

GARY PORTUESI

V.P. Travel Innovation American Express



Brooklyn native Gary Portuesi grew up on travel. From an early age, he and his siblings accompanied their parents on trips to their native Italy every summer, introducing Portuesi to the world at large and setting the tone for a life that would follow a peripatetic path.

But perhaps the first moment of clarity in regards to the career that was to come was when Portuesi first began to travel on his own—and he received an American Express card from his father. Quickly grasping the value of the resource at his disposal, no matter where his travels took him—before the ubiquity of Wi-Fi, cell phones and ATMs—Portuesi made locating the American Express Travel Office his first priority whenever he arrived in a new city.

A PORT IN A STORM

That early lesson wasn't lost on Portuesi. It showed him the importance of having a safe harbor in which to anchor oneself, and he carried that knowledge with him to his current position, overseeing one of AmEx's newest resources for globe-trotters: the Centurion Lounge. Inspired by the idea of offering a "home base" for those far from their own, Portuesi's mission, he told us, is to "identify gaps in lounge coverage across the U.S. and then create unique

facilities for frequently traveling American Express cardholders."

As each lounge gets underway (already, there are locations at McCarran Airport in Las Vegas and at Dallas/Fort Worth Airport), Portuesi's task is to create something that resonates with travelers. It should come as no surprise that Portuesi's formative years spent in Italy and beyond served to cultivate in him a deep appreciation for fine food and wine, which is why he is so adamant about providing

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a "differentiated food and beverage experience." Certainly, satisfying the most primal need for food and drink can have a profound impact on a journey.

Therefore, you won't find packets of stale pretzels and uninspired beverage options on Portuesi's watch. Each lounge serves its own signature cocktails and employs its own chef, whose culinary expression brings to life the spirit of the destination.

For example, at McCarran Airport, Scott Conant—who, in addition to being a Food Network regular, has his own restaurant, Scarpetta, at the Cosmopolitan Hotel in Vegas—was secured to seduce those traveling in and out of Sin City. At DFW, Portuesi tapped Texas talent and local "rock star" chef Dean Fearing, who for 25 years has been known as "The Father of Southwestern Cooking" and is the force behind Fearing's Restaurant at the Ritz-Carlton in Dallas.

A SUNNY FUTURE

As an inveterate traveler and a dual citizen, Portuesi now spends as much time in Italy as he can, often as a guest at the Belmond Grand Hotel Timeo, his favorite. He also owns the DeGustibus Cooking School in New York City—which holds classes hosted by the most celebrated chefs and sommeliers in the industry—and is a partner in Authentic Sicily, a travel business that specializes in custom-made programs highlighting the glories of the region.

While there's no plan to open Centurion Lounges overseas, the Mediterranean influence just might make its way into the growing number of U.S. locations, as they open to offer a ray of sunshine for frequent travelers holding the right plastic in their wallets.

— Linda Vaughan

