

The Rebirth of an Icon

An Interview with Geoffrey Gelardi,
Managing Director, The Lanesborough



The Lanesborough Céleste restaurant (left) and the sitting and dining area of the Buckingham Suite (above); and the lobby (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.

PROPERTY BRIEF The Lanesborough (lanesborough.com) occupies a 1829 landmark building that has been restored to its original grandeur. An Oetker Collection, Masterpiece Hotel, the five-star property is situated opposite London's Hyde Park with 93 guest rooms including 43 suites decorated in Regency style and evoking the ambience of a 19th-century private residence. The property is located in elegant Knightsbridge, minutes from the exclusive shopping of Harrods and Sloane Street. Céleste, the hotel's restaurant is overseen by Chef Patron Eric Frechon from Le Bristol together with Executive Chef Florian Favario. The Lanesborough also offers award-winning Traditional Afternoon Tea, cocktails in our Library Bar, and an extensive array of rare and vintage cognacs. The property also houses the most luxurious smoking venue in London, The Garden Room. The hotel boasts a Spa Studio, a Fitness Studio, and seven beautifully adorned rooms for meetings and social events.



Geoffrey Gelardi

Is it important to maintain some of the original feel of the property?

This has been the intention from day one. We were not looking at a significant change in design theme – we were looking at lightening it and giving it a new, fresh look. If we want to stay at the top in any major city in the world, we have to go with the flow and make sure that our infrastructure, design, and service levels are up-to-date, because if we miss any one of those, we are not going to be in the top five anymore.

Many at the top level in New York talk about the challenge of the food and beverage component. In London, it's the same. Do you still need to have that offering to be considered a true luxury property?

There is no doubt we need to have a great restaurant. Whether or not we actually run it or we have a restaurateur run it is debatable.



Today, hoteliers will agree that they need a little help. The successful restaurants in London are those that combine the ability of the hoteliers to run a business with the ability of the chefs and restaurateurs to produce great food.

Is it the same with a spa?

It's the same thing. It's a combination of taking the expertise of somebody who really understands what makes a good spa or club, and making sure

we hire those with the best knowledge we can, and then giving them the ability to perform.

If hoteliers think they can be restaurateurs and spa directors, they're going to have difficulty at some point.

What investments did you make in technology? Is it more behind the scenes?

From the first day we opened in 1991, from a technology standpoint, we were head and shoulders above any other hotel in Europe.

We've taken a new step for The Lanesborough in taking technology to its current limit. We all know this is something that moves all the time and it's virtually impossible to keep up with it on all levels, but we're putting in the infrastructure that we hope will carry us for the next 10 years.

How much new product can the market take and is there now greater pressure on rate as a result of the entire inventory?

It's good for the consumer and we are very lucky in London that we have one of the best hotel markets in the world – we are always in the top two or three in the world.

Not a lot of new product has come onto the market until recently, which leads to more competition, but it also leads to people improving their service levels and their product; you have to be more competitive.

London is still one of the most expensive hotel cities in the world. While it's not inexpensive to run a hotel in London, this brings creativity to the industry and there is nothing bad about good competition.

How has the renovation experience been for you? For someone who is so results-oriented, is it hard not to get frustrated when things don't go as planned?

I have been through most things in the hotel industry more than once, but this is the first time I have closed a hotel, especially one I have run for so many years and at which I have built so many relationships with employees and guests.

We acted in the best interests of both employees and guests, but it has been one of the most difficult things I have ever done.

They say opening a hotel is the most difficult thing to do in the hotel industry, but the most heart-wrenching thing to do from a professional standpoint is closing a hotel. I even had guests crying; it was an emotional time and it was done in the best interest of the hotel, but when we look at what we're going to produce and get back, even those employees that were upset are now really excited. It was the right thing to do. ●

When you have a property that is known as a leader in the industry, many would ask, "Why close it?" What can your guests expect as you reopen?

We had been looking at doing a renovation of The Lanesborough for four years. The original concept was mainly cosmetic. However, after lengthy discussions, the specification of what we were going to do grew and it became a major renovation: redoing all the infrastructure, all the rooms to a much higher specification, redoing the technology and still, at one point, we weren't going to close.

The more work that was specified, however, the longer the renovation was going to take, and we started weighing the damage of one year or more of closure against three-plus years of annoying our guests.

The renovation by now was fairly substantial and guests now see it as slightly less masculine, and will certainly notice the craftsmanship that has gone into the design of the ceilings. If The Lanesborough had a design weakness before, it was that our ceilings were quite ugly. Now, they will be quite spectacular.