

An Elevated Lifestyle Experience

An Interview with Deborah Yager Fleming, Chief Executive Officer & Partner, Acqualina Resort & Residences on the Beach

EDITORS' NOTE *Deborah Yager Fleming joined Acqualina Resort & Residences on the Beach in March 2004 after having served as Vice President, Sales & Marketing, at Island Outpost where she managed marketing campaigns for 12 boutique hotels. She also garnered valuable experience in New York at The Leading Hotels of the World where she held senior management positions and implemented the design of worldwide sales strategies and innovative marketing programs.*



Deborah Yager Fleming

PROPERTY BRIEF *With a lushly landscaped 4.5-acres of seaside bliss, world-class restaurants, curated amenities and spacious rooms and suites, all with balconies and water views, Acqualina Resort & Residences on the Beach (acqualinaresort.com) is at the center of Miami's Sunny Isles Beach providing an exclusive experience and an ultra-luxurious beach lifestyle. The property is the recipient of the coveted Forbes Five Star Award and the AAA Five Diamond Award.*

Will you discuss your career journey?

I started my hospitality career 30 years ago as a management trainee at a hotel in Miami, rotating through reservations, front desk, housekeeping, and culinary departments. When I moved into sales and marketing, I found my true calling – it lit up the world for me. I loved the diversity and impact of sales and marketing, and that became the path I chose for my career. From Miami, I moved to New York to serve as Director of Sales and Marketing at The Lowell Hotel, where I learned the art of personalized service, making guests feel like they were staying in the home of a good friend, and honed key housekeeping techniques that stay with me to this day. Next, I joined The Leading Hotels of the World (LHW) at their New York headquarters, overseeing worldwide sales offices and later moving into strategic marketing. Collaborating with 16 offices around the globe taught me how to position a company internationally, and I was inspired daily by the incredible hoteliers I worked with who were generous, kind, and true masters of hospitality. From LHW, I was recruited by Chris Blackwell of Island Records to serve as VP of Marketing for his hotel company, Island Outpost, based in Miami. Working for Chris was a shift from systems and structure to out-of-the-box thinking. He challenged me to imagine possibilities and explore creative approaches – lessons that profoundly shaped my perspective. That mindset

led me to join the pre-opening team at Acqualina Resort & Residences in 2004. Working with the owners of the Acqualina brand, Eddie, Jules, and Stephanie Trump, I learned that it's not about reaching your potential – it's about realizing that our potential is unlimited. We built Acqualina from the ground up, and in 2011, I was honored to become CEO and a partner. Today, I oversee the Resort's Executive Committee and work closely with GMs across Acqualina communities to develop and execute strategies and services that elevate the guest experience.

The common thread through every role I've held is a commitment to getting better – constantly learning, seeking knowledge both internally and externally, and looking for ways to improve. Coupled with a great team, this mindset of self-development and evolution has been central to my success.

Will you provide an overview of Acqualina Resort & Residences on the Beach, and what you feel have been the keys to the strength and leadership of the resort?

Acqualina is a family-run, luxury beachfront resort situated on 4.5 acres in pristine Sunny Isles Beach in Miami. The property features 100 guest rooms and suites and 188 residences, all with stunning views of the Atlantic Ocean. We are dedicated to providing a great living experience in a beautiful

Mediterranean Villa-style environment, offering our guests a wide range of amenities to enjoy. Our resort includes four destination restaurants, an award-winning spa, three oceanfront swimming pools, and an innovative children's program. The grounds are thoughtfully designed with outdoor living room settings and umbrellas in our signature red color, set on lush grass just steps from the sea.

The strength of Acqualina comes from a combination of exceptional service, attention to detail, and a culture where every team member takes pride in ownership of the guest experience. Working closely with the principal owners, we have built a property where luxury feels personal, experiences feel curated, and every interaction reflects our commitment to excellence. It's this alignment of vision, culture, and thoughtful design that drives our leadership and success.

How valuable is it to have such a strong suite product, and do you see this as a differentiator for Acqualina?

Absolutely! Suites are a cornerstone of Acqualina's identity and a major differentiator in the market. In fact, 50 percent of our room inventory consists of suites, including one-, two-, and three-bedroom configurations. Many of these feature private offices, making them ideal for remote work or schooling, and they accommodate a wide range of guest experiences – from romantic getaways to multi-generational trips.



Acqualina's signature red umbrellas on the resorts' expansive beachfront



Acqualina Spa relaxation room



Avra restaurant

All of our suites offer expansive oceanfront views, spacious layouts, and terraces, creating an environment where guests can truly live and connect with the surroundings. This suite product allows us to offer more than just accommodations – it provides an elevated lifestyle experience, combining comfort, flexibility, and luxury that guests remember and return for. It's a significant part of why Acqualina stands apart in today's competitive luxury resort landscape.

