

## An Urban Hotel That's Using Cheese To Earn Some Serious Cheddar

Few restaurateurs on the planet would argue that cheese isn't a good meal or wine accompaniment. But fewer still are properly leveraging these savory pairings to enhance the overall dining experience and subsequently turn a better profit.

I've been a big fan of The Ritz-Carlton, Toronto long before it even opened its doors as I was eager for this esteemed brand to finally make its mark in my home city. Even though nearly every feature and amenity in this hotel is

worth lauding, I have seldom mentioned the local Ritz Carlton before because, alas, I lack a reason to stay at a hotel overtop of the comforts of my own house some twenty minutes away. All that changed, however, after a chance encounter with the property's Director of Food and Beverage Operations, Arjun Gopi, wherein he offered to give me the royal tour of their signature restaurant, TOCA.

An unassuming shorthand for 'Toronto Canada', the most striking feature of this luxurious Italian dining spot is its glass-walled cheese cave positioned right at the entranceway. It's impossible to miss for anyone who saunters onto the mezzanine floor of the lobby, and indeed, it sets an impressive tone for what's to come. With this cave à fromage as a centerpiece, TOCA has fully embraced cheese as its 'narrative spine' with decadent cuisine infusions, cave tours offered daily at 5:30pm or at the guests' convenience, a dessert menu that's three-quarters cheese, wine pairings expertly curated by the sommelier and a monthly event series. As it concerns all hoteliers, there are some fantastic lessons here for how you can enhance revenues and your reputation.





### **A Restaurant Is Far More Than Its Food**

Ingeniously built between a cluster of structural concrete support columns, if it wasn't encased in glass and used to age veritable, wheel-upon-wheel of cheese, this corridor would be able to comfortably house an extra two foursome tables. Thus, a serious argument had to be made in favor of building the cave in the first place, for which Arjun and the TOCA Restaurant Manager, Peter Muir, offered several.

Foremost is the abovementioned sense of place.

Observable from every table, the cave helps make each meal exceedingly memorable through its additive dose of visual stimulation.

Moreover, the tours on hand, along with the sight of sous-chefs hustling back and forth as they prepare cheeses for use in dishes and formal presentations all help to bridge the topic of consumer education. That is, while your top priority at a restaurant is to deliver a satisfying meal with great service, your guests, particularly at the luxury end, crave something extra. Befitting the self-actualization zenith of the Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs pyramid, they are looking to enrich their livelihoods and their appreciation of the many fascinating intricacies of our vast planet.

Some people accomplish this by traversing the many hidden destinations untouched by the blight of urbanization; others achieve it by exploring those same megacities in search of niche subcultures and amazing slices of life. TOCA does this by making all its patrons that much more in love with cheese, thereby heightening the overall dining experience beyond what only food can do.

### **Cheese Is The New 'Wine'**

Restaurateurs the world over take great care in crafting a superb wine list, not only because the markups on alcohol are enough to make their businesses solvent, but also because they know that the right wine can boost meal satisfaction. Following the tour of the cheese cave, I sat down with Arjun and Peter for a salivating tasting prepared by the TOCA's in-house sommelier, Lorie O'Sullivan, which perfectly demonstrates why cheese is a forgotten frontier in the wine profiteering equation.

To partially reiterate the point made about heightening the meal experience through education, it's one thing to be presented a platter of four cheeses and four corresponding wines then left to nibble as you see fit. It's a whole other stratosphere to be guided through these pairings one-by-one with a brief

explanation including tasting notes, place of origin and any unique elements for each. For those yearning for details, a well-oaked Chardonnay and a salty Falanghina followed by an Amarone then a private-import Barbaresco were matched with the 'Best Cheese in the World' winning Lankaster, an unpasteurized Asiago, then the aptly wine-washed Ubrico al Amarone and finally a Testun di Barolo, with the first and the last ones aged in-house.

Two observations are worth noting from these pairings. First, the cheeses as well as the wines are expressive of TOCA's Italophilic theme, further reinforcing the restaurant's narrative. Next, both are also representative of the local region. Toronto is blessed by being situated within a few hours' drive of a few niche viticulture regions as well as several burgeoning artisan cheese communities that, dare I say, are now producing with a craftsmanship that rivals even the best of Europe.

In other words, offering a selection of cheeses as an appetizer or dessert is just the start. If you really want to succeed with this culinary feature, you have to commit to it by emphasizing your local region as well as any other motifs that your restaurant already circumscribes. To further embellish TOCA's 'all in' dedication to its cheeses, the current dessert menu lists 20 different cheeses sorted by milk type (sheep, goat or cow) with only five traditional dolce. By emphasizing cheeses in this regard, the Ritz-Carlton is further differentiating itself from other fine dining establishments and well on its way to, as Peter described it, "Achieving a perfect cheque at every table" – that is, customers who order appetizers, mains, alcoholic beverages as well as desserts, thereby maximizing revenue per turn.

### **Takeaways For Every Hotelier**

While I doubt your already-built restaurant has room or renovation budget for a dedicated cheese cave, the key lessons for you here are twofold:

For one, customers eat with their eyes. In order to become truly memorable and lever your eatery towards synergistically building the property's reputation, you have to offer more than just the food on the plate. This is known as 'experiential dining'. Think of it as live entertainment, or dinner theatre minus the kitsch. While TOCA's cave à fromage is near impossible to duplicate, your restaurant's interpretation of this may be in the form of servers torching a crème brûlée tableside (cooking anything in front of the guests, really), a roving cart for special promotions, excellently curated music that is congruent with the outlet's given theme or even a jazz pianist tickling the ivory all night long. The point is to get creative and give something extra beyond the cuisine itself.

Second is that sophisticated customers also eat with their brains. They aren't eating with you, and they certainly aren't zealously returning to you time and time again, for the same-old fare they can get anywhere else. Your guests want to be wowed, to be surprised and to be engaged on all five senses as well as get a slice (pun intended) of new knowledge in the process. Many prestigious restaurants offer cellar tours for patrons while brewpubs will let you explore their adjacent processing facilities prior to ordering. Use the facilities at your disposal, but also know that this tutorial approach relies entirely on your staff and how well they are able to pay these insights forward to customers. Hence, a good starting point for any guest education endeavor is to train your team accordingly.

And for those of you who have the opportunity to visit Toronto in the near future, be sure to make a reservation at TOCA and witness the cheese cave for yourself.

(Articles by Larry Mogelonsky, published in [Hotel News Now](#) on January 31, 2017)