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# SPIRIT SPECIFICITY

InterContinental Hotels & Resorts' all-or-nothing bar gamble wins big.

BY TAD WILKES



## IT SHOULDN'T BE A SURPRISE.

The idea of a bar branded around one spirit category, at first blush, seems a bit of a risk. But why? It makes simple common sense. The concept of a “steakhouse” has existed for as long as, well, since perhaps before the Big Bang for all we know. Cavemen probably marketed the first steakhouse with etchings on a stone wall. And the time-tested concept hangs its hat, hopes, and dreams on steak. Red meat’s the main draw. It doesn’t mean there’s not also a grilled chicken breast or entrée salad on the menu for the person in the group who doesn’t have a taste for red meat.

Jean-Pierre Etcheberrigaray, VP of F&B at InterContinental Hotel Group (IHG), based in Atlanta, had a vision of the marketability of such focused category branding in the bar realm. An IHG veteran since 1989 and in his current position for 13 years, Etcheberrigaray imagined signature bars that would

be destination concepts, featuring a single spirit as the theme, unique to specific properties.

Etcheberrigaray started with Cognac at the InterContinental Buckhead Atlanta (XO Bar, later replaced by Southern Art & Bourbon Bar) and has since rolled out Scotch Bar in Washington, D.C., at the InterContinental Willard, grappa at the InterContinental San Francisco (Bar 888), calvados (French apple brandy) at the InterContinental New York Barclay in New York City (Barclay Bar), absinthe at the



InterContinental Montreal (Sarah B. Bar), tequila at the InterContinental Presidente Cancun (Tequila Collection Bar), rum at the InterContinental Boston (RumBa), and vodka at the InterContinental Toronto Yorkville (Proof), to name a few. Next spring, the InterContinental property in Cartagena, Colombia, will open a bar featuring aguardiente, a high-proof spirit popular in South America. The brand is also working on a yet-to-be-named beer-centric concept in Dubai and craft brew signature venues in other markets. The InterContinental brand's

duplicated wine concept (ENO) is actually a third-party concept and not one of Etcheberrigaray's ideas.

The concepts aren't one-dimensional gimmicks; the aim is to create a deep experience surrounding the

spirit and its backstory and history.

"The spirits are anchors and give each bar personality," Etcheberrigaray says. "So many bars are insignificant because they're just service

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At Bar 888 at the InterContinental San Francisco, "we have Italians coming from Italy to visit our grappa bar, which is amazing," says Jean-Pierre Etcheberrigaray, VP of F&B at InterContinental Hotel Group.

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bars to the public, not an experience. A bar should have soul, should have momentum, and should be the anchor of your hotel.”

His first test of the focused approach was at the InterContinental Buckhead Atlanta 13 years ago. “After doing a study of the guests and the market, we did XO Cognac bar,” Etcheberrigaray says. “People told me, ‘You’re crazy. Nobody’s going to drink Cognac. You can’t have a bar full of Cognac. It’s too expensive. It’s French; they’re not participating in the war.’ But Cognac went on fire. We’ve sold more at the InterContinental Buckhead Atlanta than across the United States. The idea

was to have a story, and when you have a story, you have to educate the staff, to educate the people. When you have a story that is authentic and genuine, people feel comfortable with that. There are thousands of bars in the world where there’s no soul, no spirit, no story.”

XO Cognac bar would later be reimaged and relaunched as a bourbon-focused spot, to tell a better story for the market. (See “Ongoing Storytelling,” page 49.)

### RUMBA-LING IN BOSTON

The InterContinental Hotels & Resorts brand starts with the story and crafts concepts to celebrate it. A perfect

example is RumBa at the InterContinental Boston Hotel. Initially, Etcheberrigaray says, he struggled in deciding what spirit to concept the bar around. But after investigating the city’s history, the answer became clear.

