

Cocktails, Complications and Coastal Cuisine: In Good Company's The Wilson

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Anniversary, birthday dinner, date night, don't-want-to-cook night, or just a night out. These are the reasons people find themselves at a restaurant. When seated at a table, water is placed or poured by a host or busser, and eventually the server arrives. You order cocktails, a cold soda or wine. You then scan the menu, whatever options you may have for the night from appetizers to entrees, finger foods to fork-and-knife. The server will check in. You ask for an appetizer, and by the time that arrives, you know what you want for the main course. Depending on the restaurant, food comes out in a timely manner, and the server will come to check on you a few times before starting to push dessert. Whether you have room for dessert or not, the check will eventually come. You pay. You leave.

Aside from the details of the night, which depend on the occasion, this is all a diner will experience while attending a restaurant. To get you to the experience you had, the restaurant had to be constructed or renovated, and an idea had to surface of what it would be. Color pallets, furniture design and layout, its name, menu and drink planning make up the skeleton of the restaurant. Staff must be hired. The menu must be tested. Several practice services have to be run in order to ensure a smooth opening.

Once it is open, it must be maintained. Permits have to stay up to date and inspections must be passed; plumbing has to be moving and lights must remain on, and customers have to keep coming. There is no coincidence in the restaurant's location, the train station that happens to be a block away, or even the customer that walks through the door. It is all part of the strategy of the owners of the establishment, who had a plan in mind the minute they signed the property lease for the building the restaurant is in.

And they'll want to keep you coming back. Maybe that Moscow mule you favored will be suggested to you next time you arrive— frosty copper mug, crushed ice, and the froth of

ginger beer dissipating on top. Or, come often enough on a date night with your significant other, the probability rises that you may be treated to complimentary desert to cap off your meal. Offers like these are difficult to come across at any restaurant. But to experience them, and what is a higher level of competitiveness in the restaurant industry, you would stop at an In Good Company Hospitality venue.

On West 27th Street in the NoMAD district in Manhattan is a restaurant on the ground level floor of an InSide Hotel. In the warmer months, if a diner is coming in from Seventh Avenue, they'll come across an open patio on one side of the hotel where people are sitting at tables, and just at the end of the patio, where the entrance to the hotel's lobby is, they'll see a tall black panel with the words "cocktails & food" glowing in white at the top. Sideways, and spanning most of the length of the sign, glow in larger font size, "The Wilson."

The Wilson opened at the beginning of October 2018 under In Good Company, a hospitality group in New York City with restaurants in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens. After In Good Company Hospitality was founded in 2005 by Dan and Terrence Turbidy and Jeff Brosi, the company went on to open 11 venues, one of which is The Wilson.

Location is Number One

The restaurant business is a tactical one. Food is what first comes to mind when someone pictures a restaurant, but making selling meals a viable business takes knowing demographics, using marketing strategies, building a story and image, and rolling with the punches when a right-hook is coming your way.

When In Good Company was approached to open a restaurant at Ininside, they had to understand the location before coming to terms with the hotel and making an idea for a restaurant into a plan. From location stems several variables that can affect a restaurant and its service.

“Demographics matter,” said Dominick D’Aleo, assistant director of operations at In Good Company. “We do a really great job of after-work drinks. So are there a lot of companies and businesses there? Are we going to be able to capture those people? We’re right near Penn station, right near Madison Square Garden—those are all big points in our area.”

When recognizing the big points around The Wilson, IGC in turn had to recognize what can connect those big points to the restaurant. Madison Square Garden, for example, is less than a 10-minute walk from The Wilson, which means it is in prime location for those who have just left a game or concert at an arena that can hold upward of 20,000 people.

By looking at transportation and customers, the questions arise: Is the restaurant accessible to the customer— from their office, home, or landmarks in the city? What means of transportation makes it accessible? Does the restaurant do anything to attract an areas main population?

The R, W and 1 trains all stop within a one-block radius of The Wilson, and foot traffic is high. The New York City Bi-Annual Pedestrian Count reported 24,343 pedestrians that walked by Madison Square Garden in the evening of May 2017, and 23,193 in September of the same year, at the same location. When In Good Company began thinking about a restaurant at Ininside, they took careful note of the foot traffic outside of the hotel, stationing someone outside with a clicker to count just how many people actually passed by. While individual New York City blocks are big, The Wilson’s location provides it with plenty of opportunities to seat customers.

