

SIEGEL'S SUITE SUCCESS

Entrepreneur Stephen Siegel paves the way for city's boutique hotel market

BY CINDI R. MACIOLEK
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM K. DECKER



We bring something that the other hotels don't have. We offer all the amenities of a place like the Hard Rock, but in a more intimate setting.



Artisan's grandiose lobby is covered from floor to ceiling in a Salon de Refusés style of faux paintings from the art world's masters.

When it comes to Las Vegas, one might think casinos are the only game in town. Not quite. There's one player making a big impact on the city by playing his own game of chance. And chances are you have probably already seen his name in lights.

Driving down the freeway, I'm sure you've noticed the name Siegel Suites alongside the road. With 17 locations in Nevada, the furnished apartments are most likely your first exposure to Stephen Siegel, the entrepreneur making a strong imprint on the Las Vegas Valley.

"They do really well in this town," said Siegel. "They're convenient for people who need a place to stay before they decide where they want to live. I wanted to create a brand for the apartments I was running in Vegas and market them, so that's how Siegel Suites came to be. I love building brands that I believe in."

Raised in West L.A., Siegel wasn't always into real estate, but as a child, the entrepreneurial spirit definitely shone through. "I was always drawn to business. I started working at McDonald's when I was 15. Then my mom bought me my first car for

\$800. I sold it, and started to fix up cars and scooters and sold them for a profit. I started with nothing. I was always hustling. My bank account was in my pocket.

"Then I got into car alarms, window tints and auto body shops. I still own one auto body facility in Los Angeles," Siegel continued. "I love fixing businesses and products. At one point I took over a company that manufactured children's upholstered furniture for licensees like Blues Clues, Barbie and Pokemon. I turned that around and sold it."

Siegel has an insatiable appetite for learning, eschewing a formal education for hands-on passions that get him out of bed with a smile on his face. And, while the apartments are doing a fine business, Siegel has spread his wings into the hospitality sector, but from a very different approach.

"I love doing business and I love challenges even more," Siegel said. "I love hotels, especially the very unique ones. I thought that there was a missing sector of this special boutique hotel in Vegas and I wanted to capitalize on it."

Siegel's latest foray is bringing intimate, amenity-laden boutique hotels to a town known for themed resorts and hotel counts

in the thousands, not hundreds or less. His first was the Gold Spike downtown, but now he also owns Artisan, the Resort on Mount Charleston, and Rumor, just across the street from the Hard Rock Hotel.

"I'm approaching Las Vegas from a very different way," said Siegel. "In a city known for being grand in scale and the hospitality capital, all sorts of businesses come alive. People have lost sight of boutique travelers. Las Vegas is one of the only major cities in the country that doesn't have boutique hotels. When you come to town, your options are pretty much limited to a large resort like MGM, or a chain like Courtyard by Marriott. We fit somewhere in between."

According to Siegel, the boutique traveler is typically young, artsy and hip or perhaps a businessperson who doesn't want to stay at a typical 4,000-room Strip property. He doesn't want a cookie-cutter hotel; he wants something unique and special.

"To us, we don't think we're competing, we're helping each other," said Siegel. "We bring something that the other hotels don't have. We offer all the amenities of a place like the Hard Rock, but in a more intimate setting.



Poolside at Artisan hotel boutique.

In order to survive, we have to be really cool and special, right down to the cocktail service button on the phone. If someone wants to rent the courtyard area or the whole property, they can do it."

The Resort on Mount Charleston recently received a makeover, appealing both to locals and visitors alike. "Many tourists don't even know how beautiful it is on Mount Charleston," said Siegel. "They don't even know it exists. Now they can experience the beauty in a great, small hotel."

Just off I-15 and Sahara, the Artisan has only 64 rooms, but is full of unique amenities from the time you step through the heavily gilded front doors into a grandiose lobby of chandeliers and flickering candles that is covered from floor to ceiling in a Salon de Refusés style of faux paintings from the art world's masters. "It's definitely a niche product. I don't know of any other property that can be done like this," said Siegel.

