

COVER STORY
 FOCUS ON
Culinary
 TRAVEL

Theme parks that make fiction edible; minibars that reflect a hotel's ethos; cruise cooking classes that challenge and enrich. Our editors explore gastronomic immersion.
 BY THE TRAVEL WEEKLY STAFF

12

NEWS

4 Back to work

With the California contractor victory now behind it, ASTA is gearing up to take on similar proposals in other states

6 Cruise capital

Miami will no doubt bolster its maritime standing as six lines plan new or renovated terminals in the city by 2023

VOICES

8 Arnie Weissmann:
From the Window Seat

How safe is it to visit Hong Kong?

31 Mark Pestronk: Legal Briefs

Ideally, put a corporate contract in your agency's name

31 Robert Silk: Wheels Up

In a sign of maturity, domestic ultralow-cost carriers have expanded their marketing beyond pricing



DESTINATIONS

24

Adventure Travel

24 Spotlight on Slovenia

Hiking, biking and rafting on an Intrepid tour

26 Gearing up

Navigating the Judean Desert with Sababike

TRAVEL WEEKLY is published once a week by Northstar Travel Media, LLC, 100 Lighting Way, Secaucus, NJ 07094-3681 U.S.A. ISSN #0041-2082. USPS #637 780. Canadian GST #123397457. Canadian Post Agreement #41021023. Vol. 78, Number 39. Periodicals postage paid at Newark, NJ, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address corrections to Travel Weekly, P.O. Box 2007 Skokie, IL 60076-2007. Publications Mail Agreement No. 40685520. For all circulation inquiries, including new subscriptions, renewals, cancellations, changes of address, missed deliveries, contact customer service by mail at Travel Weekly, P.O. Box 2007, Skokie, IL 60076-2007; by phone at (800) 231-3776; fax (847) 291-4816; e-mail: travelweekly@omedia.com; or website: www.travelweekly.com/subscribe. A one year (52 issues) paid subscription is available at the following rates: Print Version (U.S. \$149; Canada/Caribbean/Mexico: \$189; Foreign Air: \$229) Digital Edition \$75. The prices do not include tax for some U.S. states. Rates for single copies and special issues are available. Materials in this publication may not be reproduced in any form without permission. Travel Weekly® is a registered trademark. Copyright © Northstar Travel Media, LLC. Printed in the U.S.A. — IPM121464

ON THE RECORD
 Scott Gerber
 Gerber Group

Known for a high-end and high-style approach to dining and nightlife, Gerber Group is the mastermind behind buzzed-about hotel venues like Mr. Purple at the Hotel Indigo Lower East Side in New York and the 12 Stories Bar at the InterContinental Hotel in Washington. It recently unveiled three outlets at the TWA Hotel at New York JFK. As part of our biannual Focus on Culinary Travel issue, senior editor Christina Jelski talked with Gerber Group CEO Scott Gerber about what's next on the food and beverage horizon.

Q: It seems that a major part of your success in the hospitality space has hinged on creating food and beverage venues that are not just for hotel guests but also cater to locals. Why has this become such a key part of your secret sauce?

A: Our business premise is that we want to create bars that are going to be a great amenity to the hotel. So when you're looking to stay in a hotel in D.C., we want you to choose the InterCon because of 12 Stories. And what do I mean by that? Basically, we understand that when you're visiting D.C., you want to mix with some local people. So we build our business around the locals and typically like to see around 60% of our business be local.

Another part of our secret sauce is that we don't charge "hotel pricing." For instance, if you come to our place and have a hamburger, I'm not going to say it's not going to be somewhat expensive, but at the same time, we don't jack up the price to the point where you'd only pay that if you're staying at that hotel. Whatever the street pricing is, that's what we have. So if you're a local, you're going to come to our place just like you would any other place, because the pricing makes sense.

Q: How is the bar and restaurant industry evolving, and what are some of the challenges it is facing?

A: One of our biggest concerns is the fact that wages are going up every year. And at a certain point, you really can't pass along

those wages in the form of higher prices. At some point people are going to say, "I'm not spending \$15 on a beer." But what's the alternative? The alternative to that is that you hire fewer people. But that's an unfortunate result. I've heard about people using robots to make drinks, but we're not going anywhere near that.

Another thing that we're keeping an eye on is the legalization of weed. As legalization spreads, how many people are going to be getting high before they go to a bar? And then, instead of having three or four drinks, will they just order one drink and sip it because they're already high? On the other side of the coin, will I be selling more food instead? Nobody really has an idea yet of how this is going to impact our business.

Q: How does Gerber Group keep up with cocktail trends and an ever-evolving consumer palate?

A: I think specialty cocktails have always been interesting. But I don't want to be in the business where it takes my bartender 15 minutes to make you a cocktail. And if you like to drink tequila and the bartender feels like a certain cocktail should only be made with gin or something, well, we're not into that. I want to give you what you want. We've always used fresh ingredients, and we're always going to do that. I think the only thing that we adapt around is the fact that there are certain spirits that people may gravitate toward a little bit.

So, for instance, a lot of people are really into mezcals these days, so obviously, we make sure we have cocktails with mezcals.

But honestly, we're not into trendy things. We want to be aware of trends, but our business model is based upon having bars that can be around for 10, 15, 20 years. At the end of the day, I can't make my Heineken taste different than anyone else's, but what I can do is make sure that when you're drinking that Heineken, you're having a great experience and that you remember it.



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