

# Hotel F&B

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## PREMIER

◆ L E A G U E ◆

Best Western Premier's high-scoring, customizable breakfast buffet has guests and owners cheering.

## BREAKFAST

■ "We were looking closely at addressing our own guest needs, and not following what other brands in our comp set were doing in their breakfast programs," says BWP's Tricia Fischenich (left) pictured here with BWP's Michael Lunday and Dana Newman outside BWP in Katy, Texas. Photo courtesy of Tommy Flanagan



# PREMIER

## ◆ LEAGUE ◆

*Best Western Premier scores with a robust breakfast buffet and guest satisfaction to match.*

BY MICHAEL COSTA

**T**o pay or not to pay? That is the question many travelers ask when factoring in breakfast before choosing a hotel. Within the crowded select- and limited-service category are myriad complimentary

breakfast programs, while many upscale brands charge a nominal fee as part of their business model. But at the upscale Best Western Premier (BWP), owners can choose to charge (or not) for their breakfast buffet, giving them flexibility to maximize their market.

"In our comp set, a breakfast buffet



■ BWP's most recent breakfast refresh included expanding the minimum buffet size from 20 to 24 feet, but recommending 26 feet, allowing ample room for guests to move in and out for hot items without disturbing guest flow in other areas. Photo courtesy of Tommy Alanagan



usually costs between \$12 to \$15, but here it's complimentary and comes as part of the room charge," says Raju Narayan, owner and GM of BWP Energy Corridor in Katy, Texas, one

of the highest-rated properties in the BWP portfolio. "I'd say our breakfast is better than our comp set and is the equivalent of a major brand's breakfast buffet, where it'll cost about \$30 per

person once tax and tip are factored in."

Approximately 44% of North American BWP's charge for breakfast, but the guest scores are high regardless of whether it's free or for a fee. The most recent survey numbers from Best Western—which are collected on a scale of 1 to 10, with 9s and 10s being the only numbers entered into the final metrics—show the overall guest satisfaction score (the experience of the entire stay) for BWP at 71.7%, compared to the aggregate score of BWP, Best Western, and Best Western Plus, which is 61.7%.

BWP breakfast-only scores for properties that charge are at 65.6%, while those that offer it complimentary are 69.5%. The overall breakfast satisfaction scores at BWP—combined complimentary and pay—stand at 74.3% for the current year. Twelve months ago they were 70.7%, and in 2015 they were 66.8%.

"Those 9s and 10s represent the highest intent to recommend the brand and its breakfast to others," says Michael Lunday, senior manager worldwide sales and hotel sales optimization, Premier Collection at Best Western Hotels & Resorts. "We really hit on the service level, the food quality, and the overall variety. From a complimentary breakfast standpoint, many of our clients are government or businesspeople on per diem, so that affects the way that we sell to them, because that's one less meal they have to pay for each day."

#### **BWP PEDIGREE**

To understand how BWP arrived at their current sky-high scores, we need to look back at the brand's roots and how the breakfast program has evolved since then.

BWP launched in Europe in 2003, because "Best Western hotels there didn't have boutique-type properties at the time, with a full-service food and beverage experience, and we saw the opportunity for unique branding in that part of the world that really didn't

## **Specialized Staffing**

*Best Western Premier eschews multi-tasking labor to improve guest interaction.*

Labor in F&B has been the single-most pressing topic in the industry for nearly a decade, and while technology tries to solve some of the shortcomings, many brands have trained their staff to multi-task as a way to cut costs—think of the front-desk attendant who doubles as a bartender or cook to offset a property's labor limitations.

But at Best Western Premier (BWP), employees are specialists, assembled strategically at breakfast and during evening service to maximize guest interaction and elicit feedback.

"Today we have very few opportunities to engage with customers, due to mobile check-ins/check-outs, where guests bypass the front desk during their stay. The only time we really have to engage with them is during happy hour, a manager's reception in the lobby, and at breakfast," says Ron Pohl, SVP and COO at Best Western Hotels & Resorts. "At our Premier brand, we have the front desk manager, GM, salespeople, and F&B attendants out there in those spaces talking to customers and asking about their stay. This often leads to repeat and group business, and certainly helps our feedback scores. We've really targeted that as a key service experience that differentiates us in the market."

At the 92-room BWP Energy Corridor in Katy, Texas, owner and GM Raju Narayan implements this strategy at breakfast. "I have one person in the kitchen who cooks and cleans, one person at the omelet station, and one person in the front of the house who is our Breakfast Ambassador. That person take orders, replenishes coffee, delivers omelets to tables, and picks up dishes. At the same time, they're talking to guests, and making sure their stay was OK. If customers have complaints, we can often fix them on the spot. Most likely, my breakfast staff will be the last people customers see before checking out, so if there were issues during their stay, it's our last chance to catch them before they leave the property."

