

The Pink Paradise

An Interview with Sarah Wetenhall, President and Owner, The Colony Hotel

EDITORS' NOTE Sarah Wetenhall is the President and Owner of The Colony Hotel, and the visionary behind Palm Beach's historic Pink Paradise. A native of the Midwest, Wetenhall is a nomad by nature, having lived in more than six cities during the first 20 years of her life. Her vagabond roots inspired a love of travel and developed storytelling skills that have proven essential in developing this natural-born hotelier. A graduate of Vanderbilt University,



Sarah Wetenhall

she began her career in New York where she spent a decade-plus spearheading public relations and marketing efforts for major fashion houses including Calvin Klein, Dolce&Gabbana and Hugo Boss. Her experience in the fashion industry honed her keen aesthetic acumen and strong sensibility for the luxury market. After wholly acquiring The Colony Hotel in 2016 from a previous generation of ownership which included her father-in-law, Wetenhall commenced a devoted restoration and relaunch of the hotel. Guided by decades of cherished time in Palm Beach, she sought to create a stylish, multigenerational oasis that both preserved the property's storied history and engaged visitors with a vibrant and refreshed luxury experience. Wetenhall initiated major renovations, brand partnerships, and carefully curated activations, evolving The Colony into an internationally recognized design-forward hotel. In addition to leading The Colony Palm Beach, Wetenhall is a Board Member of the Worth Avenue Association, the Palm Beach Chamber of Commerce, the Historical Society of Palm Beach County, as well as the East Hampton Historical Society and the Couture Council of The Museum at FIT. She sits on the Visionary Board of the Southampton Hospital Foundation and is a member of the Board of Directors of the Women's Committee of the Central Park Conservancy. Wetenhall is a committee member of the Ladies Village Improvement Society and the Society of Memorial Sloan Kettering Cycle for Survival. She is also a member of the National Society of Colonial Dames, studying early U.S. history and promoting historic preservation of critical sites and objects. Wetenhall was named one of HOTELS Magazine's Top Ten Independent Hoteliers in 2021.

PROPERTY BRIEF The Colony Hotel (thecolonypalmbeach.com) is still as chic and lavish as it was in 1947, when it first debuted in Palm Beach's post-war construction boom. This glimmering destination has received praise for its fashionable dining and live music – as well as its signature je ne sais quoi. It's the reason that discerning guests – which have included Judy Garland, Lena Horne, John Lennon, Sophia Loren, and Frank Sinatra – have continued to check in for decades.

Where did you develop your passion for the hospitality industry?

Although I grew up in the Midwest, my family moved around quite frequently and thus, we spent a lot of time traveling. While the hospitality industry wasn't exactly on my radar as a child, this mobile childhood fueled a passion and curiosity for travel and a desire to see the world. Years later, my husband Andrew and I spent much of our early 20s visiting The



The Colony Hotel, Palm Beach's Pink Paradise

Colony Hotel, as his father was part of the ownership group at that time. Those years visiting both The Colony and the island of Palm Beach from the perspective of a guest have proven invaluable today. Blissfully unaware of the business and any operational challenges, we observed how guests interacted with the hotel, what worked and what didn't, and what services and amenities could be added to make The Colony a truly standout hospitality experience. Throughout the years, as Andrew and I traveled and explored the world together, we took note of other hospitality experiences we liked – and disliked – and began to articulate our desire to create one place that encompassed everything we loved from our travels. After purchasing The Colony Hotel in 2016, these decades of experiences serve as the foundation for our approach and commitment to luxury hospitality.



The Colony Hotel living room

Will you provide an overview of The Colony Hotel and how the property is positioned in the market?

Originally constructed in 1947, The Colony was designated a Historic Landmark by the Town of Palm Beach in 2020. The Colony Palm Beach faithfully preserves its legacy of gracious hospitality while ensuring continued relevance to a new generation of modern, well-traveled and discerning guests. A cultural hub with partnerships across fitness, design, fashion, art, and music, Palm Beach's pinkest hotel represents more than a hotel – rather, she is a place for guests to connect meaningfully and authentically with the best of Palm Beach. With one foot in the sand and one foot on Worth Avenue, our Pink Paradise is the epicenter of Palm Beach; a destination where old meets new, charm meets retro elegance, and hospitality meets lifestyle. Through strategic, thoughtful partnerships, The Colony has become a coveted destination for not only visitors, but also island locals. It is home to over 90 rooms, a mix of guest rooms and suites, villas, bungalows and penthouse residences, all of which provide unique, curated offerings for guests of all ages delivered with best-in-class ultra-boutique service. We offer unique amenities that embrace our desirable location such as paddle boards, bespoke cruiser bikes, beach picnics, and our custom Land Rover Defender Beach Runner and beach buggy that take guests to the sand or the shops, not to mention curated partnerships and experiences that ignite all of the senses.

How valuable is it for The Colony Hotel to have such a strong suite product?

