

Hospitality

A Commitment to the Arts and Hospitality

An Interview with Jonathan Plutzik, Owner, The Betsy - South Beach



The Betsy - South Beach library (above)

EDITORS' NOTE As co-owners of *The Betsy - South Beach*, Jonathan Plutzik and his wife Lesley Goldwasser, have established a climate of luxury lodging within a creative paradise. With their vision, *The Betsy* champions the power of community through its PACE (Philanthropy, Arts, Culture, Education) program. From its 500 Writer's Room residencies to cultural workshops and festivals including *Overture to Overtown* (Jazz Festival), *TransArt*, *Escribe Aqui*, *A Cappella*, and *Yiddish Speakers* series, among countless others, *The Betsy* has been a resource for the community since opening in 2009. Prior to acquiring *The Betsy*, Plutzik was with *Credit Suisse* for 24 years, retiring as Vice Chairman in 2002.



Jonathan Plutzik

PROPERTY BRIEF *The Betsy - South Beach* (thebetsyhotel.com) embraces the local community through global arts and culture. Since opening in 2012, *The Betsy* Writer's Room has hosted more than 500 authors, artists and thought leaders. The hotel's visionary *TransArt* initiative was launched in 2015 with *Unity Coalition* and *TransMiami*. *The Betsy's* Poetry programs are inspired by the work of mid-century poet Hyam Plutzik, three-time finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, and father of *Betsy* owner Jonathan Plutzik.

How strong is the South Beach market today and what is your outlook for growth for the property?

I'm very optimistic about it. For this region, we just came through a challenging weather season. We're fortunate in Miami to have largely dodged the storms.

Last season, we struggled with the issue of Zika and this season, fortunately Zika didn't appear.

Finally, we're coming to the end of two other things that are relevant: the Miami Beach Convention Center is going through a \$615 million renovation and expansion, and it has already been partially reopened for events like Art Basel which takes place in December. We're looking for it to be completely opened in 2018, which will drive a lot of business in the area.

In Miami Beach, we have also gone through a lot of growth in rooms supply. Many

hotels have opened over the past few years, and whenever we absorb new supply, there are challenges. However, we're closer to the tail end than the beginning of that supply absorption, so we're already seeing a favorable impact on occupancy and rates.

At *The Betsy*, we went through our own expansion, which was unveiled in December 2016, that doubled the size of the hotel. We're successfully working our way through the transition that occurs when a property is doubled in size, not only in terms of guest rooms but also including the number and size of our public spaces.

Overall, we have a bullish outlook for 2018.

Has Airbnb had an impact on the property and the overall market?

We have been lucky because our target clientele is more high service-oriented and expects the amenities that a hotel like ours provides, so while we're not completely insulated from the Airbnb effect, the impact on us is more modest.

Is your focus on the arts and culture a differentiator for the property?

Our commitment to the arts and what we do in terms of amenities and programs, artists in residence, books in rooms and a broad connection to community definitely enrich the guest experience.

There are many great hotels in our region, so the fact that we are consistently embraced by top travel professionals and ranked so high suggests that it does have a favorable influence on how we are viewed.

We are mounting an important series of Art Basel exhibits of both Miami and New York based artists, which contributes to people's interest in the property.

We also host live music five nights a week, and we are proud that we are one of the few places in Miami to regularly celebrate our rich local community of musicians.

What is the key to being successful in the food and beverage aspect of the hotel?

Our guests want choices. Our neighborhood residents who might not cook and use us as their kitchen want variety, so having multiple outlets enhances that. They're all elevated in terms of quality, but they also need to be

friendly and inviting places if we want people to join us several times per week.

We are also becoming more focused on group and corporate business, and we can now provide a diverse set of culinary offerings for such groups.

We've recently opened several new food and beverage venues and we have a long-standing relationship with celebrity chef Laurent Tourondel. Our main, high-end restaurant in the hotel has been affiliated with him for eight years, first as part of the BLT Group and more recently it became *LT Steak and Seafood*. In addition, we've just opened a new pizzeria and Italian restaurant under the Laurent flag as he has become one of the most highly regarded pizza makers in New York. We will also open a small walk-up window (in Miami terms called a *Ventanita*) serving gelato and waffles, as well as great coffee. We have also partnered with Miami's iconic local coffee roaster *Panther Coffee* to open an outlet in one of our large spaces, which we call the *Conservatory*.

How critical is it to customize the guest experience today?

We need to have all the basics down before we get to that, but people who stay with us regularly name specific staff members as a reason for loving their stay. That authentic human touch is why people often choose hotels versus an Airbnb alternative. They want to be embraced, smiled at and responded to. We have to get that right to be successful.

Do you look more at experience or a service mentality when searching for talent?

It is true that elements of this business can be taught, but having an intrinsic hospitality personality is tremendously important. Genuine warmth and empathy is so powerful. We also understand that good training is a critical element to our success. The very best people in our business bring natural gifts, but teaching and great coaching can make a huge difference.

What makes the local community so important to you?

Our *Betsy* family cares deeply about community. We love the fact that, in Miami Beach, we live in a community that is rich in diversity and filled with interesting and interested people. We understand that our success is ultimately measured most by how we impact favorably on the people around us. ●