

A Place Where The Unusual Is Not A Surprise

An Interview with Willis Loughhead, General Manager, The Algonquin Hotel

EDITORS' NOTE After receiving a bachelor's degree in film production from Boston University, Willis Loughhead began his hospitality journey as a chef in esteemed restaurants in Southern California, Florida and the Northeast. He worked as the Executive Chef at the Palm Grill restaurants in Key West and Miami, both of which received the title of "Best New Restaurant" by Miami Metro Magazine. Loughhead went on to become the Executive Chef at Tantra Restaurant and Lounge where he was voted Rising Star Chef by Ocean Drive Magazine. In the early 2000s, his career transitioned to hotels, where he opened The Ritz-Carlton Coconut Grove, Miami. He relocated to New York City in 2004 to open The Modern's Bar Room at the Museum of Modern Art, which was awarded a Michelin Star and rated three stars by The New York Times. Soon after, he was selected by celebrity Chef Geoffrey Zakarian to operate all food and beverage concepts at lauded Country Restaurant at the Carlton Hotel, a 3-star New York Times and 1 Michelin Star operation with a Wine Spectator Award winning wine list. In 2010, Loughhead became the Executive Chef at the illustrious Plaza Hotel, designing the hotel restaurant to meet the desires of its elite patrons. Loughhead has been brought on to spearhead major operational overhauls to a multitude of service visions, including the private Union League Club of New York, the remodeled Intercontinental New York Barclay Hotel and the Crowne Plaza Times Square, host hotel for Dick Clark's New Years Eve experiences. Today, Willis serves as the General Manager for The Algonquin Hotel, Autograph Collection where he has reinvigorated the hotel's reputation as an epicenter for the city's cultural scene by hosting performances by Broadway stars, literary events, and curating a variety of art exhibits. Loughhead spearheaded its recent renovations, unveiled new menus for the Blue Bar Restaurant & Lounge, and is constantly engaging the hotels literary locals and tourists alike by paying homage to The Algonquin's esteemed history while providing innovative twists on modern tastes and industry trends.



Willis Loughhead

PROPERTY BRIEF The Algonquin Hotel (algonquinhotel.com) is located on a quiet block in the heart of the city, close to Bryant Park and the renowned shopping on Fifth Avenue, making it the perfect launchpad for a New York City experience. Since its inception in 1902, The Algonquin has been a cultural phenomenon, standing as one of New York City's greatest storied hotels most notably known for The Round Table, one of the literary world's most famous gathering spots. The hotel is a historical jewel that emphasizes the importance of making unique, storied experiences. Today, the distinguished Round Table Restaurant and Blue Bar offer tasteful dining inclusions and curated cocktails alongside an exciting lineup of outstanding Broadway partnerships, art shows, musical performances, cabarets, and more. Each of this boutique hotel's 181 guest rooms and suites features a comfortable well-lit work desk, complimentary WiFi, and a sleek and stylish decor that reflects the hotel's art deco heritage. A longtime champion of women, The Algonquin Hotel was also the first to welcome solo female guests.

Will you discuss the history of The Algonquin Hotel?

The Algonquin Hotel is the oldest operating hotel in New York City. The land for the hotel was purchased in 1901 for \$180,000 and in just under a year and at a cost of \$500,000, The Algonquin Hotel was built and opened on November 22, 1902. When we welcomed our first guests, and I must sound like Jack Nicholson in *The Shining* when I say this because I most certainly was not here at the time, a room with a bath cost \$2 per night.

From opening day to re-opening after the pandemic, which is where I stepped into the story as the General Manager of the property, The Algonquin has maintained close ties to the arts community. Early residents included the brilliant Broadway star John Barrymore, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks. Novelists, playwrights, humorists, and critics as well as the editors of both fact and the fictions around the facts converged at The Algonquin Hotel in the decade between 1919 and 1929, founding the legendary Round Table and the Vicious Circle.

As Hollywood beckoned and The Algonquin became the first hotel to welcome unaccompanied



The Algonquin's Blue Bar Restaurant & Lounge



Each room and suite at The Algonquin has a well-lit work desk

women travelers, the writers ventured west, and the hotel became an infamous haven for quiet, sometimes not so quiet, debauchery in the music world and the spark jumped from The New Yorker to the city of New York itself.

Maya Angelou, Norman Mailer, Ralph Ellison, Ella Fitzgerald, James Baldwin paved the way for the Rock and Roll and Film set of the 1970s. William Friedkin celebrated the wrap of *The French Connection* over cocktails in our lounge and Lou Reed never took off his shades but was known to smile at a good story by the oldest bartender in the city at the time.

