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Industry Insiders: Rick Blatstein, Mile High Maître d'

By **Nadeska Alexis**

January 07, 2009



Rick Blatstein, CEO of OTG Management -- the masterminds behind Jet Blue's new Terminal 5 -- on bringing New York's top flight dining scene to the airport and his plans for expansion.

What are your favorite restaurants outside of the airport? I like **John Dory** a lot, it just opened in the city on Prince Street; it's a great place, the food is great, it's a great little hang, a lot of fun. I'm pretty much the type of person that goes whichever way the wind blows. I don't stay in one place, so wherever is new or interesting, I go there and hang out.

Is design a huge part of the success of T5? Design was a major part. We went to **ICrave**, who designed most of our restaurants and re:vive bars. They're a New York design firm that's just great -- the hair on the back of your neck stands up when you walk into their studios. Well, at least it did for me! They were really able to bring creativity and

vision that I've never seen before.

Where did you get your start? I started out owning restaurants and nightclubs in Philadelphia for many years. Then a friend I grew up with ended up taking over the Philadelphia airport and removing the master concessionaire, and they needed a transition company to come and operate it until they found tenants they liked. I was the only person he really knew in the business, so he offered it to me. I wasn't interested in it, so we went back and forth for a while, and then finally I said yes. But once I was in there, I realized that the airport is such a great place to have a business, so I put everything else for sale and just did that. As a matter of fact, our opening weekend was during the blizzard of 1996, and as our trucks were going through the blizzard, passing closed restaurants and nightclubs to bring supplies back to the airports so people could buy them, a little bell went off that said ... well, this is a great place, the weather does nothing but help, you don't have to advertise, it's the perfect place to do business.

How is working in airport hospitality different from working in clubs and restaurants? The airport is different because it is a very controlled area. Security is very tight, so bringing products in is very tight, and everything really has to have a specific purpose to go through the authorities. That was very different for us rather than operating on the street, where obviously security is not like that and we did what we wanted, pretty much when we wanted.

What was the vision behind the new dining complex in JetBlue's Terminal 5? The first thing was to clean the blackboard and say that we don't care what's been done in airports—that really doesn't matter.

What are the types of restaurants and foods that people in New York will enjoy? The name of our location might be Terminal 5, but that's no different than Spring Street. So let's treat our customers as best as we possibly can and really capture the fabric of New York and the restaurant and dining scene that's so vibrant in New York. It's really a shame because the New York dining scene is really the capital of the world; there's none better, and we felt that there was no reason why we couldn't capture that in Terminal 5.

What would be your next target city to duplicate this project? We're going to see what becomes available, but I really see almost any city as the next perfect city. Even some of the small cities have great dining scenes that we can elevate into the airport. So while Jetblue's Terminal 5 at JFK was—I really believe—the greatest place to start this brand new concept, I believe it can go into many different cities.

What positive trends do you see in the airport hospitality business? The positive trend I see is that companies like ours are being very much welcomed around the country. The airline and airport operators are very open-minded now towards creativity, and I really see the future very brightly in that direction. I think hospitality is delivering a true dining experience as New Yorkers and other people are used to. That's becoming more and more important—you can't fake it. It either has to be real or not.

Who do you admire in the hospitality industry, and why? The people who make it happen. Anywhere from the dishwashers, who are creating a clear canvas for the chefs, to servers who are bringing it to you and talking to you about our menu, the bartenders mixing your delicious drinks, the owners of restaurants, the chefs, the creativity. I admire the people who make it happen—that's my inspiration everyday.

What puts OTG Management on top of the airport hospitality game? We feel like we're a boutique firm. There are a lot of large competitors out there that do a lot of franchises ... they franchise chef's names, etc., and we really believe at OTG that we create more of a unique experience than they do.

Any plans for expansion? We're in nine airports now, and at this point we're only in the US, but we do expect to expand at some point overseas.

What is one thing people may not know about you? I love American Quarter Horses.

What are you doing tonight? I'm packing for a trip with my family.