



Fit for its Namesake

An Interview with Philip A. Wood,
Managing Director, The Jefferson



Plume restaurant (left); The Jefferson entrance (right)

EDITORS' NOTE Over the course of his career, Philip Wood has been responsible for seven member properties of the prestigious Relais & Châteaux organization; four hotels and three restaurants that reached Five Star or Five Diamond status, sometimes both; and an elite handful of hotels that achieved number one rankings under his leadership. Wood received his formal training at Henley College and later in luxury hotels in London and Paris.



Philip A. Wood

He arrived in North America in the late '70s and has since held senior management positions with exalted institutions like Four Seasons Hotels, Jack Nicklaus' Golden Bear International, Rosewood Hotels, Orient-Express Hotels, and Forte's Exclusive Hotels of the World. He was President and shareholder in The Garrett Hotel Group. In 2007, Wood and two partners created Arden Grove Hospitality. In 2011, Wood became a consultant to The Jefferson, which led to his joining the parent company in January 2012 and assuming his current post.

PROPERTY BRIEF As Washington, D.C.'s best small boutique hotel, The Jefferson (www.jeffersondc.com) has presided over the corner of 16th and M Streets since 1923, when the Beaux-Arts gem opened as an apartment building and later as a hotel for the world's elite travelers and D.C.'s most important visitors. The 99-room downtown property is European and Washingtonian in style, and tributes to Thomas Jefferson and his beloved Monticello are found throughout. The Jefferson boasts three exquisite dining options; an intimate spa dedicated to customized treatments; and amenities including 24-hour butler service, three meeting spaces, complimentary local and international calls, an on-site fitness center, 24-hour self-service business center, and a private resident's lounge with fireplace.

What makes this property so special?

D.C. is a corporate-driven town in that the majority of the business comes in Monday through Thursday and the city takes on a different life on weekends, unless there is a citywide conference.

Because of this, most of the other hotels in town have to gear towards the group base. Even in our own competitive set, there are some great hotels, but due to their size or having aging facilities and function space, their group base is far higher than that of our hotel.

Many remember with fondness The Jefferson prior to its renovations, but it has become a different hotel since it reopened three years ago.

As our owner says, if Thomas Jefferson was alive today, The Jefferson is a hotel where he would stay when he came to Washington.

Was it important that the history and tradition were maintained as the property was updated?

The historical components and the ties to Jefferson himself, and particularly to Monticello, have been made even stronger. The original architect for the property, Jules de Sibour, named several of his buildings after presidents. This happened to be the third one he built, hence the name Jefferson.

When the renovations were done, they stripped the hotel down to the bare bones and put in all of the modern facilities and systems, but we focused on tying them in with Jefferson and particularly with his love of Monticello.

We have even reproduced the fabrics based on sketches of some of the outbuildings at Monticello, and our shampoos and other amenities have been custom-designed to incorporate herbs and flowers and essences that would have been in Jefferson's gardens during his time.

Would you highlight a few of the specialty suites?

The specialty suites are not as large or ostentatious as you might find in some larger hotels – they offer a feeling of being in someone's home.

There are several themes and the artwork reflects the individual character of each of the suites. Each has its own feel based on elements that represent some of Jefferson's loves – everything from canine themes complete with books about dogs to floral and beyond. He was a renaissance man and that inspired the decor of many of our suites.

The hotel rooms themselves are also beautiful, decorated in one of our three main color schemes.

Even beyond design, one of the reasons for the Jefferson's success is that, with our size and style of operation, it feels more like a residence so we can be more personalized in our service than a lot of other D.C. hotels.

What has made the food and beverage component successful?

All hotel restaurants are somewhat at a disadvantage compared to stand-alone restaurants, especially if they don't have their own street entrance, which we do not. So we try to give Plume its own identity based on the quality of the experience when a patron arrives.

The mandate was to make it one of the top, if not the top, restaurant in town and we are happy to say it's the highest Zagat-rated restaurant in D.C.

Consistency and continued improvement have been the keys to its success. It doesn't serve the "mad scientist cuisine" that gets a lot of the press these days, but there are a lot of regulars who keep coming back because the food is excellent.

We don't overcomplicate the food but still offer a fine-dining experience and we have the finest wine cellar in D.C. to complement it.

How do you offer the necessary technology without losing the personal touch?

Technology is a tool that allows our staff to look after the guests so it should be somewhat seamless.

When technology fails, we have to make sure the staff knows how to react and make the customer comfortable.

When a first-time customer arrives at the hotel, we work to orient them to the property. We're not intrusive but we convey that we're here if they need us. When they do need us, we have to make sure to respond as hosts and hostesses, and we can do that at our size.

We have a 57 percent repeat guest rate, which is very high for a corporate hotel, so customers are comfortable here.

Is the focus for GMs more on business or hospitality today?

The higher end the hotel, the more important the ability to communicate on a personal level.

We have a big advantage here in that our ownership has solid real estate and assets that continue to improve their value.

They look at things on a long-term basis and that gives us a distinct advantage over many other hotels in the area.

Our job is to make sure that all of our employees understand that it's about the personal service and relationships, and the ability to respond effectively to guests when necessary.

We have to make sure that use of technology and instant communication does not overshadow the ability to communicate on a person-to-person basis. ●