“Rum has such a rich history in the Boston area,” says Tony Mosca, executive assistant manager, F&B, at RumBa. “The [Boston history in the] rum trade, mixed with the Peabody Museum and the location of the hotel—everything all came together. From day one, the locals have been the largest portion of our market, about 60 percent. They’ve really jumped onto the concept and have been coming to us ever since.”

Without a doubt, Etcheberrigaray

IHG’s most profitable of the spirit-focused bars is RumBa in Boston. At any given property, the signature bar may account for between 35% and 55% of total F&B revenue.

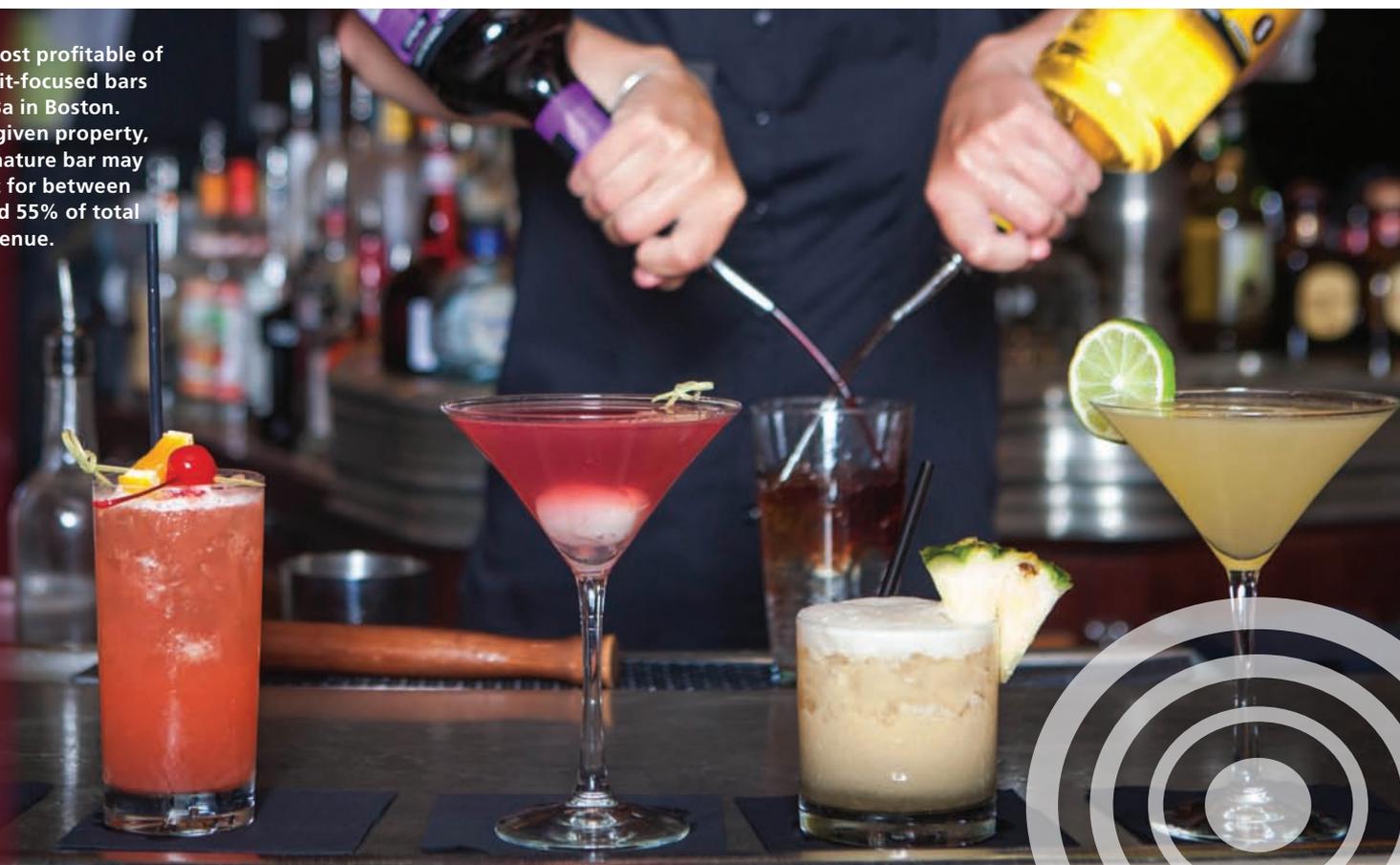


PHOTO BY NATE PHOTOGRAPHY

notes, the local crowd is the bread and butter of the spirit-concepted venues. He credits the signature, unique idea of the bar with attracting the townies away from other options and with giving the hotel an identity as being in the know and having an edge.

Being a category thought leader requires stocking the kinds of hard-to-find or newer-than-new labels that support that positioning. The IHG World Class Beverage Program exists to help hotels build beverage profits, in part by maintaining strong partnerships with distributors. Sometimes the program gets IHG the first bottles of a new rum or whatever the spirit may be for a location.

“The suppliers love the signature bars because it gives them a platform to enhance and expose their product, and the distributors love the excitement of it,” Etcheberrigaray says.

In creating the RumBa menu in 2006, Mosca says the goal was to have a good range of rums from across the world, “from all the major countries that make rum, so people could taste the variations in rum...to showcase the variety and understanding of rum and how it relates into the rum trade back to the 1700s.”

It’s a platform for conversation and consequent sales and tweaks. “With rum being so versatile...the team in the bar are fantastic at speaking with our guests and looking at the feedback they receive, creating cocktails seasonally,” Mosca says. “We make little changes based on their feedback, their likes, and what’s selling and not selling.”

He says sightseers [visiting, among other things, the Boston Tea Party Ships & Museum] will stop in for a drink at RumBa, hotel guests and

locals who appreciate the Boston-entrenched concept. “Locals are here every other day, having a drink and trying something new,” says Mosca.

