



Global Growth

An Interview with John G. Inserra,
Chief Operating Officer, The ONE Group



Sliced skirt steak, a STK dish (left); the interior of STK London (above)

EDITORS' NOTE John Inserra assumed his current post in February of 2014. Most recently he served as Executive Vice President, Restaurant Operations, Concepts and Development for Kimpton Hotels and Restaurant Group. He also served as Senior Vice President, Restaurant Operations from 2008 to 2012; Vice President Operations, East Coast from 2006 to 2008; and Director of Operations from 2002 to 2006. Prior to his time at Kimpton, Inserra was President, Owner, and Operator of Finbar Restaurants from 1995 to 2002. He served as Director of Restaurant Operations for the Rosenthal Group from 1994 to 1995 and, prior to that, served in multiple roles at The Ritz Carlton Hotel Company from 1987 to 1994, including Executive Director of Food and Beverage for Ritz Carlton Hotels in San Francisco, and in Mauna Lani and Kapalua, Hawaii. He holds a bachelor's degree in hotel administration from Cornell University.



John G. Inserra

COMPANY BRIEF The ONE Group (togrp.com) develops and operates upscale, high-energy restaurants and lounges and provides ONE Hospitality, a turn-key food and beverage service for hospitality venues including hotels, casinos, and other high-end locations both nationally and internationally. The ONE Group's primary restaurant brand is STK, which is a unique steakhouse concept with locations in major metropolitan cities throughout the U.S. and in London. STK artfully blends two concepts—the modern steakhouse and a chic lounge—into one offering a high-energy, fine dining experience with the superior quality of a traditional steakhouse. STK Rebel offers the same vibe-driven steakhouse with a slightly broader menu targeting both lunch and dinner guests at a more accessible price point.

When the opportunity presented itself to join The ONE Group, what made you feel it was the right fit?

It was the growth opportunity the company was going to experience and the challenges that come with that.

I felt The ONE Group was the right fit because I could clearly see the company's tremendous growth potential and I was attracted to the challenge of making that potential a reality.

I thrive on building teams, providing leadership for those teams, and building the structure for the growth of a company from an operations standpoint. I saw The ONE Group as a company on the cusp of growth and I thought it was something that would be a great expansion of my experience.

Is the growth primarily about putting existing brands into new markets or bringing in new brands?

Growth for The ONE Group is largely driven by two components: its main restaurant brand, STK, and its signature turnkey food and beverage service, ONE Hospitality.

Over the years, STK has been built into a powerful brand and we're expanding on STK by introducing an underbrand known as STK Rebel. STK Rebel, at its core, is still STK but it offers a more accessible price point that can be readily adapted to other markets. It's a strong catalyst for growth because STK might not succeed in a secondary market like Boston, Seattle, Philadelphia, or San Diego, but STK Rebel, on the other hand, can thrive by appealing to a wider demographic.

ONE Hospitality is another high-growth channel for The ONE Group's expansion because it fulfills the hospitality industry's demand for a highly capable, third-party restaurant operator. Recently, more hoteliers have been seeking out third-party contractors who can manage their entire food and beverage operations from restaurants, minibars, rooftops, and catering to everything in between. The service is an effective solution because it's a complete one-stop shop and hoteliers can rely on a single operator to provide quality and consistency in their food and beverage offerings. I believe the reason why ONE Hospitality is successful and will continue to flourish is because we're able to offer our extensive experience in operating a successful fine dining brand to our hotel partners.

Where are you looking to expand and will there be consistencies in every STK or will you customize each restaurant to each market?

There are probably five or six additional markets in the U.S. where we're looking to expand STK and a significant amount of growth

will also come from overseas as we begin to increase our presence in the global market with the opening of STK Milan in 2015. We feel there's tremendous opportunity for the STK brand in the international market so we're exploring how we can reach audiences in major global destinations like the Far and Middle East.

With ONE Hospitality, we recently signed on with the W Starwood in Westwood L.A. to manage their food and beverage operations, which is an incredible addition to our portfolio of hotel partners.

In terms of customizing the restaurants, our goal is to maintain a cohesive brand experience while catering to the needs of our guests. To deliver a superior guest experience, we have to focus on specifics within each local market. It's important to us that the STK experience doesn't just feel like a New York-style brand being generically plugged into a number of different cities. STK should feel like the perfect night out and what that entails is going to differ depending on where you are.

How we evolve the brand to fit each market is through our food offerings, personnel, music, and decor. When it comes to menu consistency, somewhere between 70 and 80 percent of the menu is core and 20 to 30 percent is personalized and customized for each market. This allows us to maintain the creativity level with the chef and integrate the culinary experience with elements of the local area.

When there is so much buzz around STK and its entertainment, how challenging is it to expand the awareness of the investment you've made in the food?

We exceed people's expectations on the food side. They know we have a vibe and beverage offering, but we also deliver an exceptional culinary experience. We're bringing a high energy atmosphere to the world of fine dining. There is still a need for the upscale gentleman's steakhouse concept, and it wouldn't be a strategic decision to compete in that oversaturated market because what we offer is a great vibe and a unique guest experience. However, we also maintain high food quality and we do that well.

We're committed to building on our culinary program. It's going to evolve because we believe that it's critical to provide a great dining experience on top of a great atmosphere. ●