Siegel likes to keep his options open when it comes to opportunities, so hotels are not the end of the line. Within the next year, Siegel will be launching a new juice café called Señor Hugo's. It will offer a selection of juices and soups, all with a Hispanic flair.

All of his success and entrepreneurial drive are not without criticism. "I think I'm always going against the norm," said Siegel of his business ventures. "People say I'm crazy for doing that. It's like I'm paddling upstream. But it works for me. When most people were scared of Vegas, I saw nothing but opportunity here.

"I don't sit down and think about things, I just pay attention to what comes to me," said Siegel. "Occasionally, someone will bring me an idea and if I like it, I do it. I don't sit down with a plan of what I'm going to do next. When we say we're going to do something, we do it. We're always creating jobs. It's great for the community. We're very hands on, too. If we're going to work on a project, we're there. We don't send someone else to manage it. We do what it takes to get the job done."

And Siegel will continue to get the job done in Las Vegas, he's not planning on going anywhere. "Vegas has extreme ups and downs. When I came to town in 2004, it was on an upward tick and now it has fallen down below where it hasn't been in over 10 years. I truly believe in Vegas for the long term and think now is the best time to pick up great pieces of property. Everything is on sale. When everyone is scared and frozen,

I kick the gears in and do more business. When you stop you die! You must keep always pushing forward.

"Vegas has a lot more room to grow. Everyone wants to be in Vegas. Plus, it's easier to build a brand here than LA. LA is too big. Vegas is easier to do business in. The community helps you here. The mayor is the best."

Self described as a real, down-to-earth person, Siegel believes in helping the community right back. "I'm on the board for a Hispanic children's charity, called Padres, and I also give lots of different donations to several charities around town. But most of all I like helping people individually. I give several different homeless people and families money and free apartments. I know this goes directly and immediately to help those people in need."

Siegel is only 39 years old, but he's been working nearly all his life. "I started so young, I feel like I'm 80! I'm always out there working. I never do it for the money. I do it strictly for the fun. It's a game. I never chase the money. Money is just a tool to do something.

"My passion is I like what I do. I actually enjoy the experience of the project. It's hard to take me away from my work." □

KING OF THE ROAD

John Morris is making tracks at Spring Mountain Motorsports Ranch

BY CINDI R. MACIOLEK
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM K. DECKER



Spring Mountain Motorsports Ranch plans to make even more additions to the club in the coming years. A Microtel Hotel is slated to open in 2011, while other additions include a 3.5-mile track, a 1.2-mile KART track and a wakeboarding lake.



Las Vegas is often defined by bigger, better, bolder. John Morris used that mantra to create a West Coast motorsport mecca with a country club feel that is second to none.

Morris was into cars from a very early age. He bought his first one, a Model A, when he was just 12 years old, living in Pasadena, California. “And I got my first ticket when I was 13,” he said.

That experience should have indicated where his future would lie, but as much as he loved cars, work took over. Through the years, Morris has owned a variety of businesses. He sold his first car dealership at the age of 25. Next, he bought a sailboat he ran for three years; then a restaurant. After that, Morris became interested in real estate development. That led to creating a large Internet company that provided over 35,000 realtor websites at the time he sold it. That’s when he retired, or so he thought.

A few years ago, Morris was just out having fun, participating in a seven-day car

race that took place on seven different tracks around the country. One of them happened to be in Pahrump, Nevada. He won the race, loved the track, and decided he needed a new hobby. Morris got to know the owner of the track, saw some improvements he could make, and before you know it, he had a new project on his plate.

“Until I retired, I didn’t have time to race,” said Morris, “I was always busy working and raising a family, so racing had to wait until retirement. Once I started racing, I did really well. I won most all of my races. I liked the Pahrump track, but I really didn’t want to work too much. I thought fixing it up would be a fun thing to do. I had no idea I’d develop it this much. It took two years to do the first building; now we have about 20. That’s a big change from the two tents and port-a-potties it had when I bought it!”