How has Acqualina approached its restaurant/food and beverage offering, and what are the keys to being successful in this part of the business?

At Acqualina, our food and beverage philosophy is built around partnering with the best of the best to create dining experiences that are not just meals, but destinations with their own stories. Each restaurant offers a unique journey, blending exceptional cuisine with atmosphere, service, and setting to leave a lasting impression on our guests.

Costa Grill is the perfect spot for a beachside lunch or a light snack. As Miami's only restaurant directly adjacent to the beach, Costa Grill combines a white-tablecloth experience with a Floridian menu infused with Mediterranean influences. Under elegant palms and our signature red umbrellas, guests enjoy stunning Atlantic Ocean views in a casual, family-friendly environment. Il Mulino New York brings a celebrated Italian dining experience to Acqualina, renowned for its bustling energy, expertly polished staff, and authentic cuisine. Ke-uH offers an innovative Japanese fusion experience, while the acclaimed Avra Estiatorio of New York and Beverly Hills brings Greek and seafood cuisine to Acqualina.

The keys to being successful in food and beverage are consistency, attention to detail, and ensuring that each dining experience complements the overall guest journey. It's about creating moments that are memorable, immersive, and perfectly aligned with the luxury lifestyle we offer at Acqualina.

What qualities do you look for when hiring talent at Acqualina?

At Acqualina, we look for team members who bring both skill and heart – people who are

talented, dedicated, and also genuinely care about creating exceptional experiences for our guests. We value individuals who are givers, embrace the purpose of service excellence, and take joy in making every stay memorable. Our team thrives in what we call a Dream Makers Culture, where every member is inspired to identify what can make a guest's visit extra special. Initiatives like our "WOW" Story program empower employees to recognize guests' preferences and create moments that leave lasting impressions. These stories are celebrated on our employee app, reinforcing a culture of recognition, pride, and shared accomplishment.

Providing our team with the right tools, resources, and training is critical, but equally important is acknowledging their efforts and contributions. Our employee engagement program is a cornerstone of our management philosophy – ensuring every individual feels valued, motivated, and inspired to deliver their best. Passion, generosity of spirit, and a commitment to creating "WOW" moments are the qualities that consistently make team members thrive at Acqualina.

What does luxury mean to you in today's hospitality landscape?

To me, luxury is about much more than beautiful surroundings or impeccable design. It's about enjoying every second and making people feel more valuable than their valuables. Recognition, care, and attention remain at the heart of the art of hospitality. While a stunning environment, thoughtful design, and flawless service are the baseline, true luxury is experienced through genuine care – anticipating needs, watching for the small details, and ensuring that every moment in time is lived fully and meaningfully.

At Acqualina, we believe luxury is about creating experiences where guests feel seen, valued, and truly cared for, allowing them to relax, connect, and enjoy life's finest moments without distraction. It's the combination of a beautiful environment, attentive service, and heartfelt care that defines modern luxury.

What has made the hospitality industry so special for you?

For me, it's the human connection. The ability to meet and make meaningful connections with

people from all over the world. Partnering with travel advisors and guests who have seen the world, listening to their stories, and learning from their experiences is pure bliss. Every interaction brings a new perspective, a new insight, and a shared moment of joy.

Equally inspiring is the opportunity to connect with other hospitality professionals. Through our affiliation with LHW, I've had the privilege of networking and collaborating with like-minded individuals who share a passion for excellence and innovation. That exchange of ideas, mentorship, and camaraderie is incredibly rewarding.

Hospitality has allowed me to experience both the personal and professional joy of connecting, learning, and creating moments that truly matter. That combination of relationships, shared experiences, and the ability to have lifelong friendships is what makes this industry so special to me.

What advice do you offer to young people interested in building a career in the industry?

Be curious, be resilient, and stay humble. Hospitality is a career of service, growth, and continuous learning. Seek out opportunities that broaden your perspective, embrace mentorship, and never underestimate the value of genuinely caring about people. Success comes not from titles, but from passion, self-development, and the willingness to evolve. Always look for ways to get better, both in your current role and beyond – it's the combination of knowledge, adaptability, and great teams that drives lasting achievement.

In addition, surround yourself with positivity. There should be at least one person in your life – a coach, mentor, partner, parent, sibling, or lifelong friend – who can be a trusted resource. Someone with whom you can share your goals and aspirations, who will hold you accountable, and help you process roadblocks and challenges from a different perspective. Having positive influences and trusted advisors in my life has been instrumental in helping me grow and reach where I am today. ●