



Secret. SERVICE

Nic Hogan uncovers the strategies behind the success of Customs House in Brisbane

There is an added dimension of pressure and expectation when you win a national award in the restaurant and catering industry—even more so when you are a multi-award winner.

Winner of the Function/Convention Centre award, as well as the Caterer of the Year award, at this year's Savour Australia™ HOSTPLUS Awards for Excellence, The University of Queensland's Customs House in Brisbane faced some of the toughest competition yet in the catering category.

Despite this, Customs House director Brian Roberts [pictured, opposite page] took it all in his stride. "Last year [when we won], we were overwhelmed. It was a great accolade and great recognition for the whole team. However this year, I think it now cements us as a serious contender in Australia as a top-grade function venue," says Roberts.

It is recognition that is well deserved, considering the dedication Roberts and his team commit to the business.

"We work with a continuous improvement process. We are never of the mindset that just because we won awards one year that we can rest on our laurels. Of course, yes, we recognise we

are at a certain level, yet there is always room for improvement. We are in fact always examining our product, looking at our food to see where our menus can evolve, even addressing our training needs to see what our team needs are, as well as exploring our beverage offerings," says Roberts.

This on-going investigation into their business extends to what other caterers and restaurateurs are doing. "We regularly conduct competitor analysis.

We look at what product everybody else is offering and hold strategic meetings with our team to see exactly where we can improve and evolve. I actually love going to other people's functions," admits Roberts. "It helps the creative juices flow, coming up with the next concept or innovation."

The undercover operation often involves the whole team. "We recently held a restaurant planning day where the front of house staff, the chefs, my operations manager and I sat down and brainstormed ideas on how we could improve and get a better edge. After the ideas session, I took the whole

team to GOMA [Gallery of Modern Art], which actually beat us in the Best Restaurant category," he admits. "It was a great team building exercise. Everyone was involved and it's always great to get out of the office."

After the reconnaissance mission is complete, the team regroup back at HQ to analyse what they have experienced and observed. "You become aware of ideas and concepts that are, or are not, working for others."

When considering what else Customs House does differently than the competition he outmanoeuvred this year, Roberts credits his staff and the level of service they provide. "We consistently receive rave reviews about our staff and how friendly and attentive they are, and the excellence of the service," he says. "We deliver a genuine, friendly service, and the reason for this is that we're lucky to attract a great pool of applicants. We can select only the best qualified staff."

And it's easy to see the attraction of wanting to work at Customs House, as Roberts explains: "People are proud of

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Brian Roberts, director of Customs House, Brisbane



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