



Sheila C. Johnson

Salamander's Strength

**An Interview with Sheila C. Johnson,
Founder and Chief Executive Officer,
Salamander Hotels & Resorts**



Salamander Resort & Spa in Middleburg, Virginia

EDITORS' NOTE Sheila Johnson is Founder and CEO of Salamander Hotels & Resorts. She is the first African-American woman to have a stake in three professional sports teams, including the Washington Mystics (WNBA), Washington Wizards (NBA), and Washington Capitals (NHL). She is also a founding partner of BET (Black Entertainment Television) and created the award-winning program *Teen Summit*. Johnson has served as Executive Producer of four documentary films and helped finance the Screen Actors Guild nominated feature film *The Butler*. A fervent supporter of education and the arts, she serves on the Board of Governors of Parsons The New School for Design in New York, and is a member of the Leadership Council at Harvard Kennedy School's Center for Public Leadership (CPL). She is also a board member of the Sundance Institute and the ANNKA Foundation, as well as Founder and Chair of the Middleburg Film Festival.

COMPANY BRIEF Salamander Hotels & Resorts (salamanderhotels.com) is a privately owned and operated company based in Middleburg, Virginia, just outside Washington, D.C. Founded by Sheila C. Johnson in 2005, the company has a portfolio that features a collection of three golf resorts including Innisbrook Resort near Tampa, Reunion Resort in Orlando, and Hammock Beach Resort in Palm Coast. Other properties are the luxurious Salamander Resort & Spa in Middleburg, a 340-acre equestrian-inspired property; and the development of the new Tryon Resort in Tryon, North Carolina.

What was your vision when you founded Salamander Hotels & Resorts?

It started with Salamander Resort & Spa in Middleburg, Virginia. I bought the 340-acre property from the Harriman Estate and I immediately knew what I was going to do with it. I just didn't know it would take this long, but ignorance is bliss.

I wanted something that was reflective of the Middleburg area. I wanted to focus on spa, health, and wellness to help people in Washington and elsewhere to come to the countryside where they could de-stress.

Not knowing it would take so long for the entitlement process, I branched out and bought Innisbrook outside of the Tampa Bay community, near Clearwater. It was a distressed property that was in trouble. The recession was getting ready to strike, and I bought the place and renovated the entire 900-acre resort, and it is now a Preferred property.

We have a PGA Tour event there – now called The Valspar Championship – and we're in our seventh year of being on NBC with our tournament.

People within the industry became impressed at how we had turned Innisbrook around, and this led to us entering into a partnership with Lubert-Adler for Salamander to manage Reunion Resort in Orlando and Hammock Beach Resort in Palm Coast. We have now also turned these properties around financially and they're doing very well. In fact, we're looking at building a hotel at Hammock Beach because of the demand for group business.

Our newest opportunity is in Tryon, North Carolina, where we have been selected to manage a 2,300-acre resort development called Tryon Resort. The developers have already created incredible competition fields and we have already had numerous events in hunter/jumper, dressage, and other classes.

We are developing a 150-room hotel that will overlook the show grounds, and we're going to develop a nearby five-star-level resort atop a magnificent vista.

I was able to get into the hotel business and acquire properties that we could turn around to start building our company.

From here, we want to continue to add hotels, focus on management contracts, and work with developers to integrate our brand into new properties.

What makes for a successful hotel restaurant?

In the areas we're located, we work with local farmers because we definitely want good, fresh, and organic foods. For example, all of the produce I grow on my Salamander Farm is used at Salamander Resort & Spa. Beyond food, the key to success is really great leadership in the kitchen, and you have to have the best chef possible: one who is a visionary, flexible and resilient, and very attentive to detail. The chefs change our menus seasonally. We have a lot of repeat customers and we want them to come back and experience new items in our restaurants. We also look for someone who is an

orchestra director of sorts, who can coordinate getting the meals out on time and ensuring that they're flavorful and attractive.

Do you run the spa yourself and how are you making it innovative?

We absolutely run the spa at Salamander Resort & Spa ourselves. It's garnered rave reviews from the media and the public. Even though it operates somewhat independently, we have connected it to our equestrian area, as well as with our kitchen because we have cooking classes and we really focus on nutrition. I really like to talk about different foods and what they can do for the body for the purpose of health and well-being.

Our specific services in the spa for different areas of the body are customized to the guest, from the oils we use to get rid of ailments to emphasizing to our customers that what they put in their bodies will affect their overall condition.

So as they're resting at the pool after their treatment, we have a café out there with fresh juices and healthy food choices, which our guests can enjoy. We are really trying to educate everyone who visits the spa. Almost all of our food is grown organically; the meats on the table come from local farmers, although we do have some foods that have to be brought in fresh, like seafood. But it's important that we offer healthy options.

What more needs to be done to open up opportunities for women in business?

There aren't that many women on boards. Many men who sit on boards become very close and recommend each other to other boards. It's still an old boy's network in that respect. For women to penetrate that circle has been very tough. I'm proud of my team ownership because I have a very enlightened leader in Ted Leonsis, who has welcomed me as an owner of three sports teams and named me Vice Chairman of Monumental Sports. I'm very active and work side-by-side with him to make our sports franchises very successful. It takes special men like Ted to have a more open mind and bring women into positions of leadership.

There are more female businesses that have started up in recent times. However, the walls they keep hitting are financial. Even as my company grows, I need to find ways to bring in partners to continue our growth. I have a great team of people behind me and they have helped me become more successful in breaking through those walls. ●