

Hospitality

Tradition with a Contemporary Twist



An Interview with **Stuart P. Johnson**,
General Manager, Rocco Forte's Brown's Hotel

HIX Restaurant at Rocco Forte's Brown's Hotel

EDITORS' NOTE In 2004, Stuart Johnson was appointed General Manager of Brown's Hotel in London and assumed the role in January 2005. Prior to this, he served as Publishing Director at Condé Nast Johansens. Before this, he was Director and General Manager of Cliveden from 1994 through 1999 and had previously held the position of Resident Manager between 1986 and 1990. Between those two posts, at the age of 32, Johnson became the youngest



Stuart P. Johnson

ever Hotel Manager at The Savoy in London, a position he held for four years. He originally made his mark with The Savoy Hotel Group as Personnel and Purchasing Manager at The Connaught and as Assistant Banqueting Manager of Claridge's, having started his career as a management trainee. In November 2012, Stuart Johnson was named 2012 Hotelier of the Year by Caterer and Hotelkeeper.

PROPERTY BRIEF Rocco Forte's Brown's Hotel London in the heart of Mayfair is situated within walking distance of key shopping areas such as Bond Street and Regent Street, in addition to major theaters, art galleries, and all key central London landmarks. The hotel has hosted many distinguished guests since it opened as London's first hotel in 1837. Each room and suite is individually decorated and many feature contemporary artworks. The Donovan Bar and HIX Mayfair celebrate British art and cuisine and The English Tea Room offers the award-winning afternoon tea, while an indulgent spa and state-of-the-art gymnasium offer guests a discreet sanctuary. Brown's Hotel (www.roccofortehotels.com) is also home to six unique private dining rooms for intimate meetings or extravagant celebrations. The property is comprised of 11 Georgian town houses offering 117 bedrooms, including 29 luxurious suites.

Has the London market remained strong?

The Olympics gave London a bit of a boost. Because of that, the London market remained strong throughout 2012. The number of travelers from the U.S. in particular did not increase dramatically – one would not expect anything else in an election year.

Once the election was over, it was expected that the U.S. would recover quickly, so we're seeing an increase in U.S. travelers coming back to Europe.

London is fortunate – it is a great hub for those traveling from the North American continent in particular to stop into on their way to other destinations.

The U.K. as a whole and particularly London has a huge affinity with family friends in the U.S.

A property like Brown's has a long history and tradition. How do you balance that heritage with the need to remain current?

It's important. Brown's has a huge depth of tradition but with a contemporary twist.

Olga Polizzi, Director of Design and Deputy Chairman of the company, has a wonderful knack for ensuring that all properties and in particular Brown's exudes qualities of the location at which it sits – we're sitting in the center of London and we're very English, yet there is lightness and a contemporary feel to our interior design.

We continue to be innovative with a modern approach; we're fortunate in that we have a young but experienced team.

There is a vibrancy and energy within Brown's. We're in the center of the most exciting part of London within a stone's throw of theater land, Bond Street, and Dover Street, where there are some amazing fashion brands.

In 2012, our Christmas tree was decorated by Nicholas Kirkwood, who just opened a shop in New York and is one of the biggest up-and-coming English shoe designers.

It's about continuing that energy, that edginess, and thinking ahead in the marketplace to ensure that although everybody is interested in our tradition, we're still spearheading it with what will be happening tomorrow.

How important is the suite product for your clientele?

First, the suites are opulent; they have fabulous interior design and a choice of bed linens, pillows, and bathroom amenities – every suite has its own docking station and a flat-screen television with endless channels.

A Rocco Forte suite experience includes breakfast, Internet, movies, free pressing, and the use of a mobile phone that has key numbers programmed in, particularly that of the concierge, who is available 24 hours a day to guests. Our concierge has a motto: Once a guest, always a guest of Brown's. So wherever that guest is in the world, he will not hesitate to contact our concierge.

Does the suite product have a consistent feel or does it differ suite to suite?

All of the suites are individually designed by Olga Polizzi, so there is a consistency in the interior design. They are special in that the person who is staying in one of our suites, which is effectively a mini apartment, has a unique address in Mayfair, which is in the heart of London.

I remember a journalist saying soon after we first opened how wonderful it was to walk into those suites and feel that every single object has been positioned as if it was a home.

How challenging is it to compete in the food and beverage space?

We have three distinct offerings available to external guests as well as our house guests.

The Donovan Bar is a unique, vibrant bar adorned with photographs by renowned photographer Terence Donovan and it is frequented largely by locals. There is a buzz from almost mid-day until past midnight daily.

The English Tea Room is synonymous with English afternoon tea. It's served on Edwardian Silver Stands and we offer fabulous sandwiches, warm scones that are served as you wish them, unique pastries that change on a four-week rotation, and a trolley that offers two rotating cake flavors.

In addition, we just introduced the Prestige Seasonal Tea Library curated by leading tea traders, Lalani & Co, so guests can taste teas from family run boutique tea estates.

We have also introduced Tea-Tox, where each sandwich and pastry has been created in conjunction with a dietician to ensure that it's full of flavor but low on calories.

Our restaurant is HIX Mayfair, and Chef Mark Hix is known for being at the forefront of English products – everything within the restaurant is English and we know the providence of those dishes. So that attracts a huge volume of external diners but ensures that everyone who stays at Brown's will make time in their schedules to take a meal at HIX.

Has the GM role evolved more into a financial business role?

All key successful general managers realize that hospitality is what our job is all about. It's playing a part in what is a private occasion, be it a business visit or a golden wedding anniversary, where you and your team are contributing to the success of that occasion.

We are business administrators, but one cannot lose the art of hospitality. ●