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Shack Up in Your Coolest Friend's House

Jake Wurzak curates spaces in which you'll want to sleep, eat, drink and gaze out at the ocean

Hospitality Industry Network



By [Deborah Stoll](#) ([http://dstoll@ypo.org](mailto:dstoll@ypo.org))

"The properties I want to create need to fire on all cylinders, offering services in a totally unique way and creating little 'wonder moments' at every turn," says President of Wurzak Hotel Group (<http://www.wurzakhoteles.com/>) **Jake Wurzak** (<https://www.ypowpo.org/portal/profile?memberId=75A6BB79-F98B-E211-AE55-0050569257EF>) (YPO Miami).

"Wonder moments," is an apt description for the vibe Jake is infusing into his latest project. The Dalmar, in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, USA, is suffused with "wonder moments" – a term that implies the transformation of the every day into the unexpected. Think of 'wonder moments" as the movie version of your life in which intrigue, romance, beauty and cool luxury permeate your every move.

"I see myself as a kind of choreographer," says Jake. "Our niche is running successful hotels, we know how to do that really well, but then we bring in collaborators who are great at what *they* do and that's where the magic happens. Having an incredible food and beverage program is a massive part of creating a distinctive space where people want to return."

A Roof With a View

Ft. Lauderdale has never been considered a cultural hub, unless you fancy spring break an enriching pilgrimage, but that only counts if you're between the ages of, say, 16 to 22 and have a penchant for keg parties, sunburns and ill-advised romances. As part of a concentrated effort to turn the city's reputation around, since 2002 intensive efforts have gone into developing Ft. Lauderdale's historic downtown area, developing multi-story residential and retail projects, museums, and an overhaul of the riverfront area that will align river-based activities (boating, maritime and transportation) with land based recreation, entertainment and commerce.

"There's a huge market in the area now for amazing food and beverage outlets," says Jake, "and not nearly enough places of quality. We see The Dalmar as an opportunity to make not only the hotel and design experience something no one had seen before, but the food and beverage element as well."

It's anyone's guess how there is nary a rooftop bar in Ft. Lauderdale – a city built along Florida's southeastern coast lined with beaches and boating canals – but The Dalmar will be the first. In order to ensure its popularity extends well beyond that as the forerunner to what is bound to spark a rooftop revolution, Jake has teamed up with one of Los Angeles' most dynamic young proprietors as a collaborator for the space[1].

"We spoke to a lot of the big groups out there, but it wasn't right for us," says Jake. "We wanted someone in the space with soul. Someone who was prepared to hustle and grind, who would take charge of the space like it was theirs, not just something they were taking care of for somebody else."

With all this talk about The Dalmar, you might wonder what's happening at Wurzak's other properties, like the Sheraton Valley Forge (<http://www.wurzakhoteles.com/projects/hotels/sheraton-valley-forge>), The Hilton Philadelphia, Homewood Suites Philadelphia.

"Even in our limited service properties, food and beverage is becoming much more amplified," says Jake. "We bought a prototype Hyatt Place Hotel and part of our strategy was to push the limits of what that brand would allow."

The Golden Age of Travel

"The thing on my mind today," says Jake, "is creating a fantasy for locals and guests. I want our hotels to feel like our guest's coolest friend's place; the kind of home they wish they had the time or talent to design themselves, but where they're happy to 'live' every once in a while."

To create this, Jake has tapped into what he calls, "the most underpriced asset in our generation – nostalgia." The Dalmar's key inspiration is "the golden age of travel," which to Jake, means the late '60s winter break. A family shoveling their wood-paneled station wagon out of the snow in upstate New York, cranking up some Crosby, Stills & Nash, and then heading south on I-95 toward sunny Florida.

"People love to imagine themselves in another time period and hotels and restaurants are amazing ways to transport people to that state of mind," enthuses Jake. "It's all about the colors, the sounds and feel of that time but not in a kitschy way. By blending these times with pieces from other eras it keeps things from being cookie-cutter. It makes it feel authentic."

And as anyone in the hospitality industry knows, the most important representative of authenticism, beyond the design, beyond the farm-to-table ethos and beyond perfectly built classic cocktails, is the staff.

"In order to deliver your vision and embody the message of your company, you need people who are real, people who want to serve genuinely," adds Jake. "One of the things I learned from my dad was that loyalty is very important; grooming and training people from the bottom up is critical to our success."

So how does one find a staff of unicorns – those youthful, service-oriented ambassadors of your brand?

"Your executive level management needs to have a hospitality background, but front desk people, cabana people and servers just need to be nice and energetic," explains Jake. "I always have my cards on me and when I'm in a store or a coffee shop and I get good service, I give them a card and tell them to apply for a job at the hotel."

The YPO Advantage

Like all competitive businesses, the hotel world is incredibly secretive. There is no place for hoteliers to regularly gather in confidence to chat about their trade, exchange ideas and commiserate over common issues. Except ...

"YPO has introduced me to tons of friends in my industry with whom I have a private forum," says Jake. "We trade highly confidential information and share best practices, which is not something we can do anywhere else. It's a totally unique circle of people who will always pick up the phone."

We don't know about you, but all this talk of sun and surf and hotel rooftop cocktail bars has us thinking one thing: time to load up the station wagon and hit the road[2].

[Connect with Jake](https://www.ypowpo.org/portal/profile?memberId=75A6BB79-F98B-E211-AE55-0050569257EF) (<https://www.ypowpo.org/portal/profile?memberId=75A6BB79-F98B-E211-AE55-0050569257EF>)

[1] Sadly at this time their names are still top-secret.

[2] And by 'load up the station wagon and hit the road' we mean pack a bag and fly south first-class.



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