“We literally stood outside of the hotel restaurant for a few weeks and just watched the amount of bodies that walked by,” said D’Aleo. After deciding the location would be a good fit for a new venue, D’Aleo and other IGC team members decided what type of restaurant it would be, what competitors were in the area, what would work (like after-work drinks). “You don’t want to be a destination spot. You want to be able to be around other restaurants and bars to bring people to the area, and do what you do well and translate that to customers,” he said.

Not only does D’Aleo like to coexist close to other establishments, but the IGC team as a whole is big on having their restaurants within a close diameter of each other. If one is booked for the night, for example, the reservation system they use can direct customers down the block.

“It’s easier if a restaurateur has a whole group of restaurants,” said Florence Fabricant, a food critic and columnist for The New York Times. “It’s easier for them to open another one, because if there’s a delay, at least they have a cushion. They have income coming from other restaurants, from catering, from all kinds of situations.”

Weather can also be a variable that restaurants must account for when choosing location. The National Restaurant Association reports “more than 90 percent of restaurant operators indicate that changes in local weather conditions affect their sales and customer counts.” Venues located in areas with heavy rain may have to account the likelihood of customers walking by will be fewer than those driving; warmer months could mean customers may be outside grilling, for example, rather than going to eat somewhere inside. The Wilson is easily adaptable to weather, featuring a front terrace that easily covers and is heated when closed; with local transportation being a major factor in New York City, there isn’t much of an issue with a lack of customers with chillier conditions, and without a lot of outdoor property for sale, it’s either eat out or eat in, with hardly any room for outdoor grilling.

Where There's a Will, There's a Way

At the front of their drink menu, which is constructed of stained paper to accommodate some of the nautical themes of the restaurant, is a story about a bulldog. Wilson the bulldog catches and releases fish by a dock, as his owner Ryan Quinn watches. “Wilson’s never been a typical bulldog,” Ryan says to a passerby. Just like Wilson the bulldog, The Wilson the restaurant stands to be a unique venue in Manhattan.

Before the inception of The Wilson, Ininside Hotel approached In Good Company about opening a new restaurant space in the Chelsea area. Ininside needed a restaurant that could operate as a fully-fledged venue rather than an additional amenity of the hotel.

“In the past, a hotel was happy if their restaurants broke even,” said Andrew Soares, digital sales and marketing manager at Ininside New York. “The mindset now is to have them become profit-generators in their own right. When the decision was made to become in accordance with the shifting tide, our management team shopped around for a restaurateur who had an established name and brand within the New York City market.”

Having opened seven restaurants prior to The Wilson in a little over a decade, In Good Company has made a strong name for itself in the industry. And they’re part of the growing number of open restaurants in New York City. Between 2010 and 2017, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene noted an increase of restaurants labeled “current.” These current restaurants numbered 21,611 in 2017, up from 7,839 in 2010, gaining about 3,00 every year. Distinguishing one venue from thousands of others depends on the identity of your restaurant, and the work that goes into constantly evolving and staying relevant.

Statistically, a partnership between a hotel and a restaurant makes complete sense. The leisure and hospitality sector (hotels, bars and restaurants) added 10,300 jobs in 2017. Although

the growth rate in the sector slowed sharply in the past two years, the leisure and hospitality sector made up for one-fifth (139,400) of the job gains in the city between 2009 and 2017. More than three-quarters of the gains in the sector were in bars and restaurants.

But before they could begin hiring managers, servers, bartenders and cooks, 10 weeks of construction and layout planning of The Wilson had to be completed. One of the biggest challenges D'Aleo and In Good Company faced was the design and adaptation of the sublevel dining space already existing. IGC designed the space around one wall in the room. As you're walking down the stairs in the expansive area, your eyes won't miss it: on the wall in front of you are people, realistically designed and colored in entirety of grass. Based on their body language, they're all jumping, their arms and legs expanding every which way; a wall with such a celebratory feeling was perfect for In Good Company to place a bar underneath. It isn't clear who the people are exactly, or what time period they should be from. The front-most man, for example, looks mostly like he belongs to the early to mid 1900s— he wears a flat cap and a suit with a bow tie around his neck, but has modernized sneakers on his feet. The other men and women around him follow the same dress code, and the same body language: arms up and out, as if trying to fly, and legs outstretched or bent, posing for a landing or adjusting to just taking off.

