

Hospitality

ONE Group's Growth

An Interview with Celeste Fierro,
Senior Vice President, The ONE Group



STK London in the ME Hotel (above) and Heraea in Palms Casino Resort in Las Vegas

EDITORS' NOTE In 1997, Celeste Fierro founded Cititaste Events and quickly became one of the most sought-after event planners in New York City. In 2004, her career catapulted to the next level when she and Jonathan Segal opened ONE, a restaurant in the heart of New York City's Meatpacking District. The success of ONE led to the creation of STK and several additional equally as successful concepts that now span the globe.



Celeste Fierro

COMPANY BRIEF The ONE Group (www.togrp.com) is a global hospitality company that develops and operates luxury restaurants, lounges, nightclubs, and a turnkey food and beverage operation for boutique hotel groups. Founded in 2004, the company currently operates a number of brands including STK, Asellina, Cucina Asellina, Heraea, and Heliot, and partners in nightclub Tenjune and French bistro, Bagatelle. The company operates venues in New York, Miami, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and Atlanta. In 2012, The ONE Group expanded internationally with The Hippodrome Casino and STK in the ME Hotel, both in London.

What excited you about founding The ONE Group? Has it been what you expected?

It has been better. When I met Jonathan (Segal, Founder and CEO), I was running an event company. A mutual friend introduced us and we became friends. He thought the restaurant business was more about the DJs and less focused on the food, and he wanted to focus on all of it: the food, service, design, and music.

I thought it would be great to come in and undertake that with him, utilizing my marketing and events background. We hit it off. I never thought we'd have as many venues as we have now, so it has been pretty incredible.

Is it tough to communicate that The ONE Group has a great food program when you're known more for the music and design aesthetic?

People love the food. Even if they are initially enticed to come in for the party, they always leave very impressed with our cuisine. We stand apart because we have both the party atmosphere and high quality items on our menu. All of our chefs are top of the line.

Do you tailor the STK experience to the specific location or is there a similar feel in each one?

We tailor the dishes, a bit of the music, and the decor to the attitude of each city.

In Los Angeles, the food is extra fresh because people pay more attention to their health there; in Miami, the food has a Latin theme; Atlanta is a Southern market so we have a southern flair. In New York, the music is louder at our downtown location than it is in our midtown location.

Is it challenging to manage the growth when you're moving at such speed? What are you planning for Las Vegas?

It's a challenge, but the more you open, the easier it gets because you have an experienced team that comes in to manage the opening. In Las Vegas, we've opened a new concept we created called Heraea: it's a sports-themed restaurant and lounge. It has similarities to STK, but it is a sports and vibe driven venue. The food is upscale, not just wings and nachos.



You have also expanded in London. Are there more opportunities internationally?

We handle the food and beverage program for The Hippodrome Casino in London – that was the first property we did. Then we opened Heliot, which is a steakhouse inside the Hippodrome. We just opened STK in the ME Hotel, as well as Asellina, which is our Italian restaurant. We are also handling the food and beverage for the ME Hotel, which is right at the end of the Strand in London.

We're also looking to do STK in Berlin.

In an industry with high turnover, how have you retained your people?

Our biggest strength is the fact that our staff is so loyal and a lot of them have worked their way up in the company. We promote from within and that creates a loyal employee following because you're giving them an opportunity to start and build a career. We try to be as corporate as necessary, but we also treat you as family.

We do a lot of things together as a company. I know everyone's name, Jonathan shakes everyone's hand every night he walks into the restaurants; we are hands-on and very visible.

I'm running seven cities and I'm in the restaurants all the time; my staff knows who I am and I encourage input from them.

How important is it to continue to innovate in this business?

It's all about marketing and staying in touch with customers, which builds loyalty. We have customers at STK who have continued to come regularly since the day we opened. We know their names; we'll always seat our regulars and we make them feel special. People want a consistently good product but also to know they're going to be taken good care of.

I practice that in my management. We also get involved in different charity and promotional events in the cities where we're based. We like to get the word out about our restaurants.

At senior levels, this is a male-oriented business. Is that changing?

Women are generally more detail-oriented and can multi-task, which works well in this industry. You have to love what you do and be competent at it, and all of the women that work for me have those qualities. You learn from your leaders and Jonathan has empowered me to be a woman in this business. I used to be intimidated but now I'm not. I know the business and we have a good product.

We attract women because they want to work for a company that is empowering but also consistent and that gives them the opportunity for longevity and growth.

Do you take time to reflect on the success or is it always on to the next?

Because we're opening so quickly, it's tough, but you do step back and appreciate it. It's about being out there continuously, maintaining relationships, and giving the customer a great experience. I believe that makes the difference. ●