

Interactive Service

An Interview with Octavia Marginean-Tahiroglu, General Manager, The St. Regis New York

EDITORS' NOTE With more than 20 years of experience in the hospitality industry, Octavia Marginean-Tahiroglu is a longstanding member of The St. Regis New York family, having served as the Hotel Manager since 2015. In 2021, Marginean-Tahiroglu successfully led the hotel's reopening, welcoming travelers from around the world back to the beloved property. Prior to joining The St. Regis New York, she served as the General Manager of the Tribeca Grand Hotel and the Deputy General Manager of the Soho Grand Hotel. She began her work with Marriott International in 2004 with The Westin New York at Times Square, and first joined The St. Regis New York in 2006 as the Front Office Manager. Marginean-Tahiroglu attended Hunter College in New York where she received her BA degree in sociology. She is currently enrolled in the MBA Program at Zicklin School of Business, Baruch College.



Octavia Marginean-Tahiroglu

PROPERTY BRIEF The St. Regis New York (stregisnewyork.com), originally founded by John Jacob Astor over a century ago, is considered to be one of the finest hotels in the world. The majestic Beaux-Arts exterior, elegant public spaces, exquisitely designed guest rooms and suites, and unparalleled, bespoke service have preserved its legendary status for more than 100 years. The hotel is also home to the famed King Cole Bar, the birthplace of the original Bloody Mary. Ideally located in the heart of Manhattan at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 55th Street, The St. Regis New York is steps from the city's finest shopping, restaurants and museums.

Will you provide an overview of The St. Regis New York and how the property is positioned in the market?

When The St. Regis New York opened its doors at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 55th Street in 1904, it introduced the world to a level of luxury never before seen. At that time, luxury hotels of its kind did not exist in the U.S., and it was actually considered "low class" to stay at hotels – the wealthy preferred to stay in the homes of friends. The St. Regis New York was a major disruptor, and it continues to perform exceptionally in the luxury market.

Over the years, St. Regis has managed to stay true to its heritage while continuously evolving its legacy in exciting and daring ways. The St. Regis New York has remained relevant through its rich history, brand rituals, and traditions. We continually reinterpret our storied past for today's guests, whether by enlivening rituals like the Evening Ritual, sabrage, bespoke tableside champagne cocktail service, or offering a modern interpretation of jazz – all of which evoke a sense of nostalgia and glamour. Our iconic butler service remains a unique differentiator, and we continue to focus on it through rigorous butler training. We are proud to remain culturally relevant by fostering emotional connections with our guests through glamorous activations and brand experiences. The hotel's legacy has also been shaped by the iconic people who have stayed here, creating incredible stories – from Marilyn Monroe escaping the press, to Alfred Hitchcock riding the elevators in search of inspiration for his films. We are launching a podcast called St. Regis: Legends of 5th, which delves into the history of the St.



Exterior of The St. Regis New York

Regis brand and the Astor family. We interview historians, authors, and friends of the brand to share unique moments and stories of the famous guests who have stayed at our property. It's available on Spotify.

The St. Regis New York has gone through a major renovation. What can guests expect from the property?

Over time, various renovations have added and removed aspects of the original architecture. Our goal with this renovation was to simplify and bring back the elegance of 1904 while embracing a modern sensibility for 2024. We studied historical photos and incorporated original architectural elements in an elevated, sophisticated, and innovative way.

Led by Champalimaud Design, the renovation of our public spaces embraces the hotel's design legacy and original Beaux-Arts architecture, transforming it into a lavish urban oasis. During the renovation process, we discovered the original exterior-facing windows in the reception area, which had been covered up during previous renovations. We restored them and incorporated a stained-glass window based on the room's original 1904 Tiffany window design, found in a 1905 photograph. The original cages that housed the front desk have been reimagined as the walls behind the reception desk area. This whimsical concept is brought back through hand-painted wall coverings featuring beautiful peacocks perched on rose bushes and vines. The design choices relate to the Astor family's fantastic and vibrant lifestyle; they were prominent figures who loved to have fun and throw grand parties, which is mirrored in the playful and artistic details that guests will discover throughout the hotel, and we hope it will inspire our guests to host celebrations of their own in our newly renovated spaces.

How valuable it is for The St. Regis New York to have such a strong suite product?

A strong suite product is both a significant advantage and a unique challenge. We continuously find new ways to leverage our suite



A Red Snapper drink from the iconic King Cole Bar

product as a competitive edge and to monetize it accordingly. We see tremendous opportunities to develop innovative offerings through our packages and by establishing unique partnerships.