Narayan is not a fan of multi-tasking staff as a way to save labor, reasoning that the lack of specialization can be detrimental to the overall guest experience. "We don't mix up our departments, and we continually train our employees because the brand standards are so high. We're not going to ask someone to work a breakfast shift, then turn around and work another shift somewhere else, or try to do both jobs at the same time. There's not enough physical and mental bandwidth for them to work in two departments and perform at the level we expect from a customer-facing standpoint."—MC

exist with major hotel companies at the time. So we took existing boutique, independent hotels that were very successful there, and tied them to this brand and provided an upscale experience to customers in Europe,” says Ron Pohl, SVP and COO at Best Western Hotels & Resorts.

From there, BWP expanded into Australia and Asia, with full-service F&B competing in both the upscale and luxury markets, and in 2010,

BWP launched in North America.

“We saw an opportunity at that time to compete in the upscale space with brands like Courtyard by Marriott and Hilton Garden Inn and raise the overall perception and offering of our Best Western brand,” Pohl says.

Currently, there are 35 BWPs open in North America, with another 26 in the pipeline. Overseas, there are nearly 100 BWPs, with approximately 25 more planned. “Asia is our fastest-growing market right now,” notes Pohl. “Countries like Thailand, Indonesia, Laos, Vietnam, China, and Japan all have properties in the pipeline.”

Back in North America, one of the carry-over components from the original European BWPs is a full-service kitchen in each hotel. The efficient footprint is large enough for a stove with burners, convection oven, dishwasher, sizable workspace for prep, cold and dry

storage for ingredients, and more. This allows each BWP the flexibility to have a restaurant if they choose, or, in the case of Narayan’s BWP, a full bar with a menu of appetizers and larger plates (burgers, wraps, salads) made-to-order by a cook in the kitchen (see sidebar about labor at BWP).

“A lot of our brand development in the upscale segment focuses on food, so we’re seeing more of our hotels building multi-faceted kitchens with the space they have, beyond the typical cutting board and combi-oven setups you see at other brands,” says Amy Hulbert Manktelow, VP, boutique and upscale brands at Best Western Hotels & Resorts.

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## BREAKFAST

### BREAKFAST BLUEPRINT

The main F&B focus for BWP remains breakfast, which has been through two evolutions since 2010. Much like the leeway afforded owners to opt for either pay or free breakfast, the BWP blueprint allows them to add local and regional ingredients to the buffet, including what coffee is offered, which is unusual for a branded breakfast program.

“The only coffee requirement is that it be 100% Arabica coffee. The rest is up to owners,” says Lunday. “They can pick any coffee vendor because we have national agreements with a number of suppliers, but we don’t have an exclusive contract with any of them. Coffee today can be regionally based, so for example, if you’re in East Texas, Louisiana, or Mississippi, Community Coffee would be one of the local choices an owner can make. We empower our owners to always look for local flavors, and many times the regional items they choose happen to be part of a national agreement we already have so the pricing is practical.”

From an overall breakfast menu standpoint, the BWP minimum requirements allow substantial room

for regional foods and day-to-day variety, which is especially enticing for extended-stay travelers.

“Our hotels are required to have three types of cereal, two types of yogurt, three fresh fruits, fresh-squeezed fruit juice—not from a juice machine—two types of bread, a hot meat, a hot egg, two types of milk, Arabica coffee, two types of tea, a gluten-free item, and a non-dairy milk,” says Tricia Fischenich, regional service manager, Best Western Hotels & Resorts. “We also require a minimum of three build-your-own concepts and three different toppings each for those concepts. Build-your-own bases can be an omelet station, waffles, yogurt, and pancakes, for example. Owners can choose which three toppings they want for each of their build-your-own stations, so they can customize for their markets.”

At Narayan’s BWP, this basic framework gives him the freedom to offer four hot chafers on any given morning, where guests can build a plate of eggs, bacon, sausage patties or links, and breakfast potatoes. He has two self-serve waffle stations (which make waffles in the shape of Texas), an oatmeal station, a yogurt

station with Dannon products, and a chef-attended omelet station with Tex-Mex toppings like pico de gallo and salsa. He also features hard-boiled eggs, a toast station with Smucker’s condiments, and a three-tiered bread display with croissants, English muffins, bagels, sliced breads, Danish, and Otis Spunkmeyer packaged muffins. For coffee, he uses a self-serve Smucker’s Select Brew coffee machine.

