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Best Western Premier's high-scoring, customizable breakfast buffet has guests and owners cheering.

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Despite being the only hotel in the immediate area and having the advantage of a somewhat captive audience, Hotel Drisco pays strict attention to detail and quality in its continental breakfast, driving its guest reviews to the top of TripAdvisor's ratings.



CONTINENTAL

Divine



How Hotel Drisco's free breakfast sets the tone for a top TripAdvisor rating.

BY TAD WILKES

Getting to the top of guest accolades requires starting strong at the bottom of the day.

San Francisco's Hotel Drisco has ranked as the number-one hotel in the city on TripAdvisor for five years running, and considering that its continental breakfast is one of the only dining options at the property (along with room service; see the sidebar), the morning offering merits inspection in determining what the property is doing right. At a boutique hotel with limited room to prepare and stage much F&B, the situation is all the more intriguing.

"The breakfast underscores the fact that we are extremely detail-oriented," says Hotel Drisco GM John Spear. "It follows throughout—whether it's the wine reception, the room service menu, or the service people get at the front desk. We look at every last detail, and breakfast is part of that."

That detail and attention to quality and service is the simple reason, the Drisco team believes, the property soars above others in reviews—out of 230 hotels in San Francisco at press time, according to TripAdvisor.

"Breakfast gives an impression to the guest," says F&B Manager Amira Strain. "We do not have a lot of the amenities other big hotels, such as a spa and pool. We're a small, 48-room hotel in a beautiful neighborhood. We offer an excellent breakfast, and people talk about the breakfast in almost all their reviews."



■ More than a dozen different types of locally made bread and pastry items are part of the guest-impressing continental breakfast.



■ Recent upgrades have included the addition of healthier fare such as mini parfaits and smoothies.

UNDER-PROMISE, OVER-DELIVER

With the average daily room rate hovering around \$500, breakfast is “free” only in a purely academic sense. Hotel Drisco’s affluent clientele is mostly older, Spear says, and includes many couples and a number of families (the property has some two- and three-bedroom suites). The hotel’s figurative positioning is upscale, and its literal positioning is without nearby competition.

“We are not in the downtown core in the financial district in Union Square like many of our competitors,” Spear explains. “We’re in an upscale neighborhood called Pacific Heights, and we’re the only business establishment in the neighborhood. A quarter to a third of our guests have a connection to the neighborhood. Either they have children who live in the neighborhood or parents or grandparents, or one of our neighbors recommended they stay here.”

And yet the isolated status Hotel Drisco enjoys isn’t an excuse to serve lackluster breakfast. Spear says Hotel Drisco under-promises and over-delivers. This sandbagging sets guests up for a pleasant surprise.

“Depending on where you see our breakfast mentioned, we might describe it as a ‘continental’ breakfast or an ‘extended continental breakfast’ or a ‘European-inspired continental breakfast,’” says Spear. “It’s always continental; we don’t have scrambled eggs, quiche, hash browns, bacon, and sausage. But we have a huge variety of other things, including more than a dozen different types of locally made pastries and cheese, charcuterie, vegetables, oatmeal, and a dozen different spreads. We have lots of different cereals, and a local sheep’s milk yogurt, and a local granola made especially for us. But we still describe it as a ‘continental’ breakfast so that when people stay here for the first time, they’re positively overwhelmed and surprised at the extent of it.”

Strain adds that they’ve been

incorporating more healthy items, such as shots of fresh juice—carrot and celery—and organic protein shots. Other items include mini parfaits and smoothies and sliced avocado and tomato, and there's a station of fresh berries, including blueberries, raspberries, strawberries, and blackberries. Local bread includes gluten-free options. And in the last two months, smoked salmon has joined the spread.

"We thought we needed more protein," Strain says. "People like it a lot. They constantly ask me where I buy the salmon. It's not dry or chewy."

THE HUMAN ELEMENT

The dining room is one level below the front lobby. "Like many buildings in San Francisco, the hotel is built on a steep hill, so one end of the building is two stories higher than the other end," Spear says. "So, even though the dining room is one level down, we have beautiful windows that look out at the neighborhood. It's a very elegant space, and the buffet is set in a very tasteful way.

Spear is certain to make an appearance for around a half an hour each morning to greet guests. It's a great opportunity, he says, to assess the quality of their stay—not only their opinion of the breakfast but what they did the previous night, how they enjoyed the wine reception, how their interactions with the concierge have been, and whether they have any

The labor picture has changed over time as the breakfast has become more extensive. Besides Spear and Strain, the breakfast may require two or three people, depending on occupancy. One staffer works from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. to get everything ready, including taking two to two and a half hours to plate all the food and set it out.

