Arthur F. Backal at his Apella, Event Space at the Alexandria Center in Manhattan

EDITORS' NOTE *Celebrity event planner/hospitality specialist Arthur Backal has, in the course of over two decades in the industry, managed more than 20 event spaces in New York. He has consulted and participated in the development of new hotels, restaurants, and event spaces around the world. Backal has been Consulting Director of Catering for the Mandarin Oriental's New York flagship hotel since February 2003. He graduated from the Hotel and Restaurant Program at Michigan State University, and worked from the onset of his career with some of New York's most renowned hoteliers, from Leona Helmsley at The Palace to Donald and Ivana Trump at The Plaza. He was in charge of the reopening of the majestic St. Regis, overseeing the entire food and beverage operations, and was also credited with restoring The Pierre to its legendary grandeur during his time there as Director of Catering. Stints at The Waldorf-Astoria and The Rainbow Room rounded out his successful career. Backal is a leading philanthropist for several major charities including Food Allergy Research and Education, City Harvest, and National Jewish Health.*

COMPANY BRIEF *The Backal Hospitality Group (backalgroup.com; BHG) is designed to meet the discriminating needs of individuals, groups, or corporations who simply want the best of hospitality, restaurant, hotel, lifestyle, and event offerings. The company develops and provides a wide range of exceptional venues; launches premiere hotels, restaurants, clubs, and lounges; targets and invests in new projects; produces large-scale, sensational events; and consults on the organization, staffing, marketing, and branding of luxury hospitality ventures around the globe.*

How do you define your business today and has it changed over the years?

Our business has changed tremendously over the years. We have embraced the entrepreneurial spirit more because it makes our business stronger and it helps make our projects more innovative and successful.

The people involved in my projects not only cross-market each other and blend well, but have the talent to deliver on our projects and the experiences we create.

Is the event market strong today?

Yes it is, and opportunities are presenting themselves often but my experience has made me more patient, and I look at deals more closely now. I might not want to take on the inherent risks that I would have 10 years ago.

Some in our business might present themselves as bigger or better than they actually are and, while social media can help businesses, it can also cloud the truth. Although one can more easily promote a business today through social media, they have to be able to deliver results.

In the events business, success to me is not only organizing a great event; it's how long I'm going to be able to continue to do this at the highest levels and truly enjoy it. I'm in my 13th year of being associated with Mandarin Oriental, and I'm thankful to be associated with this great brand. Apella, Event Space at the Alexandria Center is an amazing property, and continues to deliver excellent experiences and host first-class events. It's now in its sixth year and it's only getting better. We have many great things planned for the future.

Are there certain characteristics that make a signature project for you?

All of our company's projects allow our talented and dynamic colleagues to work in various areas or departments. This provides so many of them an opportunity for growth in the future.

Whether it is a hotel like Mandarin Oriental, or an event space like Apella, we still have to deliver excellent service. I've been always associated with five-star type properties, but that doesn't mean we can't deliver on different types of experiences. The base of my experience and the kinds of projects that I like to be involved in are a bit more high-end.

What is the key to longevity and to remaining relevant in this business?

Even though I have always had an entrepreneurial spirit, it took me a while to go out on my own. I started working with a multitude of different business partners. Today, those partners help keep me relevant by bringing in their own experiences and allowing me to expand my horizons.

I push the talented pool of people I work with to be receptive to new ideas and to continuously want to get better. I also listen and learn from them.

Technology is changing so quickly today. We have to provide all of the latest gadgets in our properties in order to cater to the clientele. The clients want to constantly keep pace with technology in both the workplace and their personal life. We have to make sure we balance what our brand stands for and the service that we want to deliver and make sure we reflect what is current.

When the Apella opportunity presented itself, did you feel it was a natural fit?

While I didn't necessarily have experience in the biotech/life science world, I did have experience setting up projects and venues, and running first-class facilities. From early on in meetings with the owners, we collaborated and planned for what was necessary for the project. It shows today in what we developed, a one-of-a-kind venue with a tremendous amount of repeat business that is known for the quality and attentiveness of service that we're delivering.

How critical to success is the training of your people?

It's critical to running a successful business right now and in terms of expanding our business in the future.

An important element of this is the sharing of information. Transparency has become more common than it was years ago when everyone kept so much information private. There are certain things that still cannot be shared, but the more that is shared with key team members, the more they feel a part of the overall goal.

There is a different attitude coming from the workforce today. Everyone wants success so quickly. They want it overnight. What needs to be understood is that putting in the time and effort will lead to future success.

Do you worry about the oversupply coming into the city with the number of properties increasing?

Not really. There has been a large increase in supply of hospitality-related projects as of late. Everyone is stepping up their game. We need to have the most up-to-date technology and facilities. The cost of doing business, especially in New York, is only increasing. We have to deliver on that exceptional experience and make sure we're getting our fair share, while remaining profitable. It's a balancing act, one that keeps everything interesting and exciting. ●