And just as a steakhouse must offer a chicken filet, RumBa is mindful to

have something for everyone, even while telling its rum tales. “When we first started, it was basically all rum drinks on the menu,” Mosca says.

“It’s still primarily rum, but we offer

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RumBa's Boquerones use fresh Spanish anchovies and red pepper aioli on ciabatta toast.



Nantucket scallops and rum pair for a perfect Boston bundle at RumBa.



Barbados Fish Tacos at RumBa.

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some rye cocktails, gin cocktails, and everything else, just because that's what the market is—not just rum. We've listened to feedback from guests. As new products have come out and classic cocktails have become popular, we've put those on the menu as well."

Don't let the broadening of offerings fool you; the dedication to the rum core is going strong. "I was here when we got our one-hundredth rum; we had a big celebration," says Senior Bartender David Wills. "It's ever expanding and evolving."

## SPIRITED PLATES

RumBa is also a good example of IHG's approach to food menus in the spirit-specific portfolio. The RumBa menu, which has evolved over time from larger plates to smaller plates for sharing with cocktails, is rum-friendly.

"One of our most popular is the Barbados Fish Tacos, which match well with many of our rum drinks," Mosca says. Other pairable shareables include honey scallops. "We have items that match perfectly with rum, but then we also have items our guests are looking for, and we try to look at the local market. The scallops we use are local. We use a combination of items to connect with our guests."

Mosca tells of a recent rum dinner event, with various rums paired with food. "That was very well received in the market," he says. "It was interesting, like with wine and food, how rum and food engage."

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# LISTEN, LEARN, AND LIBATE

For newcomers to rum, RumBa Senior Bartender David Willis and his staff query them about flavor preferences. "Some people might be Cognac sippers, so I might get them into a sipping rum," Willis explains. "They might like a sweeter drink, and we have a variety. If they don't like a sweeter drink, we have more citrusy rum cocktails. We have first-time rum drinkers or people who are not that experienced with rum, but they want to try a rum cocktail even though rum might not be their first spirit."