Morris wasn’t quite sure how he wanted to develop Spring Mountain Motorsports Ranch, but he knew he had to please one special person—his wife. “The real problem

I had with racing was my wife didn’t want to sit on a lawn chair on asphalt to watch me,” Morris said. “I felt we needed a place where everyone could be happy and comfortable.”

The location was never a great concern. “There are very few pieces of land where you can put a racetrack in the country,” said Morris. “This was right on the highway and close to Las Vegas. Those were my biggest considerations when I purchased it.”

The Texas Motorsports Ranch served as the initial inspiration. Once he knew where to start, Morris got to work. He decided to build Spring Mountain Motorsports Ranch into a country club, too. He began with one building, added the Corvette Driving School, then the clubhouse. There are also 80 different garages for member cars, along with 25 condo facilities. And if that’s not enough, they’ve added a 17-room dormitory that will be open in the near future to support the Corvette, Radical, Lotus and advanced driving schools as well as private lessons.

“We’ve now taken it further than the Texas

club,” said Morris. “It’s very plush inside. There are driving simulators, conference rooms, lockers, and a big viewing tower with a large patio. We have a lot of member barbeques and banquets. We’ve also added a basketball court, racquetball court, horseshoes, a climbing wall, putting green, Jacuzzi, masseuse and a pool. We’re aiming to have a Pebble Beach type of feel, but with a motorsport facility instead of a golf course.”

The club boasts about 265 members, 42 percent of which are local, and 33 percent come from Southern California. The rest are from around the country and Canada. Although members definitely get to have the most fun, don’t be dismayed if you’re not one. You can still come out and be a guest for the day; just call ahead to see what events are taking place, and make your reservations. You’ll have to pay a gate fee and sign a waiver, but you can view the races from the bleachers or the towers. Some events are televised, so they draw a larger crowd. And, with an advanced reservation, you can also indulge in the catered lunch at the clubhouse. You’re also welcome to participate in the driving schools. Fees vary, so contact the club for more information.

waste time driving back and forth. We get up and we’re ready to go. I’m so busy it gives me the opportunity to have fun and to have experts maintain the car.

“Racing demands your full attention. The club gives us an environment in which we get a chance to drive cars on a real track in a safe environment, and to actually race. There’s a shop on-site that takes care of all the needs of a gentleman racer.

“There’s also a great exercise facility at the club,” continued Goodkind. “It’s important to be in good shape if you want to race. You’re balancing on the edge of physics. My car pulls three G’s in a corner. It’s a lot of effort and really tires you out. The good thing is, there’s no space in your brain for work. Racing really gets your head clear.

“You can’t understand the experience until you’re on the track. To get all the dimensions, you have to be in the car and feel the physical forces. The sheer exhilaration is something you have to experience.”

Morris knows all about exhilaration, but also looks beyond the track for stimulation. Sometimes, he’s considered a James Bond-type, and adrenaline-producing hobbies are part of his life. “I’m always zipping around,



to the club in the coming years. A Microtel Hotel is slated to open in 2011, which will be particularly handy to members from the East Coast who travel here to drive in the winter months. He’s also anxious to add a 3.5-mile track, a 1.2-mile KART track and a wakeboarding lake. Once the lake is finished, the site will be able to host triathlons.

“When we’re done with the new development, we will have the longest track in the world, except for the one at Nuremberg,” said Morris. The new track will also have a drag strip that will double as a landing strip for members’ planes.

This game changer embraces his role. “I like changing things, I think change is great,” said Morris. “It’s exciting! Money is a by-product. My philosophy, from a business standpoint, is to do your best. Be honest, provide a good service and product, and the money will take care of itself. At the track, we want to provide an experience you can’t get anywhere else.”

“Professionals who come here have a lot of stress in their lives and they want to relax,” continued Morris. “When you’re racing, you can only focus on that moment. At the same time, your family is with you, enjoying themselves. You get to de-stress, and have fun with your family. No one bothers you, you don’t talk business, you talk about cars.

