

Greening the Menu

For Wyndham Hotels, a local, organic and sustainable beverage program is a priority coded into the chain's corporate DNA.



● The Wyndham's organic cocktail program features such drinks as Summer Friends Forever (front), Autumn Moon (center) and the Gin Ginger Sage (in the back).

Organic products have been trickling into the mainstream since the late twentieth century. Now, with rising awareness of personal and public responsibility to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, some members of the hospitality industry are jumping into the deep end and swimming along with the green movement. One ready example is Wyndham Hotels and Resorts, where vice president of food and beverage Fernando Salazar has just completed a revision of the core beverage list for all eighty-five North American properties to include a substantial percentages of wine, spirits and beer that are certified organic, biodynamic or produced using sustainable practices.

At each property, the food and beverage director can make selections from a wine core list that varies from 17 to 30 options depending on tier, and the list is augmented regionally as appropriate with local products. Also, the hotel's marketing program is flexible and features local promotions such as "Beer and Burgers," many of which are still currently under development. Some of the promotions, which will be initiated this year, will be entirely organic, according to Salazar. The roll-out began in October, 2009, with a push for compliance this January.

"We think it has greatest appeal to 25- to 40-year-olds, but that other demographics will like it, too," notes Salazar. WineQuest has customized online staff training and geared it to teaching Wyndham staff about their core lists and how to increase sales through use of tools such as the progressive wine list, which orders wines from light and sweet to dry and robust, customer base and organic message.

Almost all bottles in the hotel's core list wholesale at approximately \$10. The average national cost to the hotels is \$12 or less per bottle for everything except the sparkling wine.

To select the core list, Salazar led a blind tasting of trained and untrained palates at company headquarters in New Jersey earlier this fall. Among the 107 wines tasted, the top



● Fernando Salazar enjoys a Gin Ginger Sage (top) near a lineup of the Naranja, Summer Fields Forever, Organic Mojito and Autumn Moon drinks. Rebecca Applebaum (bottom), the mixologist at the property's Times Square location, is shaking up the hotel's drinks program.

two sparkling wines, both from California, were Scharffenberger, a sustainable farming producer, and Domaine Carneros Vintage Brut, made from 100 percent organic grapes. Natura, the organic label from Emiliana in Chile, placed impressively well, says Salazar, with both their Casablanca Valley Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc among the top white wines. In red categories, Emiliana's organic Novas, a blend of cabernet sauvignon and merlot, received a top score. And the Benziger Family Winery Merlot, produced under their sustainable grape growing program, was rated number one among 13 merlots.

Wyndham already had a head start introducing guests to organic wines, placing Natura wines in their ByRequest frequent traveler program.

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Guests who have program membership, which is free, can request customized amenities and services, including, for example, having a chilled bottle of Natura Sauvignon Blanc waiting in their room with a snack. "Guests have commented on the fact that it is an improved wine experience. They love that it is organic," he adds. A 375-ml. bottle of Natura is a complimentary part of the ByRequest program.

On the spirits side, Salazar always was concerned with organic cocktail quality, and has worked with Kim Haasarud's Marina del Rey, California-based Liquid Architecture, to develop cocktail lists and unique ingredients such as juices and mixers for the hotel's cocktail recipes. He also has linked up with Melkon Khosrovian, co-founder of TRU Organic Spirits, an environmentally conscious company dedicated to carbon-negative production.

"The taste quality is there," he says, noting that in the past some organic products haven't passed the taste test. "Their vodka is priced in the premium category. And for every bottle

sold—that's eight cocktails—they will plant a tree." For the overall program, three to four of the eight to 10 mandated cocktails at each property will be organic.

At the new Wyndham Garden Hotel-Times Square South, a small sign, headlined "Drink It. Plant It." twirls on the softly lit uncluttered bar. It lists five TRU vodka or gin drinks and explains, compellingly, that one tree can remove 1,700 pounds of CO₂ from the atmosphere, making enough oxygen for 500 people to breathe annually.

Rebecca Applebaum, the bar's mixologist, sums it up this way: "As long as it tastes good, it's easy to turn people on to organic." And her drinks do taste good, fresh and refreshing—ginger and sage mingle with organic lime juice and TRU organic gin in the Ginger Sage, a delicious sipper paired with the simple tapas-style menu. Organic cocktails were rolled out at the Times Square location in November, 2008, and they are great sellers, says Salazar.

"Bartenders are the first customer contact. They are the best source of information," Salazar remarks, noting that Applebaum already has a strong neighborhood following.

Salazar feels confident that organics will continue to play a big part in Wyndham's future. "A program has a beginning and an end, he says. "But [going] green has to be a philosophy, a way of life, not a program." He notes that sustainability is a "must have" in his organization. The hotel's parent company, Wyndham Worldwide, was ranked among the top 100 greenest companies, he explains, and notes that it is part of every hotel's goal to come up with more green initiatives and implement all those that are mandated company-wide.

"Wyndham has had a vice president for sustainability for about three years. And each property has a green council [represented by a cross-section of employees]," says Salazar. "What we are doing comes from the chairman down. So this [organic beverage program] is part of an overall push for green initiatives." ●

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