How has The St. Regis New York approached its culinary offerings and what are the keys to being successful in this part of the business?

I'm incredibly excited about the renovation and the details I elaborated on earlier, as it will mark a new chapter for The St. Regis New York. We have revamped public spaces, including the historic lobby, King Cole Bar, and two new dining spaces, unveiling a striking new era at Manhattan's best address. The renovation reflects the hotel's enduring legacy reborn for today's global traveler with a modern touch. And, of course, coinciding with our 120th anniversary makes it even more special – it's the perfect celebration of our rich history. With this monumental occasion, we had the opportunity to get particularly excited about our new dining offerings. We added an entirely new restaurant on our first floor. The space will be bright and airy, designed to feel like an outdoor pavilion, inspired by our original breakfast room from the 1910s. It offers a fresh and elegant new option for our guests – the perfect backdrop for breakfast, lunch, or afternoon tea.

At St. Regis, we have four signature rituals inspired by the Astor family that continue to inform the guest experience. These include Afternoon Tea, the Bloody Mary, the Evening Ritual, and the Midnight Supper. One of my favorites is the Midnight Supper, inspired by Caroline Astor, who would invite her closest friends to join her for a secret midnight supper after a gala or ball. These suppers, attended by about 150 guests seated at one long table, were legendary. As the story goes, waiters used a telephone to communicate with colleagues at the



The St. Regis New York entrance



Tiffany Suite living room

other end of the table, while floral arrangers in white felt shoes walked on the tabletop, dropping roses and carnations along the way. We continue this tradition today, hosting Midnight Suppers to celebrate new partnerships or momentous events. They are truly magnificent.

The Evening Ritual is a way to transition from day to night, with dimmed lights, shifted music, and the setting of candles. The Astors believed in celebrating each day with a glass of champagne, inspired by Napoleon Bonaparte, who famously opened champagne with his saber in both victory and defeat. Today, we invite guests to join us each night for a ceremonial champagne sabering event. Afternoon Tea during Caroline Astor's time was when friends gathered between lunch and dinner to sip tea and gossip – something rather innovative at the time, as women were not supposed to be seen dining without a man's supervision. The Bloody Mary is an essential part of The St. Regis New York's story. The beloved drink was perfected at our King Cole Bar in New York in 1934 by the legendary bartender Fernand Petiot. Petiot once told *The New Yorker* that the St. Regis served around 150 Bloody Marys a day. We are excited to start serving our signature beverage once again when we reopen.

How do you define the role of a general manager and how do you approach the role?

A hotel General Manager is a dedicated innkeeper at heart and a fearless leader in mind, continuously evolving with immense curiosity about how to stay ahead in fierce competition and how to surround themselves with the best talent. All these efforts are made to offer our guests – our ultimate judges – unimaginable experiences.

What makes a true luxury hotel experience today?

True luxury is defined by finessing the small details, creating an emotional connection, and offering an experience that has a personal touch. In the past, luxury was defined by “invisible service,” but today, expectations have shifted.

Luxury is now about “interactive service,” where a small conversation can lead to gathering a nugget of information that we can develop into a delightful and unexpected experience. Luxury goes beyond material things; it's about people who are genuinely interested in serving others.

Do you feel that there are strong opportunities for women in leadership roles in the hospitality industry?

Women in leadership is a hot topic in a traditionally male-dominated industry, but there has been a positive shift over the past decade. Opportunities exist where there is the will to put in the hard work. It is possible to balance a family and a leadership career while also having hobbies and a life outside of work. It's a big challenge, and sometimes we stumble, but overall, it's worth pursuing to have it all, even in small doses. All humans, regardless of gender, are more similar than different, and we should stay focused on that.

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

Young people in hospitality are a blessing. Youth is refreshing. My advice is to stay hungry, curious, and to learn how the world around us works while building resilience. Resilience is the quality that pushes you to take one more step when you think you can't. It's that inner strength that drives you to keep going, whether in your career or anything life throws at you. Common sense is another useful trait I highly recommend for a successful life and career. The magic question I often ask my young daughter is: “Does it make sense?” If the answer is a confident yes, go ahead and pursue it. If the answer is no, or if there is uncertainty, it may need more attention and could be done differently. Common sense is teachable, and it can be learned. We need talent in our industry, and we are eager to mentor and grow the next generation of leaders at The St. Regis New York. ●