"Then you've got three staff working

breakfast, but it's so important to our guests and such a huge part of the value proposition, that we would never consider cutting corners."

Spear says that even at full occupancy (48 rooms occupied with couples, so about 96 to 100 guests), because breakfast is spread out over three hours from 7 to 10, it never feels crowded.

"It's a very relaxed affair, unlike a large



■ The hotel bills the breakfast as "continental," but the variety and quality of items exceeds that expectation for guests, who are "positively overwhelmed," says GM John Spear.

It's such a huge part of the value proposition, that we would never consider cutting corners.

comments or suggestions. Strain is there too, along with friendly staff at the ready to make custom espressos, lattes, and cappuccinos for guests who take their plates to two- and four-tops or a large, round table for six to eight.

the breakfast from 7 to 10, then two or three people breaking it down, vacuuming, doing dishes, wiping everything down for another two to three hours," Spear says. "It's fairly labor-intensive for a complimentary

hotel's breakfast buffet or even a buffet in a concierge lounge in a five-star hotel. The items are laid out very tastefully and replenished quickly by Amira's very capable staff."

NET SUCCESS

Besides staying at the top of TripAdvisor in the city, Hotel Drisco has garnered a high Net Promoter Score, a metric that has been gaining attention and popularity not just in hospitality but across the business world.

Room to Grow

Room service upgrade with sous vide balances guest satisfaction with limited cooking facilities.

Glowing TripAdvisor guest reviews of the Hotel Drisco date back to around the time GM John Spear came to the property and implemented a new room service program. Previously, the Drisco had phoned it in, so to speak, with minimal effort to satiate its captive audience. Room service simply did not exist.

"About four or five years ago, we recognized that given our position in the neighborhood here—about seven blocks away from the nearest restaurant—one of my goals was to introduce room service," he says. "Before that, we were buying some prepared paninis from a local store and pressing them in a grill. They were not impressive at all. (F&B Manager Amira Strain) wasn't here then. If people got in late at night and were tired and cranky, the only thing we could offer them was a soggy panini or a Chinese takeout or pizza delivery menu. We knew we needed a room service menu."



The hotel partnered with a local company, Avenir Culinary Systems, which works with local chefs to design meal elements. "They are all about sous vide cooking," Spear explains. "They prepare gourmet elements."

Though the room service menu the hotel team created would include some paninis and salads they would make fresh themselves, they went sous vide for all of the main courses, vegetables, soups, and some desserts. "We have a wonderful fire-roasted tomato soup, a spicy corn chowder," Spear says. "We do chicken and beef, a vegetarian lentil shepherd's pie, and a variety of other things."

With this system in place, Hotel Drisco had to train all staff who work in or near the kitchen on how to prepare the food, 24 hours a day. "It was a big challenge," says Spear, "but we met it." —TW

"It started to appear on business people's radar about five or six years ago," Spear notes. "It is designed to be a measure of the quality of an experience a person has with a brand—whether it's a pair of Nike sneakers, an iPhone, or a stay at the Hotel Drisco. Our Net Promoter Scores have been absolutely astronomical."

According to NICE Satmetrix, co-creator of the Net Promoter Score, the NPS is calculated based on consumer response to one question, using a 0 to 10 scale: How likely is it that you would recommend the brand to a friend or colleague? Respondents are put into three groups: Promoters (score 9 or 10) are loyal enthusiasts who will keep buying and refer others, fueling growth; Passives (score 7 or 8) are satisfied but unenthusiastic customers who are vulnerable to competitive offerings; and Detractors (score 0 to 6) are unhappy customers who can damage the brand and impede growth through negative word-of-mouth.

"The only positive scores you can get on a scale of zero to 10 are 9 and 10," Spear says. "The Drisco has averaged greater than 9."

Food and beverage are certainly among the satisfaction drivers, the team believes. Another, Spear posits, which affects satisfaction of breakfast too, is the lack of hidden charges for F&B or anything else at Hotel Drisco; most everything is rolled into the ample room rate.

"That's a huge part of the experience," Spear says. "It's not only the details but that we include all the little details with the room. We're very concerned with providing value. Unlike other hotels, we have no extra charges. We will charge you a reasonable amount for a room service meal, but there's no charge for breakfast or the wine reception or our complimentary chauffeur service during the week to the financial district." ■

Tad Wilkes is editor at Hotel F&B.