Higher-End Bars, Lounges Can Offer Pizzazz, Profitability

Tony Aabo-Gamin likes to schedule his many flights each year with a layover at Chicago O'Hare International (ORD) so he can visit airport restauranteur Tortas Frontera. If on the West Coast, he shoots for San Francisco International (SFO), where he typically heads for Buena Vista Cafe.

"It's not the food that's driving Aabo-Gamin's decisions, it's the cocktails," says Aabo-Gamin, an educator, author and owner of The Modern Mixologist consulting firm.

"Rick Bayless' place [TORTAS Frontera] has become a destination for me," he says. "I go there for a great, fresh margarita every time I'm in Chicago, and I always have two unless I'm on a really tight time schedule." At Buena Vista Cafe, he drinks Irish Coffee - "usually two or three, depending on my layover."

Aabo-Gamin is probably not the typical cocktail consumer. After all, he makes his living advising restaurants, bars and clubs about cocktails. But he does point to a growing interest in the bar side of the business, cocktails in particular, amid a cocktail renaissance among consumers.

Many U.S. food and beverage concessionaires are taking notice.

"The palate of the traveler has changed," notes Oscar Hernandez, vice president of operations for Areas USA. "We've seen the evolution in airports with food, where it used to be the cookie-cutter mentality with quick-serve food, but now we have chef-driven concepts in airports nationwide. We're starting to see the same approach in bars."

"The more savvy traveler, those who understand the intricacies in exploring drinks, have that option now, which is obviously something that was not done in the past in our industry," Hernandez says.

Richard Schneider, chief operating officer of Delaware North Companies Travel Hospitality Services, says craft and artisanal cocktails - along with higher-end bars that serve them - are beginning to make waves in airports.

"People are traveling up and they're drinking better," he says. Noting the rise of higher-end cocktail bars on the street, Schneider adds, "It's starting to make the progression in airports in bigger metropolitan areas, and I think we'll see it spread out into other airports, as well."

Meeting Expectations

"I think this is a very big opportunity," Schneider adds. "If you look at the street, there are great cocktail cultures in almost every market."

Travelers long have been interested in cocktails, says Sean Auz, director of communication for OTG Management.

"We as an industry are just doing a better job in catering to it," he says.
Many OTG Management concepts, including Minibar at Minneapolis-St. Paul International and Apropos (below) at Toronto Pearson International feature a robust selection of specialty cocktails, along with wine and beer.

Below: Many OTG Management concepts, including Minibar at Minneapolis-St. Paul International and Apropos (below) at Toronto Pearson International feature a robust selection of specialty cocktails, along with wine and beer.

Above: Ice, an HMSHost Corp. concept at Chicago O’Hare International, offers a range of cocktails along with other drinks to appeal to discerning travelers.

Kent Vanden Over, director at AirProjects Inc., says the growing popularity of craft cocktails on the street, and the demographics of the audience for those cocktails, make the transition to more cocktail-centric offerings in airports likely.

"I think we've only just begun to see the creativity that concessionaires have with cocktail bar concepts," says Vanden Over. "I think over the next couple of years, we'll see more [higher-end bars with specialty cocktails], and they're going to be really innovative, really creative."

Along with taking cues from the street, U.S. concessionaires also have seen the benefits of a cocktail focus in airports abroad.

"The cocktail movement hit Europe first, in London with Milk & Honey, then it caught on in the States," says Doug Draper, senior director of adult beverage and bar development for HMSHost Corp. "We are just seeing the evolution of this in the airports, where now we are catching on."

Patrick Murray, executive vice president at SSP America, points to his parent company's Center Bar at Flughafen Zurich (ZRH), where travelers sit “like royalty and enjoy these great cocktails,” Murray says. ZRH attracts a very high-end clientele, making it easier to justify the heavy focus on premium cocktails.

Concessionaires who ignore the trend could be giving up a huge profit potential, adds Abou-Ganim.

"Anybody who isn't seriously looking at their cocktail offering and elevating it is missing a great opportunity," he says.

One Of Many

A bar that focuses exclusively or primarily on cocktails can be a tough sell in airports, regardless of the popularity of the drinks on the street.

"Believe me, it is hard for us to not create a really 'beverage geek' cocktail bar, as this is what our team loves," says Draper. "We are really focusing on creating full bar experiences, even in our wine bars. If there is a balanced offering, that will take away the veto card and increase our capture ratio."

A key problem is that airport bars generally need to be all things to all people because of the relative scarcity of space devoted to bars overall. A high-end cocktail bar might turn off a beer drinker, for example, and if there is no alternative, that translates into a lost sale.

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"It hasn't been the case in the past that we could just have a high-end cocktail bar and expect travelers to come," agrees Vanden Over. "It's really not any different than providing different types of retail. You're trying to match the offering to the tastes of the consumer."

Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County (DTW)'s McNamara Terminal redevelopment is one example. Hociej Branded Foods won the contract for a combination location, proposing a bar/lounge concept called Fountain Bar, coupled with an Espressamente Illy cafe. The venue is situated in the center of Concourse A, adjacent to the terminal's signature water feature.