“We wanted to figure out how to incorporate that and make downstairs like a jungle feel in a sense,” said D'Aleo, “where it's earthy, and airy, and there's a lot of greenery and Instagrammable moments.”

“It's tricky in New York City trying to get people excited about dining downstairs in a sublevel, so we had to make it special,” he said. The goal was to have a centerpiece to draw attention, to be vibrant enough to dine in, and have guests want to come back for the experience. To accomplish the jungle-feel and add on to the grass wall, they used a center column in the

room and constructed a faux tree, with branches and vines dispersed from the meeting of the ceiling and column. Light bulbs hang from different distances from the “tree,” coming down to be close to the diner. “We wanted to give that warming feeling, where you feel cozy while you’re eating,” said D’Aleo. “Since the ceilings are so tall, we had to find a way to bring the ceiling down. That’s where the hanging lights came from.”

At the top of the stairs that descend into the sublevel are several framed works of famous ‘Wilson’s’: Owen and Luke Wilson, Wilson from “Home Improvement” wearing his fishing hat, Wilson the volleyball from the Tom Hanks movie “Castaway,” and Wilson the aforementioned fishing bulldog. Turn to the left, and you’re in the ground level dining room, where everything has a place. Planning the layout of the floor went into The Wilson’s time spent open and operating. It would be difficult to find the correct place for things when they didn’t know how services would go; “If we put this here, it’ll jam up the flow of the restaurant,” said D’Aleo. “We need another service station here because the walk to the other service station is too far.” Service stations were added and furniture was moved to prevent stoppage of flow in the venue.

And in order to find out what would work here or there, several practice services were conducted. First, a mock service, where the staff sits down and serves one another as if it were a real service. Next are friends and family, where there are expectations set that it is supposed to be a practice and is supposed to be a learning experience rather than an experience for the customers. With the friends and family service, a specific amount of reservations are scheduled per 15 to 20 minutes, and the day goes on as if the restaurant was open; guests come in, get greeted and seated by the host, they’re introduced to the server, orders are taken, drinks are made, and every other essential step to a clean service.

That's done a few times until the opening party, "which is like a grandiose friends and family opening event, where you have some influencers come and check out the place so they can write on their Instagram, write stories, do the PR push and marketing push," said D'Aleo. Following that is a soft opening where only one or two service periods are open, and then opening day.

Near the end of the construction phase, toward the point of opening, D'Aleo and the crew realized the wrong plumbing and equipment for the sublevel bar was delivered to the restaurant. Now, the drain in the bar wasn't able to function properly. "You're constantly evolving," said D'Aleo. "No matter what, there's always going to be kinks. They're there no matter how well you train, no matter how long you've been around, and you have to figure out those kinks in real life time."

Even after opening, slight issues arose within The Wilson. Lights began to flicker in both dining rooms, and with a space like the sublevel where the lighting is a part of the ambience, the staff needed to find a solution. But nothing more could be done than changing the light bulbs—something that D'Aleo had to do himself. He spent the time that the restaurant is closed between services moving a ladder around the dining rooms, climbing up and replacing a bulb, and repeating. Issues like plumbing, however, were more difficult to solve than light bulbs; D'Aleo noted it's the things you can't do yourself that move on to become the real problems.

"In Good Company has succeeded in transforming the space through their management and culinary expertise," said Soares. "We now have a symbiotic relationship with each other wherein our clientele can take advantage of a complete dining experience just footsteps away from their rooms, and we benefit from the IGC name and reputation that can draw more local eyes onto our property for increased market awareness and exposure."

Affordable Luxury

It wouldn't be possible to look at The Wilson's progress without taking a step back and looking at its owners, In Good Company Hospitality. If the name doesn't say it — rather, *yell it* at you — already, In Good Company believes it does hospitality best. But it isn't the kind you would expect off the top of your head from a group that owns 11 venues in New York City. From that lens, you think restaurant tycoons, owners thirsty for profit—owners who still like to please, but only because the success will mean more money.

Not In Good Company. When you dine at one of their restaurants, you're truly among good company. Its owners define their specialty as “approachable luxury”: high-quality dining, but with that small-town familiarity. Their goal is to personalize the dining experience for their customers, because it is seven times more expensive to acquire a new guest than it is to get an existing guest to return. And they accomplish this goal with the help of the reservation platform SevenRooms.

