



Genuine Hospitality

An Interview with Scott Gerber,
Principal and CEO, Gerber Group



Mr. Purple in Hotel Indigo Lower East Side (left); Rooftop pool at the TWA Hotel (above); The Campbell in Grand Central Terminal (below)

EDITORS' NOTE Scott Gerber began his career in the bar business in 1991 when Gerber Group opened its first venue. Soon after, Gerber formed a partnership with Starwood Hotels & Resorts to develop the W brand, which features Gerber Group venues throughout the U.S. and in select properties internationally. Prior to founding the company, Gerber was a Principal at real estate firm Peter R. Friedman Ltd. Gerber has been quoted in The Wall Street Journal, USA Today, and Crain's New York Business, among others. He holds a B.S. in Finance and Real Estate from the University of Arizona.



Scott Gerber

COMPANY BRIEF Gerber Group (gerberbars.com) is the owner-operator of 15 innovative cocktail bars and restaurants in New York, Washington D.C., Atlanta and Santiago, Chile. Each venue celebrates the importance of genuine hospitality and positive customer experiences. In 1991, Gerber Group established its ability to provide a unique nightlife experience with the opening of its first property, The Whiskey at the Paramount Hotel. Today, Gerber Group continues to redefine the hospitality industry with creative dining concepts and bars featuring renowned beverage programs accompanied by exceptional culinary talents.

What are the key characteristics of a Gerber Group venue and how do you define the Gerber Group difference?

Hopefully, the most common characteristic is the hospitality that we provide from the staff at each location. It's obviously very difficult to differentiate a Heineken you drink at our venues, versus a Heineken you drink somewhere else. We find that it's also hard to differentiate with spirits.

That is not to say that one bar may make a better Manhattan than another bar, but I don't think you can really hang your hat on that. We preach that we want our staff to be polite, friendly, engaging and attentive. That's the most important thing, and what sets us apart.

In addition to the people, the music and the sound levels have to

be great. The lighting has to be just right. The design of the space has to be comfortable with different options depending upon who you're entertaining – if it's a business person, you may prefer to sit at a high-top. If you're with some friends, you may want to sit at a banquet or on a couch. If you're alone, you may want to go up to the bar. We always like to provide different seating options.

Where do you see growth opportunities for Gerber Group?

We're very opportunistic. We've been in a fortunate position for many years where we don't really go out and seek opportunities. They come to us. For instance, The Campbell at Grand Central Terminal that we took over about two years ago was an open, public request for proposal where a broker came to us and asked us to participate.

Most of our opportunities are in hotels. Generally speaking, we want to make sure that we are complimentary to the hotel and that we can add value to the hotel, not just in running a great bar, but really being a deciding factor in somebody choosing to stay at that hotel over another.

How did Gerber Group's relationship with the new TWA Hotel at JFK Airport come about?

Tyler Morse, who is the CEO of MCR, developed the property. He used to be at Starwood and he knew of us from them. We happened to run into each other at a NYC Hospitality Alliance board meeting and he

mentioned that they were doing a project out at John F. Kennedy Airport. He asked if we would be interested in looking at it and I was intrigued.

At first, I didn't really know very much about airport hotels, but in spending a lot of time with Tyler and his team, and understanding how passionate they were about making sure they were bringing this place back to its authenticity, we became very excited about it. I think part of the reason they chose us was also because we were good at operating The Campbell, which was a historic space, so they knew that we would be respectful to this restoration project. We were able to make a deal.

Gerber Group creates venues that are timeless. What is the key to staying relevant?

That's a great question. Our business model has always dictated that we don't want to be trendy, but we want to be aware of the trends. For instance, years ago, it started becoming trendy to drink cold-pressed juices. Instead of just adding juice to our menu, we saw that people were looking for healthier alternatives in their cocktails, so we added items like green juice with vodka to the menu. It was a different way of looking at things, while always using the freshest ingredients that we can.

It's also important to be aware of trends so people don't walk into a place and feel like it's their grandfather's bar but, at the same time, know it's not about being the coolest kid on the block. If you're the coolest kid on the block, that's probably good for 18 months to two years. Then you have to reinvent yourself.

There are a lot of people in this industry that have that business model, and it works out fine for them. It's just not what we do. We want to create a great ambience so that if you haven't been to our bar in two years and you go back to that city to visit and walk into the bar, you remember what you loved about the place. Maybe the music is great. Maybe it's contemporary. Maybe it's still old bluesy or old rock or whatever it might be. The cocktails are still amazing. The sound levels allow me to talk to the person I'm with. It feels good. I think if you provide all of these things, plus genuine hospitality, you will have longevity. ●