Left: Tony Abou-Ganim, an educator, author and owner of The Modern Mixologist consulting firm, says airport bars that expand and improve their cocktail offering improve profitability significantly.

Above: Ice, an HMSHost Corp. concept at Chicago O’Hare International, offers a range of cocktails along with other drinks to appeal to discerning travelers.
DTW spokesman Brian Lassaline says that area of the terminal previously was underserved, currently housing a Starbucks but no bar/lounge area.

“Our team felt this was the perfect location an opportunity to incorporate an upscale contemporary lounge, with a well-recognized branded coffee concept that is able to serve to other key day-parts and needs,” Lassaline says.

He notes that the bar offering will include a selection of modern and classic cocktails.

Vanden Oever, who led the AirProjects team that consulted for the Wayne County Airport Authority, says the upscale bar “niche” was missing in the airport.

“It wasn’t because WCAA was so driven by the trend that it wanted this no matter what,” he says. “Instead, it was the proximity of the international gates and the availability of other bars throughout the terminal that made this concept a natural fit for the space.”

The proximity of a large casual-dining venue with a bar component, as well as other bars throughout the terminal, allowed Hojeij Branded Foods to capitalize on the niche cocktail customer.

“This was something that was going to raise the bar and add something different,” Vanden Oever says.

Troubleshooting The Logistics

The nature of craft cocktails also can be an issue in airports, where space is limited and timeliness is crucial.

Craft cocktails can be complex. They are typically made with fresh fruit, herbs and vegetables that are juiced or chopped fresh and sometimes muddled on the spot.

“A basic bar can be pretty self-sufficient with just the alcohol components, lemons, limes, olives, cherries and onions,” notes Vanden Oever. “But now people expect more.”

Some concessionaires are adding a broader selection of alcohol.

“We already had a premium spirits selection, but we have recently added a few more artisanal products to our national program,” Draper says.

For SSP America, “our base bar package has 82 liquors in it,” Murray says, noting that is typical for “street” bars but large in airport venues.

“We thought it was important to have some culinary credibility,” he says. “I think the industry overall is going that way, adding many more ingredients than we had in the past,” Murray adds.

Cocktails also can be labor-intensive. There are often three or four or more steps in “building” a cocktail. It’s not as simple as shooting juice out of a gun or pouring mixer from a bottle.

“There are a lot of great mixologists out there who are creating high-quality drinks with multiple steps, which would take too

Left: Areas USA’s Ford’s Filling Station at Los Angeles International focuses on using local and fresh ingredients. That policy extends to the bar with signature cocktails and other drinks.

Left and Above: The new Jay Z’s 40/40 Club at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International and Wolfgang Puck Express at Los Angeles International put heavy emphasis on the bars, including upscale cocktails. Both concepts are operated by Delaware North Companies Travel Hospitality Services.
long to make in a high-volume environment,” says Schneider, noting that cocktail menus in airport bars have to be modified “because with our customers, there is always a bit of a time crunch.”

The labor aspect is also an issue, but Hernandez notes, “If you embark on this type of mixology, you know that more labor comes with the territory.”

The key for airport bars, many agree, is to focus on a few drinks done really well. Abou-Ganim advises that airport bars choose just a few signature drinks for which they want to be known.

“You don’t need to offer 14 or 16 handcrafted drinks,” he says. “Pick four or five and do them really well.

“If you set yourself up to be successful, and if you are realistic, then you can execute in virtually the same timely fashion that it takes to push a button for mixers and juices coming off the gun,” Abou-Ganim continues. “It’s going to take a bit of work at first, but once you get it set, it becomes easy.”

That’s what Paradis is doing in select locations. Bill Casey, senior vice president of food and beverage, says the company is pairing a specialty cocktail with a food item on a quarterly or seasonal basis in its bars this year.

Delaware North is taking a local approach in some bars at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International (ATL) with signature drinks such as the Moonshine Martini, made with Grandaddy Mimms Moonshine, sour mix, orange juice and grenadine.

OTG, like some others, is taking a page straight from the mixology playbook. At John F. Kennedy International (JFK) Terminal 2, one signature drink is the Breakfast Manhattan, made with Cinnamon Toast Crunch-infused rye, Antica Formula sweet vermouth and bitters.

Although these types of drinks may require more time and space, there are certainly benefits.

“A mojito, for example, may take a bit longer because you are muddling fruit and mint, but you’re also getting a premium for it,” Casey says. “The longer it takes and the better the quality, the higher your prices.”

Hernandez agrees, noting that more labor comes with the craft cocktail territory.

“The [craft cocktail] segment is making our locations become destinations and offering a differentiator,” Hernandez notes. “That in turn is going to generate revenue for us, revenue that might not have been exploited in the past.”

We’d like to hear your opinion about this article. Please direct all correspondence to Carol Ward at carol@airportrenuewnews.com.