As one can imagine, being a historic, boutique hotel also means that the guest rooms at The Colony are not overly large. Our suite product, as well as our residences – villas, bungalows, and penthouses – are crucial to our operation. These larger spaces are desirable to families and multi-generational travelers, of which we have many, but they also offer a different experience than staying in our typical guest rooms. It is this variety, paired with our unique location and intentional programming, that reinforces the fact that our Pink Paradise has something for everyone.

How has The Colony Hotel approached its culinary offerings and what are the keys to being successful in this part of the business?

Aware of its singular place in the hearts of long-time Palm Beachers, The Colony is dedicated to maintaining a rich tradition of culinary distinction in a vibrant social setting that is both welcoming and refreshingly unpretentious. Soon after Andrew and I purchased the hotel, we worked with Robert Caravaggi to bring Swifty's, the iconic Upper East Side boit e, to the property. Knowing what an institution Swifty's was to so many New Yorkers, we knew it would be a great addition to Palm Beach with its elevated scene, great people-watching, and classic comfort food – and it has been just that. Swifty's is a top attraction for guests of The Colony and Palm Beach locals alike, bringing people together for unforgettable food, entertainment, and Palm Beach memories.

How do you focus your efforts leading The Colony Hotel?

It is true what they say: the hospitality industry is not for the faint of heart. While I never dreamt of owning and operating a hotel, nor did I have previous hotel experience, my career in fashion, working for high-end luxury brands like Calvin Klein and Dolce&Gabbana, proved to be invaluable and was the ultimate training for hotel ownership.

The Colony is highly a visual, marketing-forward hotel; to that end, our strategy is carefully curated and intentional. I truly live and breathe the hotel, and I am near obsessive about the brand, strategy, and overall direction of the business. I owe this unwavering attitude to my previous career in fashion; it gave me a rare glimpse into how hugely successful fashion houses were able to effectively shape and maintain their identities with a laser-focused level of consistency of message and branding. This level of detail and nuance is what I strive for when leading The Colony.



The Colony Hotel pool

What do you feel are the keys to effective leadership and how do you approach your management style?

Personally, I am a hands-on, decisive leader. I am also an active listener that is uncompromising when it comes to The Colony brand and our guest offering and experience. I am also always learning; observing things from other people, properties, and destinations that I admire, and thinking of ways to inject them with "Colony magic" and bring them to Palm Beach. I think good leaders know what they want, but always have their eyes and ears open for new ideas.

Branding, marketing, and overall strategy is where I excel, and is much of what has led our hotel to where it is today. I spend most of my days strategizing our next move, speaking with

potential partners, and constantly brainstorming "what's next." Even when I'm not physically in Palm Beach, I'm speaking with my leaders at the hotel every day, often multiple times a day.

This brings me to my next point: you can't do it alone. We have a hefty responsibility to deliver on the brand promises that we convey to our guests, and that means an experienced, passionate, and well-trained team is necessary in order to do so. When building a team, it is important to know your strengths, but even more importantly, to know your weaknesses, and hire accordingly. A pivotal moment for us was when we hired our current General Manager, Bruce Seigel, whose experience and acute knowledge of the industry has transformed The Colony. Together, we make a stellar team and have restored the best parts of The Colony, preserving its colorful and storied history while introducing newness and intentional programming to excite the well-traveled and discerning guest – all while being employee-centric and community serving. When you have a great team, the sky is truly the limit.

What makes for a true luxury hotel experience today?

True luxury is expressed when the guest doesn't have to think – it is when hospitality is seamless, intuitive, and natural. This is what we continually strive for at The Colony. Staying at the Pink Paradise should feel like staying with a gracious, sophisticated, and well-connected friend; a good friend that knows you so well that you don't have to specify your preferences. Of course, full-service amenities, luxurious bedding, and wonderful food and beverage are essential to round out the experience, but what takes a hotel and its experiences from good to great is being thoughtful, intuitive, high-touch, and personal.

We always say that The Colony is much more than a hotel; she is a way of life. She is a place to connect meaningfully and authentically with Palm Beach, its vibrant history, lifestyle, and community. It is through best-in-class partnerships in fashion, food, fitness, design, and lifestyle that we're able to consistently surprise and delight our guests and embody this intuitive and natural hospitality experience.

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

Hospitality, like any industry, requires focus and tenacity. A mentor once told me to write down my goals and objectives. There is an element of permanence and intention that comes when you write something down, not to mention that it serves as a reference point in the future. For The Colony, this came in the form of drafting our Mission Statement and Brand Values. One of the first things I did upon our purchase of The Colony was to articulate how we envisioned the future of the hotel and the brand that we were building. With decades of experience as guests of The Colony, Andrew and I had so many hopes and dreams for the property; our Mission Statement and Brand Values were where we poured out this vision. It was, and still is, the road map for all that we do at Palm Beach's pinkest hotel. ●