

### MARKET ROUNDUP DESIGN

## Alfresco and panoramic venues



Glamorous clubbers gather in the open air, nibbling from eclectic menus while swaying to the beat – it's getting hot and the party is about to begin - KARIM ASMAR

**R**ooftops and terraces are all the craze. Every gateway city around the world has a must see open air bar located on a roof top with stunning panoramic view. Every year, clients wait with eagerness and watch with insatiable appetites for the opening of new venues. From the fashionable **SkyBar** in Beirut, to **Nu Bar** in Istanbul, and **Sho Chos** in Dubai, open spaces are here to stay.

From breakfast to dinner, open air outlets attract customers all day round. But more recently such outlets have become a key concept of the club scene. Operators are invading roof tops, beach shores and pool decks to convert them into open air night clubs. Highly exclusive, festive, trendy, and eclectic, clubbing alfresco has become a significant demand. Skybar in Beirut hosted more than 3,000 guests a night last summer, the **Dragon-i** in Hong-Kong is entering its fifth operational year, and **Scirocco** in Bangkok is the city's ultimate venue.

#### Is this a new trend?

Open space outlets, or alfresco as they're called today, have been around for a long time. Terraces, whether on roof tops, by the beach or in gardens have always been synonymous with summer, sun, and fun. Such outlets have become a key concept of the sophisticated night leisure and clubbing scene. Destinations such as Ibiza are icons of alfresco clubbing and the Middle East has caught the fever.

In the last 5 years there has been increased dynamism and an intense innovation on the Lebanese and regional market. In Lebanon the first and prince of rooftop outlets was **Sydneys** on top of InterContinental Le Vendome, but the need to compete and differentiate created Skybar on top of the Palm Beach hotel.



In the summer of 2003 Skybar opened in Beirut, triggering a new trend in the country. This trend brought on the scene outlets such as **Asia** above the Buddha Bar, **White** on the roof of the An Nahar Building, **Virgin Cafe** on the top of Virgin Megastore and **Bubbles** on the roof of the Palm Beach (once the Skybar relocated above the Pavillion Royal at BIEL).

In Dubai on the other hand, Sho Chos ruled as the unique alfresco venue before it was joined by a platoon of outlets such as **360°**.

Driven by the customer's insatiable appetite for novelty, developers in the region have launched a spiral of innovation challenges, upgrading year after year. While the regional demand is still increasing and the response is becoming more and more innovated season after season, this is not seen as a new trend from an international perspective.



#### Are such outlets viable?

Real estate in the region is booming and opportunities are there to be seized. Yet, suitable venues remain scarce. Indeed, attractive venues are located in high end areas. It is therefore not a surprise that F&B developers driven by marketing and economic constraint to position their outlets in the high end.

Indeed, both the scarcity of venues, the inherent real estate cost, the seasonality of the operation and the related cost of opportunity force the hand of the operators.

These outlets do however attract a high number of persons, and reaching thousands of customers per week at an average check exceeding US\$30 during the week and US\$40 on the week ends, the business can be highly lucrative. The survival of the outlets year after year and season after season is the proof.

#### What does it take to create a successful alfresco outlet?

Unquestionable, finding the right spot is a key issue. To that effect hotels may have an advantage since the building is naturally dedicated for tourism and leisure activity, and the infrastructure is there to support the operation of the outlet.

Nevertheless, as for any high end product, the key issue is creating the right brand aura. Indeed customer perception is key and the association of brands is essential. The Skybar in Beirut initiated the fireworks tradi-

tion while other outlets have used laser beams and lighting effects. Whatever the method, the customer should always have fun.

Trendy is another key word. Being on a roof top, watching the stars with a breathless view of the city is not sufficient. The outlets have to enrich and elevate customer perception. Design, staff behavior, uniforms, silverware, and glassware are essential components packaging.

Communication is also essential. A successful outlet has fame beyond the borders. There are several paths of communication and the most important remains the word of mouth. The combination of word of mouth with digital communication can be devastating. A quick search on "you-tube" will yield a sample on each outlet, with a highlight on the atmosphere. Dragon-i in Hong Kong developed its website, and provides a taster of what's to be expected.

Open air outlets have huge potential and the market is highly competitive, yet in the region of 1001 nights there is always room for surprise. So far the Arabian theme remains under exploited - will the next icon be an Arabian nights or the suspended gardens of Babylon?

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