

Hospitality



Staying Ahead of the Competition

An Interview with Geoffrey Gelardi,
Managing Director, The Lanesborough



The Lanesborough exterior (left);
The Lanesborough Suite living area (above); Céleste restaurant (below)

EDITORS' NOTE Geoffrey Gelardi, a fourth-generation hotelier, previously served as Managing Director of Hotel Bel-Air in Los Angeles. In 1990, he assumed his post at The Lanesborough.



Geoffrey Gelardi

PROPERTY BRIEF The Lanesborough occupies an 1827 landmark building that was restored to its original grandeur. Part of the prestigious Oetker Collection, the five-star ultra-deluxe property is situated on London's Hyde Park Corner and offers 93 guest rooms including 43 suites, decorated in Regency style and evoking the ambience of a 19th-century townhouse. The property is located in elegant Knightsbridge, minutes from the exclusive shopping of Harrods and Sloane Street. Guests will enjoy dining at Céleste, which received its first Michelin star in October 2016. The Lanesborough also offers award-winning Afternoon Tea, cocktails at the Library Bar, and an extensive array of vintage cognacs dating back to 1770. The property houses the most luxurious cigar bar in London, The Garden Room, and The Lanesborough Club & Spa, London's most luxurious members club and spa.

Where does the hospitality market in London stand today and is this a challenging time for growth?

It's a challenging time in many ways, more so today than in recent times. The world is in such flux right now; you only have to look at the changes in our main feeder markets of America and the Middle East to see how the industry can be affected by external factors.

Having said that, we're seeing reasonable growth year over year, and things are positive for the most part.

Will you discuss the continuous investment that is made at The Lanesborough?

He who stands still loses, especially in the hotel business. When we decided to renovate, I had most of the major hotel designers in the world knocking down my door. The one that we decided to go with was Alberto Pinto. When he came to the hotel and I showed him around, he said, "You have a beautiful hotel. So what do you want me to do?" I took that as a real compliment because it means the property has been

well maintained and that he liked the design, even though it wasn't his.

With our new concept, we wanted to bring in a lighter feel. We wanted to keep the same design intent with the regency style but, over the years, the wood we had at The Lanesborough had gotten darker and darker, and it felt too much like an old English club.

I explained to him that we didn't want to change the look and feel of the place, but we did want to lighten it and modernize it and give it a fresh, younger new look after 26 years of

operation.

We not only revitalized the look of the hotel and gave it a fresh and livelier feel, but we also went through the infrastructure. Sometimes people don't recognize this, but we put in all new lifts and air-conditioning systems and the latest technology available on the market.



London is probably the most competitive market in the world with Paris probably a close second with the new product they have there. Unless one is leading edge in nearly all forms of the hotel industry, which includes the technology, the look and feel, as well as the service, then one is not going to be successful because there is so much outstanding competition in the market.

Was it important to maintain the history and heritage of the property during the renovation?

When we have a hotel that has been as successful as The Lanesborough, it's dangerous to make too many changes. People want a fresh

new look, but the success of The Lanesborough is partly a result of its feel. We have always tried to create a residential feel so we don't have shops within the hotel. We are in the dead center of London so we have plenty of shops around us. The look and feel of the hotel needs to stay the same, so we sometimes walk a fine line in determining how far to go with our modernization.

Our decision was that we wanted the rooms to remain very English in our stately home kind of way, and thus the regency style was kept throughout. We wanted to make sure that the look of the hotel was similar to what it was before, only with a more vibrant feel.

How challenging is the food and beverage product when there is so much competition in London?

The food and beverage operation continues to be very successful. Our restaurant Céleste is under the auspices of Eric Frechon, who is our three-Michelin star chef at our sister hotel in Bristol. The Library Bar is still one of the most successful bars in London. The Garden Bar, which is our cigar bar, never ceases to amaze me – we have invested in some amazing new cigars and cognacs and it continues to improve year after year.

How has The Lanesborough Club and Spa been received?

The most significant improvement we've had over the past year is that we recently opened The Lanesborough Club and Spa, which is a 20,000-square-foot facility connected to the hotel. This is one of the most luxurious spas in London. We have just started selling the memberships and we have been very pleased with the success of those. Hotel guests can use the facilities as well.

While we've always had a small spa, we now have a spa facility that is the best in London.

Has the competitive landscape changed with so many new properties in London as well as with new competitors such as Airbnb?

The marketplace continually changes, and the competition is getting better and better. We continue improving our product and service on an ongoing basis. If we don't move with the times, we will fall behind everyone else.

Every new hotel that opens in a major city is trying to make its mark on the world. We have so many new properties opening in London and we have to retain our regular guests and make sure we stay ahead of the competition. ●