What excited you about the opportunity to lead The Algonquin Hotel and made you feel it was the right fit?

I am attracted to legends and comeback stories. Removing the pandemic related shackles on the doors and allowing the property to step out of the past with a wink and a nod to The Algonquin Hotel's history was a challenge that I could not pass up. I am probably the only Film School graduate who then built for decades a Michelin starred Executive Chef life, then to leave it and branch into the Executive Leadership and Hotel General Manager role, so the level of appeal was extraordinary. To enliven a cultural institution and create a salon for a new time with a long tenured and legendary service staff was impossible to ignore.

What have been the keys to The Algonquin Hotel's leadership in New York City?

I like to think of The Algonquin Hotel as a déjà vu experience, not entirely new, unusual in its familiarity and comfort; a place where the unusual is not a surprise. Leading that experience, it is my job to steer well clear of the tried-and-true traditions of other hotels. My goal is to allow breathing room for the irreverence and natural personality of our property. The staff, managers and guests should all hum along as loudly or as quietly as they like inside an atmosphere of hospitality.

How did you balance keeping some of the history and traditions of The Algonquin Hotel with the focus on bringing a modern and current feel?

The Algonquin Hotel has been on the tip of the tongue of New York City's tastemakers for over a century. Looking back at an epoch other than founding of the Round Table is important – in 1988 and 1989, the scene may have been across the street at The Royalton, but the fun was at The Algonquin Hotel.

I look back at the '20s and want to lift the spirit and attitude, but life is not a costume party. It should feel authentically 2020s. In the past year I have hosted events with close friends in the arts community such as legendary musician Thurston Moore from Sonic Youth, James Ijames, who celebrated his Tony nomination for his play *Fat Ham* upstairs, and both Colson Whitehead and Richard Hell have read passages of their recent work.

Will you provide an overview of the suite product at The Algonquin Hotel?

We have 24 suites, all with a pre-war residential feel, and they sell out quickly. Literary quotes, quips, and barbs are framed on every door and the suites are all named after the residents who either lived or created inside them. William Faulkner wrote a Pulitzer acceptance speech inside one and of course the Dorothy Parker suite is incredibly popular. Some say that since she was interred properly by The Dorothy Parker Society and given a proper burial and gravestone that she no longer haunts that suite, but the guests say otherwise. We receive frequent reports of mischievous spirits, and they are not all the product of extended hours in the Blue Bar.

How has The Algonquin Hotel approached its restaurant/food and beverage offerings?

It is important to accentuate the positive reputation we have for running the Blue Bar for over a century. New York City cocktail culture from

the Copa to the Stork to the 21 Club is legendary. In a nod to that ambiance, we run a lively literary bar with locally sourced food rather than the other way around. The cabaret element is critical to our ambiance and history, so I spend a great deal of time working with producers and their cast members who are fine-tuning their work. More than a few legends have been discovered at The Algonquin Hotel and I would bank on listening to a future star on any random night right now in the Blue Bar.

Will you discuss The Algonquin Hotel's focus on offering personalized service and a customized guest experience?

Without venturing too far down the road of discussing celebrity amenities and the whims of the creative elite, I will say that I can think of no other hotel business center that contains a well-tuned practice piano as well as Dorothy Parker's original writing desk. We foster an atmosphere of respect for the creative process. I encourage anyone to take time in the hotel and the city at large to access their creativity and we customize the experience for all guests of all ages around the idea of open encouragement.

My team and I have relationships that extend all over the city and into the waters around it. I recently took a diehard music fan to a small record release event at Rough Trade Records. Custom is our wheelhouse. The best guest experiences are built over an early afternoon cup of tea together in the Blue Bar.

How do you define the keys to providing a true luxury hotel experience today?

Leading luxury is fueling the freedom not to think, but to create.

What are the keys to being effective in the general manager role?

Perhaps it is the years of therapy and many mistakes I have made on my leadership journey, but I believe that we function best and glean the most with a genuinely humble and mindful stance. The purpose of leadership is to be present, in and outside of the workplace. Remember, our hired guests and visiting guests both select us as stewards of their journey and in doing so, they choose to share a portion of their lives.

What advice do you offer to young people interested in pursuing a career in hospitality?

My advice is to clearly identify the difference between function and purpose. Our purpose is to engage, build a community and create significant emotional memories. If you apply your purpose to each one of your functions, keeping your eyes open to the larger picture, you will never feel part of, nor get lost in the machine.

I advise you to be patient, listen and learn the property before attempting to problem-solve. What worked in one operation may not work at another.

And finally, if you do not show the property, your team, and yourself the patience and respect of working for a minimum of a year then you have not fed your purpose – you have only applied yourself to the function. ●