“Our breakfast is not a regimented, branded core breakfast or a limited-item breakfast you’d see repeated at every property. Our breakfast is unique to our hotel beyond the minimum requirements, and it’s made fresh in our kitchen every day. The selection is fairly large, and we rotate menus on a five-day schedule, so a businessperson here for a few weeks will only come across the same type of cooked breakfast items maybe two or three times during their stay,” says Narayan.

### BUFFET BOOSTERS

BWP’s most recent breakfast refresh was in 2015 and relied heavily on customer comments. “The big changes were adding the build-your-own concepts, requiring a glass-door



■ BWP requires three build-your-own concepts at breakfast, which can include waffles (left) and an omelet station (right) along with a minimum of three toppings for each, which owners can choose based on regional tastes. Photos courtesy of Tommy Flanagan

refrigerator where yogurt and milk is displayed, adding gluten-free and non-dairy options, and instituting a grab-and-go component for guests checking out before breakfast opens, which can be a bottle of water, piece of fruit, and a granola bar or muffin,” remembers Fischenich. “We had multiple hotels beta-testing a number of different options, including smoothies, which didn’t make the final menu, based on guest feedback, and some of those hotels had about 10 different ideas we were testing to see if they raised our breakfast scores.”

Increasing the size of the buffet area was another endeavor for the 2015 refresh to improve guest flow with the additional menu items added. It also coincided with BWP’s brand-wide renovation program, so physical modifications to the buffet area could be included in that initiative.

“We changed how much space to recommend, because in the past the minimum requirement for the buffet was only 20 feet. So we moved the requirement up to 24 feet, recommending 26 feet, with electricity every four feet, which allows flexibility in enhancing customer flow with each station. From there, we refined how everything was placed in sequence on the buffet. We spent a lot of time from a training perspective on how to set up breakfast, and we worked with our design team to create a larger environment,” Fischenich says.

The buffet flow at BWP starts (left to right) with coffee and beverages; moves to cold items like juice, yogurt, and cereal/milk; then continues to the toast and bread station with condiments; followed by the hot items in chafers like eggs and sausage; then cooked-to-order omelets or a similar station at the end. In the middle is an island with waffle, pancake, and/or oatmeal stations, and their corresponding three toppings for each. Guests who only want hot items, for example, can bypass the other stations without interrupting the flow, primarily because there’s more physical

## The Collection Connection

*The difference between Best Western Premier and Best Western Premier Collection.*

The Best Western brand currently features three products under one umbrella: Best Western, Best Western Plus, and Best Western Premier (BWP). Within BWP is Best Western Premier Collection (BWPC), and while the names are similar, there are slight differences between the two that signify a separation.

“When we developed Premier, we didn’t require a cookie-cutter approach in design or layout. So we had developers and owners tell us they really liked the Premier concept, but they already had an independent hotel that’s made a name for itself, and they wanted to know if there was a way the Premier brand and their existing hotel could complement each other. So we merged those ideas, and that’s how the Collection brand was born,” says Ron Pohl, SVP and COO at Best Western Hotels & Resorts.

BWP is considered the “hard” brand, and BWPC the “soft” brand, but both aim for a boutique size in the 100 to 120 room range, although some have upwards of 300 rooms. While most Stateside BWPs are new-build, BWPCs are conversion properties, since the hotels existed prior to adding the BWPC flag. Currently, there are 81 BWPC properties worldwide, with 25 in North America. Aside from the Best Western name, the F&B program is the main ingredient tying both brands together, with the minimum requirements at breakfast (see main story) the same for each.

“The signage is more limited for the Collection properties, but the F&B requirements are almost identical,” Pohl says. “They have to provide breakfast, and they have to provide meals outside of breakfast with a full-service restaurant or lounge, and we give them the flexibility to customize menus for each of their markets.”

—MC

room on the buffet now.

A breakfast program duplicated from property-to-property might work for other brands—whether it’s free or paid—but at BWP, the diverse, upscale demographic of businesspeople, small groups, and transient guests traveling with or without children demands variety and adaptability. Instead of dictating a top-down menu with little room for owners to customize, those at BWP listened to the guest and applied their feedback, and that strategy has fueled the brand’s year-over-year score

success.

“The key for us was when we refreshed breakfast in 2012 and again in 2015, we were looking closely at addressing our own guest needs, and not following what other brands in our comp set were doing in their breakfast programs,” says Fischenich. “For us, it’s always been focusing on what our guests want first, and then evolving the program through them to meet and exceed their expectations.” ■

*Michael Costa is editorial director of Hotel F&B.*