Picture this: A small family-owned diner, in a small town or in an old neighborhood. A customer starts to come in every Thursday morning and always orders two eggs over easy with a side of well-done bacon and rye toast. Well, the more this customer comes in, the better chances that the cook behind the counter can ask if they want their usual: two eggs over easy with a side of well-done bacon and rye toast. The same goes for venues operated by In Good Company. By using SevenRooms, they have the opportunity to get to know their diners as they progress through the guest journey, and become that diner “regular.”

There are four parts of the guest journey of dining, said Bianca McLaren, senior manager of brand marketing at SevenRooms. Through discovering and booking a reservation, going

through the in-service experience, giving feedback to the venue and returning to the restaurant one day, guests will be able to experience that small town, family owned feeling.

Guests will first discover a restaurant through a multitude of ways, including an influencer, a post on a blog or social media, or reading an article. Through partnerships with channels like Facebook and Instagram, SevenRooms allows clients to place themselves in every single place a guest could be searching for a reservation.

“The most important part of discovering is you have to make it very easy for guest transact, meaning guest booking,” said McLaren. “SevenRooms enables that to happen in a very white label way.”

Their clients can take the white label widget SevenRooms offers, and use it as an advantage to get to know their customer before they step foot into the venue. Of course, you will have to put down a name, the time of the reservation, and how many guests will be included; there are two other tabs available for dietary restrictions and special occasions. If you have a peanut allergy, or are a pescatarian, the venue will note this before service; if you are celebrating an anniversary, a birthday, or just going out to dinner after seeing a show on Broadway, accommodations will be able to be made correctly to fit the occasion. The venue, and in this case The Wilson, will understand you as a guest before they even see you.

“We operate the venue with local guests being our true targets,” Chris Billioux, food & beverage director at The Wilson, told *Hotel Business* in February. “Obviously, we are going to have hotel guest traffic and do our best to be a highlight of their visit, but deep down we envision ourselves as a neighborhood spot. To this end, our service is geared toward generating repeat business through making connections and learning our guests.”

After data is collected by In Good Company about the guest's profile — their dining preferences and the occasions they go out to eat — while the guest is booking their reservation, they continue to gather information from the diner's visit itself.

“They can not only see which properties you visit, they can also see how much you spent across every single visit,” said McLaren. “That's really valuable because they know who you are, they're able to see what your preferences are.”

Though this may be intimidating, gathering the data is helpful for them to be more proactive in service. They're also able to add custom tags to guests — VIP, wine spender, and gluten free, to name a few — so over time as customers visit IGC venues, they may have a more robust guest profile than someone who is on their first visit.

SevenRooms enables their restaurant partners to send out surveys directly after a visit asking how the guest experience was. Customers may disregard such an email, or it might even be sent to a junk folder, but in reality it's quite important for the hospitable reputation IGC cares about maintaining. By capturing guest feedback, it allows the venue to understand the experience before it hits another platform, like Yelp. If a customer has a negative experience, the venue wants to take that information directly, and be able to correct themselves and make it right for the next visit. Upon such an experience, and when feedback is given, the restaurant's general manager or food and beverage director may reach out, apologize on behalf of the venue, and invite the customer back—they may even throw in a complementary desert, or glass of champagne.

“Historically, restaurants care about you as a guest; they just haven't had the tools to do this,” said McLaren. When it comes down to it, this will change the experience for the better for

the customer, because they will realize that the restaurant, and the company overseeing it, cares about its guests.

“One of the greatest common factors that In Good Company and In Inside share in common,” said Soares, “is the belief that our guests place their trust in us to provide them with a one-of-a-kind experience as their hosts.”

To invite guests back, IGC will focus close to the same email strategies they use to register guest feedback. “In Good Company grew their marketing database by over 400 percent strictly by hyper-targeting their email campaign,” said McLaren. Whether it be offering complimentary champagne, or inviting a guest to an event, In Good Company wants to see more of their guests, and will do their best to make that happen. And, since they’re aware of dietary restrictions, like a guest not eating meat, they won’t be sending you invitations to the New York City Wine & Food Festival’s Burger Bash.

But they will be sending invitations to their many seasonal events. The Wilson has held a Super Bowl party, a March Madness Kick-Off party, Valentine’s Day specials, and Mother’s Day brunch, where an event-specific menu is offered that features pre-set courses customers pay the entirety for.

