

HOTELIER OF THE YEAR

One of the Philippines' best hoteliers, Merrill Yu, was recognized in last year's *Mabuhay Awards*, garnering its highest honor, the *Mabuhay Gold - Hotelier of the Year*. The author gives a glimpse into this man with excerpts from his forthcoming book *Hospitality Superstars* to be released June this year.

Merril Yu is CEO of **Y&S 1874** and **Managing Director GHM Hotels Philippines**, both companies independent of each other and serving the hospitality industry. Below are his thoughts on his experience and how it has helped shape his stellar career.

FIRST CAREER THOUGHTS

There were only two professions I wanted when I was young—an ambassador and a hotelier. I was fortunate to travel with my father and my family as I was growing up. This exposed me to all sorts of hotels in many countries. Hotels impressed me as a fun and nice place to be.

This drove me so much so that during my senior year in college, I attended a future-self themed party dressed in a tuxedo, while others came as doctors, lawyers and the usual professions.

ON THE FOUR SEASONS, HIS BEST MENTOR

I worked with **Four Seasons** in San Francisco, USA; New Zealand; and Jakarta, Indonesia. Many of those who worked with me in these Four Seasons hotels have all moved up the ladder of success. I had six of my team in New Zealand who are now well placed. My banquet manager is now GM of Shangri-La in Kuala Lumpur; his number two is now VP for F&B of Ritz-Carlton; the F&B Manager is

Managing Director of Ritz-Carlton Indonesia; the housekeeper is now GM of Four Seasons Lankawi; the Assistant Banquet Manager is now GM of Four Seasons Maldives; and the Front Office Manager is now GM of Four Seasons Regent in Singapore. They were my “kids” in 1993.

The career paths with Four Seasons can bring anyone around the globe, not solely in North America. There is a clear “Four Seasons stamp” in the staff wherever they are. The best hotel in Paris is not French. The best hotel is a Four Seasons hotel.

At the Four Seasons, we focus so much on gaining respect from our staff because that is a core value of Four Seasons or what we call the 3P's—people first, product second, then profit. Hire the best suited for you, who love doing what they're doing. You train them to not make them all the same, but to understand what the minimum requirement is, so that they can perform their maximum. When you get this kind of people that are well-led, supported, loved, trained and encouraged, they give you a product that is more consistent, more refreshed that people would pay more money for as soon as when it hits the market. At the end of the day, that's how you make money.

ON HIS FIRST STINT AS GENERAL MANAGER

It was at the **Hotel Equatorial Shanghai** that I became GM.

The hotel had 650 rooms, and the building also had an office tower—that's why the hotel made so much money. We had grade A clients and tenants, such that we were able to pay off everything in six years time. We had the **Chilean Embassy**, the **Italian Trade Consulate**, **Singapore Telecom**, and all class A companies.

ON CHINA'S BIGGEST HOTEL, THE XIANG LU HOTEL

We did it from scratch; we brought the team over. Agnes, my wife, eventually took over as head of marketing and sales. We opened the Xiang Lu Hotel after 18 months in September 2006, and I must say that in the three years we were with the owners, they gave us everything we needed after realizing that we were honest and trustworthy. The owners were Taiwanese and owned the largest petrochemical plant in China. They also used to own the Regent in Taipei, so they knew hotels.

I remember during the first few months of operations during board meetings, they would say that we were losing money. I would say, however, that at least we were losing less money. Of course, his lectures were only for show. But he said, “by the end of December,” and that meeting was in September, “this hotel will show positive GOP profit.” That was only 189 days after opening. I told Agnes about it and she completely freaked out. But we did it—positive GOP by the end of December.



PHOTO BY KEITH DADOR



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