



The DUKES Experience



An Interview with Debrah Dhugga,
Managing Director, DUKES LONDON

The Dukes Bar (above) and its signature martini (left), widely considered to be one of the best in the world

EDITORS' NOTE Prior to joining DUKES LONDON, Dhugga was Director of Retail and Spa at hair and beauty brand ghb. Previously, she spent four-and-a-half years as CEO of Tom's Companies, a Durham, UK-based hotel, restaurant, and spa group with luxurious properties including The Samling and Seabam Hall hotels. Much of Dhugga's experience has been in sales and marketing, including as Director of Sales of Malmaison Hotels from 1996 to 2005. Dhugga, who holds a fellowship with the Institute of Hospitality, and was recognized as one of the top 100 U.K. females in hospitality and transport in 2012, was named Business Mentor of the Year in 2013 and is a member of the Institute of Directors, the SPA Advisory Board, and Business Women Leaders. She is also a trustee for the hospitality charity "One and All" where she was tapped as a keynote speaker at the House of Lords. Dhugga is a founding member of the Leading Ladies of London, an organization comprised of female general managers of five-star hotels whose mission is to bring more women leaders into the hotel industry. She also earned a Marketing Degree from Newcastle University and often supports the industry as a speaker at hotel schools and conferences. She is a mentor to many young people in the industry and personally challenges herself to raise funds for an industry charity each year.



Debrah Dhugga

PROPERTY BRIEF Recognized as "Europe's Leading Boutique Hotel" and the "World's Leading Classic Boutique Hotel," DUKES LONDON (dukeshotel.com) is a hidden gem in the heart of St. James Mayfair, where quintessential British charm and fine luxury merge to create a timeless atmosphere for all guests. The property features stunning bedrooms that offer outstanding comfort, the legendary DUKES Bar, and THIRTY SIX restaurant featuring Michelin-star chef Nigel Mendham so guests may experience the culinary excellence that has been awarded three AA Rosettes. There is also the option for true English style with Champagne afternoon tea in the Drawing Room or the Champagne Lounge, as well as The Health Club featuring an Italian marble steam room, a modern gym with the latest Technogym equipment, and a beauty treatment room.

In a market like London, with a number of great properties, what makes DUKES LONDON so special?

It may not be the biggest or the most posh hotel, but it offers some of the best service in London. We have very high retention with a very well-groomed team that understands the DUKES' experience. A lot of our repeat business comes from that experience.

Also, we have one of the best locations in London. We're hidden away in a little private courtyard, so it feels like a country house. Yet it's a short walk away from Fortnum & Mason and Bond Street and, at our back door, we have Clarence House. We are one of the closest hotels in London to any Royal residence and have all the Royal Parks around us so it doesn't get much better.

How important is it to empower your people to respond to guest needs?

I always tell the members of our team to be themselves. If I was to try to push people out of their comfort zone, they're not going to be themselves. They will act nervous on the job because they're trying to think too much about the standard procedures instead of focusing on the customer.

Great customer service has to come naturally. I want my team to enjoy their jobs, to have a smile at the beginning and end of the day, and make sure they're there for the customer.

DUKES is independent. Some of the key tools behind the success of DUKES are building relationships with our guests; being positive, helpful, and friendly; and ensuring that our staff provides a great impression. A happy customer will return, and spend more money next time. We have to use things like social media, but our biggest PR platform is the customer in our doors at any particular time.

Are you happy with where the product is today and are there any changes on the horizon?

We're very lucky because our owner is constantly investing in the property, so if there is a need to be met at the property, he takes care of it. We don't have an operating company. We run the hotel ourselves, with passion and attention to detail. DUKES LONDON will never be an on-trend hotel. It's a classic,

beautiful British hotel that offers outstanding service. We have a wonderful bar, for instance, that has a global reputation for serving the best martinis in the world. When we refurbish that bar, we won't change the character of it. We will refresh it and update it. We don't want to change our beautiful old key system for VingCards, for example, because that would change the character of the property.

There are a lot of new, on-trend hotels that have opened, but they lack the character and classic British hospitality that DUKES offers.

How challenging is it to have a successful hotel restaurant in a city like London?

It's very challenging because the market for food and beverage is changing every single day, and there are restaurants opening and closing. While London is not New York, many hotels here now have excellent restaurants in them, whereas there were formerly more standalone restaurants.

There are on-trend restaurants that open for six months and then they close and another outlet opens.

Our restaurant offers great, well-priced food in an amazing location. However, it is more of a fine-dining restaurant and we are looking at a refit of the area to change the offering to a more casual dining experience later this year.

Is your role still about hospitality or has it become more financial?

A general manager's job today is very different than it was 10 years ago. A lot of my colleagues in business have a big challenge because they have so many reporting structures today. They have an owner, an asset manager, and an operator, so they're already reporting to three people, as well as trying to run the hotel.

One has to be financially astute to be a successful general manager these days. I don't think it's an option.

I also don't think that general managers should try to be their own financial controllers or accountants – that is what they pay other experts to do. They have to work hand in hand with these experts.

We live in a very commercial world. The days are gone when one could simply be a host. However,, I always urge my colleagues to never forget the inn keepers' role – host of the house. ●