

LEADERS IN *Hospitality*

On the Leading Edge

An Interview with **Geoffrey Gelardi**,
Managing Director, **The Lanesborough**

EDITORS' NOTE *Geoffrey Gelardi assumed his post at The Lanesborough in 1990. A fourth-generation hotelier, he previously served as Managing Director of the Sorrento Hotel in Seattle and the Hotel Bel-Air in Los Angeles.*



Geoffrey Gelardi

PROPERTY BRIEF *The Lanesborough, a St. Regis Hotel, occupies an 1827 landmark building that was restored to its original grandeur. The five-star ultra-deluxe property situated on London's Hyde Park Corner offers guests 52 rooms and 43 suites to choose from, decorated in Regency style, evoking the ambience of a 19th-century town house. The property is minutes away from the exclusive shopping of Harrods and Sloane Street, located in elegant Knightsbridge. The Lanesborough is known for its award-winning afternoon tea, but guests may also enjoy a drink in the Library Bar, which offers an extensive array of vintage cognacs. It also houses the only cigar bar in any hotel in London. The hotel (www.lanesborough.com) boasts a Spa Studio, a Fitness Studio, a business center, concierge services, and six venues for meetings and social events.*



While all industries have been affected by the global economic crisis, how much of an impact have you seen on the London market as well as for The Lanesborough?

It's been a challenging time for everybody, but it hasn't been as bad as we originally anticipated. We've just come through an excellent summer and the London hotel market did very well. Our occupancy was in the mid-90s for both June and July and in the 60s in August. However, this is part of the problem – it's feast or famine, making things much more difficult from a management perspective but, luckily, giving us some high occupancies and high average rates from time to time.

What made you feel it was the right time to pair your restaurant, Apsleys, with celebrity chef, Heinz Beck, and has the restaurant had the impact and the acceptance that you had hoped?

We had been looking for someone like Heinz Beck for a long time. He has not operated outside of Italy nor does he have dozens of restaurants. He is a very focused and talented individual, and he has great food philosophies, and all of these things mesh well with what we were trying to achieve. Heinz has already become a great asset to us; he's been very well received, and his food is absolutely incredible.

In terms of the wide range of accommodations you offer, do you feel that you have the right mix, and while it was once said that suites were sold first, has that changed in this market?

During prime times, that continues to be the modus operandi for rooms. But in slower times, like now, it's the other way around; the lower-priced suites and rooms are more popular. A lot of people have downgraded the types of rooms they're willing to pay for, especially those from the larger public companies, although recently, we have seen a great improvement in our corporate sector and private dining. We have a plan to add a Presidential Suite, which we hope to do in the next year, mainly because our Royal Suite is so popular.

The Lanesborough offers such a high level of service that one might not think it would lend itself to accommodating children and families, but you're very focused on that experience. Is that well known, and how important has that been to the property?

It's not well known, unfortunately, but we are very child-friendly. Our head butler has five



children himself, and he has held children etiquette classes, which were very popular at one time. We have programs and special amenities for the children, and once they're here, they're very happy.

Many in this industry talk about enjoying either the development side and opening hotels, or managing the day-to-day, but how those two often don't mesh. You seem to enjoy and have expertise on both sides. Is that the case, and could you imagine in the early days that some 17 years later, you would still be running this property?

If you'd asked me 17 years ago, I would have said, that's extremely unlikely. But I have been lucky in that I've been given opportunities to oversee openings of other hotels all over the world – everywhere from Tokyo to Jakarta to Saudi Arabia – and I enjoy that side of it. Prior to coming to The Lanesborough, that was my specialty for many years, even when I was in food and beverage. I used to be moved around just to do openings of restaurants, and then renovations of hotels, like the Hotel Bel-Air and the Sorrento Hotel before I opened The Lanesborough in London. So much of my career has been in development and construction of hotels, and probably the most difficult thing to do in the hotel industry is to open a new hotel and maintain it at a very high level. That's why most hotel openings are pretty much a catastrophe; people just aren't ready. When you're opening a hotel, if anyone says, don't worry about that,



we'll do that after opening, you know they're not ready. You must have everything ready when you open and even then you might get 80 percent right.

I also really enjoy running a property. We continue to improve The Lanesborough both from a physical and a managerial standpoint. I just recently renovated our Garden Room, which is the only cigar bar in London. It meets all the smoking legislation, and is one of the most successful bars in the city. We've just put in a walk-in humidior and purchased what are probably the most expensive cigars in the world – they're called Cohiba Behike, and we sell them at 1,500 pounds a stick; there are only 4,000 of these cigars made. They were hand-rolled by one of the top cigar rollers in the world, and are made from very special tobacco leaves. So we continue to create new ideas and concepts, which keeps my job interesting and keeps the hotel on the leading edge.

You seem to be constantly looking to innovate, and you have that passion for this business. Do you imagine a time when you'll slow down?

Then it will be time to retire. We continuously look for new and better ways to do things, and it was very nice to get an award last year for the most innovative general manager, and this year, from the same people, The Lanesborough is up for three awards: Best City Center Luxury Hotel, Top Concierge Worldwide, and also Top General Manager of a Luxury Hotel Worldwide. ●

The Garden Room – the best smoking room in London (left page, bottom); Aspleys – A Heinz Beck Restaurant (other photos)