“I just wanted a hobby but it’s a lot of fun,” said Morris. “We’re the only club *Road and Track* works with. And, we’re always doing testing for different car manufacturers, like Chevrolet, and special programs for companies like Mercedes and Porsche. The club has become a great place. I love what I’m doing!” □

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Local resident and author, Terry Goodkind, has been a member since 2006, and makes it out to the club about every three to four weeks. “I’ve always loved racing,” said Goodkind. “In the ’70s I raced cars for a brief time. It’s so hard to do by yourself, traveling, maintaining the car. Spring Mountain Motorsports is a godsend. It’s a great way for me to indulge my hobby.”

Goodkind and his wife lease a condo at the track to make the most of their race time. “I write seven days a week, 14 hours a day. Racing at the club is a wonderful getaway and a beautiful place. With the condo, we don’t

going somewhere. My favorite hobby is racquetball,” said Morris, “but I also love flying, hang gliding, acrobatic flight and I have my rotary license for helicopters. I always wanted a jet pack and I’ll be getting one in 2011. I placed my order with a company in New Zealand. It will fly for 30 minutes at 65 mph. It’s just like being a rocket man! The funny thing is, when my wife and I go on cruises or other vacations, I just sit around reading books and relaxing.” Like Morris, a number of members have gotten either helicopter or fixed wing flying licenses.

Morris plans to make even more additions

A photograph of Max Brenner, a bald man with a friendly smile, sitting on a green park bench. He is wearing a dark blue t-shirt with a graphic design. The background is a lush, green park setting with trees and a blurred city street.

WELCOME TO MAX BRENNER'S WONDERLAND

The Chocolate Cultural Capital of the World

BY CINDI R. MACIOLEK



Max Brenner, Chocolate by the Bald Man's New York location.

Max Brenner, the chocolate impresario, brings his wonderland to Las Vegas. How did we ever survive without him?

With the opening of the new chocolate emporium, Max Brenner, Chocolate by the Bald Man, at the Forum Shops, Las Vegas is finally able to experience the phenomenon that is slowly pervading the culinary world. And if that's not enough, the man behind the fantasy shows us that a journey to chocolate heaven can begin with a series of twists and turns we call life.

When Max Brenner was growing up in Tel Aviv, he didn't have visions of chocolate pizza dancing in his head. Quite the contrary. This modern day Willy Wonka wanted to be a novelist.

"It's kind of a coincidence how I started my culinary journey," said Brenner, founder and innovator of Max Brenner, Chocolate by the Bald Man. "It wasn't like many famous chefs who had a culinary passion since they were young, or were inspired by grandma. I wanted to become an author from a young age. In order to finance my writing, I took a government funded course to learn a skill. I took pastry because it was the easiest. It was an easy way to make money. I'd go to class

“Once you experience it, it's something you can only get at Max Brenner. Las Vegas has not seen anything like this before. It's the busiest chocolate restaurant in the world.”

for six hours, take the money and go home and write. When the course was finished, I continued to have a desire to write.

"I was traveling in Europe working with all kinds of pastry and confectionary masters, viewing pastry as a way to finance my writing," continued Brenner. "I lived in Paris for two years, working with unique chocolate masters of a very traditional sort. I learned a hand made style. Eventually, I went back to Israel to make some money to finance my writing dreams. I met a guy who suggested we go into business and opened a small chocolate store. That was the end of my writing at the time and the beginning of a fantastic business journey.

"Very quickly I understood there was a big contradiction between the way people think of chocolate and the way they can experience it in a store. As a child, we think of Willy Wonka; as an adult, we think of chocolate as a romantic gift or a sensual food ingredient. The reality of shopping for chocolate was different, very restricted. I wanted to free the chocolate and fulfill all the chocolate dreams, from super romantic to happy and fantastic.

"At Max Brenner, there's a very rich characteristic of chocolate expressed here. I couldn't imagine we could take it so far. We're still creating and revealing more and more chocolate experiences. It's super rich and fascinating. We opened the first store in

1996 when I was 26 years old. Now, I'm 41 with a daughter almost two years old and locations around the world!"