May I See a Menu?

Behind culinary director Jeff Haskell, The Wilson shaped a seafood-forward menu, with notable dishes like blue crab carbonara (\$29), Brussel sprout tacos (\$14), sea scallops (\$32), and octopus (\$18). Haskell, who joined the restaurant industry when he was 12 or 13, attended the Culinary Institute of America after working his way up the kitchen staff ladder.

Haskell was featured on the In Good Company website preparing the octopus dish on the menu, noting his love for the animal and that it “deserves to be treated respectfully and enjoyed” as a meal. He starts by chopping onions, celery and carrots and sautéing them with garlic until they begin to caramelize, and then deglazing the pot they’re in with white wine. Later he adds water to the pot, and then the octopus, which will cook slowly in the liquid for two to three hours until tender. Once it is finished, he cuts the tentacles into sections, about four to six inches long, and adds them to a pan to sear the outsides of the meat and to achieve a golden, lightly pink color on the outsides.

In a separate pan, sliced fingerling potatoes are placed with butter, chopped bacon, and thyme to crisp the potatoes gently. He takes the sauce — fresh orange juice, ginger, lemongrass, thyme — and reduces it halfway before adding thinly sliced kumquats (picture a baby orange) and a couple knobs of butter. Plating it, he meticulously places the potatoes sporadically on the plate, and then stacks a few tentacles on top of the potato layer before drizzling the sauce over and around the food. With a small sprinkle of salt to finish it off, Haskell’s octopus dish is complete.

Haskell even curated a menu for dogs, sticking close to the origin story of The Wilson and his own bulldog, Stella. “The inspiration behind this menu was cooking wholesome, delicious and safe food for dogs and providing peace of mind for our guests who enjoy taking their pets out for a night on the town,” Haskell told *Forbes* in April. Whether or not the food is worth getting is up for debate, however. Titled “Wilson’s Dog Menu,” it starts with a 16 oz. grilled rib-eye steak with baby vegetables (\$42), pan roasted salmon with steamed vegetables and lemon (\$28), grilled chicken breast with baby vegetables (\$16) exist for when a dog is dieting, and for smaller plates, sliced apples and heirloom carrots (\$11) and a bowl of mixed

berries (\$14). Dog menus are exclusive to the side patio and front terrace of the restaurant once the weather is warmer and the areas aren't walled in.

As D'Aleo said, The Wilson does a great job of after-work drinks. Their menu, the one with the story of Wilson the bulldog on the front, features a short selection of cocktails and beer, as well as wine options by the glass or bottle. Their cocktails include a "Castaway Mule: a cocktail so good it'll have you talking to it": Tito's vodka, ginger, Thai chili, coconut, basil, lemon (\$17) and the "Garden Maragrita: a slightly spicy, flavorful riff on a classic": casamigos blanco tequila, anchor eyes verde liqueur, bell pepper, avocado, cilantro, citric acid (\$17). Their beers cover all different flavor preferences, from dry ciders, lagers (Amstel Light, Budweiser) and pilsners (Pacifico, Captain Lawrence 6th Borough Pilsner) to IPAs (Goose Island) and white ales (Shock Top, Blue Point).

Check, Please

Now in the eighth month of operation, The Wilson has lasted through a couple of season changes, various readjustments to design and function of the venue, and an identity for the restaurant has been established. "Northeastern coastal cuisine with global influences and classic cocktails with global influences" is presented on their website. They'll have a while to further develop as well; In Good Company signed a 13-year lease at the hotel.

On a given night, The Wilson can either seem quiet, or bustling with action. Wait staff shuffle through tables, and Chris, the food and beverage director, slowly follows, checking on tables and guests to ensure their experience is optimum. Crowds gather around the ground level bar, either watching the Yankees game playing on a television in the corner, ordering cocktails, or talking to one another. Occasionally, a guest walks past the portraits of the Wilsons and turns

the corner to examine the sublevel dining area. Usually empty on a weekday, the room emits a feeling as if it were waiting for the weekend rush of night owls to come and fill it.

“We’re excited to have The Wilson open and running,” said D’Aleo. “We’re confident that in three or four years, the area it’s in is going to be a hot spot. We’ll be adding to the menu. And there will always be an event to look forward to, to bring customers in and to further establish ourselves, and In Good Company.”

SOURCE LIST

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