Critical to the deep experience the signature bars purvey is staff training. There is no point in having a spirit story if the bartenders can't communicate it. InterContinental Hotel Group (IHG) uses beverage trainers from iMi Agency and has also created an IHG Beverage Academy.

"We've developed our own schooling, our own system, and our own certification at three levels," says IHG VP of F&B Jean-Pierre Etcheberrigaray. "Part of the training is online; the rest is hands on. In the end, they become a certified bartender for us, and the training also doubles as certification for the U.S. Bartenders' Guild (USBG). That brings another level to the customer. People are really engaged on both sides of the bar, and our bartenders feel like it's a noble profession—not just something you do just because you don't have a 'real' job. We have to change that culture in our industry." —TW

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Bar 888's Italian Mojito.



Grappa cocktails work at Bar 888, which has more than 200 labels of the brandy distilled from grape skins.

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## SIT A SPELL

The InterContinental Hotels & Resorts brand has no uniform vision for the seating capacity or configuration of each unique signature-spirit bar, but VP of F&B Jean-Pierre Etcheberrigaray says they've responded to increasing guest desire to sit at or near the bar itself—not necessarily at the counter but within the “bar ambience. We have more and more customers wanting to eat at the bar. The seating is changing as we move restaurant seating into bar seating.”

The vibe differs some from concept to concept. At RumBa in Boston, from 5 to 10 p.m., the traffic level is going gangbusters, Etcheberrigaray says. But at Proof in Toronto, the feel is more of a “library” atmosphere. “I guess rum is more of a devil spirit than vodka,” Etcheberrigaray jokes.

Tying into a market is about more than its history; in Boston, RumBa's waterfront location—in the upwardly trending Fort Point Channel area, with new restaurants, stores, and bars launching—makes the rum emphasis all the more compelling.

“The expansion we've made is very important because as the Fort Point Channel has become popular, people are drawn toward the water,” says Tony Mosca, executive assistant manager, F&B, at RumBa. “Now we've got floor-to-ceiling glass and a terrace that represents RumBa as well. It's really giving people that inside-outside feeling...[enabling] people to stay longer and feel connected to the waterfront.”

—TW



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## ONGOING STORYTELLING

After seven years of success with the XO Cognac bar in Atlanta, IHG wanted to re-concept into something that would better complement the hotel's Southern Art restaurant, led by Chef Art Smith.

Cognac just didn't have a Southern accent, but bourbon certainly does, and guests in the market seem to understand its story a little better. In fact, the Buckhead Business Association named Southern Art & Bourbon Bar the top business of 2012.

"The bourbon resurgence was just beginning and is now in full swing,"

says Southern Art Mixologist Clayton Livingston. "I think at the time it was a risky venture that no one was sure would work, and it has turned into a great program for both guests and locals."

Livingston and the team update the drink menu three to four times a year, driven by seasonality and availability of products. They offer drinks with other spirits, but the late summer/fall/early winter menu for 2013 featured bourbon in 17 of 22 cocktails.

Because of the differences in spirits, the signature bars keep to themselves and mostly have free reign creatively. "With only a handful of exceptions, I have been the sole creator of the drinks and have built on my early menu successes to bring a better cocktail list

each time," Livingston says. "We have been reusing about one-third of our menu on each new menu, with several big hits staying on the menu the whole time. Sales and reception of drinks have dictated what stays and what goes with each change."

All the signature bars have seen year-over-year revenue growth, Etcheberrigaray says, with RumBa being IHG's most profitable. At any given property, the signature bar may account for between 35% and 55% of total F&B revenue. "Remember, a lot of those people eat, so it's [food and beverage] combined," Etcheberrigaray notes. 🍷

Tad Wilkes is managing editor of *Hotel F&B*.

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