What started as a store expanded into a restaurant serving fantastic desserts and scrumptious food, as well as incredible, unique cocktails. "We also serve real food at Max Brenner," said Brenner. "We felt it's not enough to just have dessert. Our slogan is first food then chocolate – that's what my mom always told me. We created a very interesting American comfort food menu with a Max Brenner twist. The menu is very approachable. Our average check is \$17 – 18. It's a special culinary experience, funky and artistic."

But it goes beyond even that. Every detail is orchestrated by Brenner and his team to treat visitors to what he calls the holistic chocolate experience.

"A holistic experience means it works on all our senses," said Brenner. "I'm trying to make each visit a very multi-sensual experience. Touching, tasting, smelling, seeing and, of course, hearing. It even translates to the music. We try to find unique music for this type of experience, sexy at night, quiet and soft in the morning."

Beyond the audible, the company has taken tremendous care to not only develop great recipes, both savory and sweet, but to also individualize the presentation, including unique plates, glassware and mugs, that complete the visit and bring people back. Two of the most popular items are the Hug Mug and the Alice cup, named after the scene in "Alice in Wonderland" where she drinks from the bottle marked, "Drink Me." The Hug Mug is a cacao bean shaped mug that you cup with both hands as you drink your hot chocolate, warming you up on those frosty Vegas nights.

"When I started to think about hot chocolate," said Brenner, "the first thing that came to mind was a rainy day under a blanket, cuddling with someone you love and hugging a cup of hot chocolate. You hug it with both hands and feel the warmth. Like all the creations in Max Brenner, there are different emotions of chocolate that I try to address. I started thinking, why isn't there a ceremony for hot chocolate like there is for coffee or wine? I decided I want to be the first to create a whole culture around it, and chocolate itself.

"There is a difference in the definition between the words tradition and culture," continued Brenner. "When I said I was

Euphoria Peanut Butter Chocolate Fudge Brownie Sundae



The Bald Man's Cake & Shake

creating a new chocolate culture, people said, 'Who are you to say that?' When I talk about chocolate, yes, there is tradition of where it came from, but when I'm talking to people, there are so many aspects connected to it – emotion, fantasy, childhood memories – all these interactions that we as humans have with chocolate. When I refer to culture, we are taking different aspects and different interactions of humans with chocolate and creating an experience around it – it's everything together.

That philosophy has not been lost on the Bald Man's devotees. "The nicest part about going to Max Brenner's is the overall experience," said Sara Schweitzer, a frequenter of the New York City location. "We have taken small groups and large parties there, and it works for every occasion. Whether for a date, with a friend or for an event milestone, it's not just a matter of going for dinner or ice cream, the service and atmosphere make the whole night an event."

It's hard for Schweitzer to pin down a favorite menu item. Once prompted, the list just kept growing – waffles, milk shakes, waffle fries served with chili mayo, the new cocktail menu, particularly the dreamsicle and the banana split drink in a stemless martini glass. As a vegetarian, she finds there are several menu options to satisfy her, with her favorite – the pizza.

"The presentation of the food and drinks is amazing," said Schweitzer. "It has an element of surprise. You don't know how anything is going to look when it comes to the table. It will surpass your expectations. It's a whimsical experience that prompts good childhood memories. It's always exciting to see what the waitstaff is carrying. You wonder, 'Is it mine?'"

The Bald Man and his team are more than ready to expand their chocoholic following beyond the East Coast. "The design and retail is very unique," said Eric Kaplan, president of Max Brenner, Chocolate by the Bald Man, of the two-story Las Vegas venue. "We're not trying to be a theme. We're not trying to be a steakhouse. We don't necessarily want to be the place where people say 'let's go for the food.' We want to be a long term, solid restaurant based on a lot of little things.

"That's what makes up the brand. It's its own niche," continued Kaplan. "Once you experience it, it's something you can only get at Max Brenner. Las Vegas has not seen anything like this before. It's the busiest chocolate restaurant in the world."

"Max Brenner is super fantastic, indulgence to the max, no limits. I didn't feel ready before operationally but now we're ready for the grandiose place," said Brenner of the Forum Shops location. "It's been a natural progression. This will be our biggest store, almost like the capital of the chocolate culture."

Now, if only they built condos on top of the restaurant... ❑