

## Embracing the Community

An Interview with Maria Zec,  
Regional Vice President, USA East Coast, The Peninsula Hotels  
and General Manager, The Peninsula Chicago



The Lobby at The Peninsula Chicago

**EDITORS' NOTE** Since March 2002, Maria Zec has served as General Manager of The Peninsula Chicago and she assumed her current post with The Peninsula Hotels in May 2007. Prior to this, she served as Managing Director and Hotel Manager at the New York Palace Hotel. Zec holds a BS in business management and a BA in French from Purdue University.



Maria Zec

**PROPERTY BRIEF** The Peninsula Chicago ([peninsula.com/chicago](http://peninsula.com/chicago)) has been recognized as a premier property with Forbes' Five-Star and AAA Five Diamond awards since its grand opening in 2001. The property features 339 luxurious guest rooms and suites and offers a 15,000-square-foot spa and fitness center, 24-hour room service, a ballroom, and seven additional meeting and event rooms as well as two distinctive restaurants and Z Bar.

### Will you provide an overview of The Peninsula Chicago and how the property is positioned in the market?

The Peninsula Chicago opened in June 2001. It was important to us that we embrace the local community and develop strong relationships with business and civic leaders. It wasn't long before the community reciprocated and, to this day, the hotel is recognized among local residents, business leaders and the social community as a favorite destination. What is especially impressive is that the hotel continues to receive accolades and recognition today, 20 years later. This is a wonderful reflection of the dedication, commitment and pride that our staff embraces in taking care of our guests.

The hotel is perfectly situated overlooking Lake Michigan in the heart of the shopping district on Michigan Avenue. The hotel features 339 guest rooms and suites; an award-winning Spa, a half-Olympic length swimming pool, outdoor sun deck and fitness center; a variety of meeting and event venues – many of which have natural daylight and views of the city; and two restaurants and a rooftop bar. The Lobby features 20-foot floor-to-ceiling windows allowing for a lot of natural sunlight. In addition to breakfast, lunch and dinner, The Lobby serves Peninsula's signature Afternoon Tea, Sunday Brunch, as well as "Chocolate at The Pen" on weekends, featuring live entertainment. Shanghai Terrace features

Cantonese cuisine and this restaurant has been named the Best Chinese Restaurant in Chicago by *Zagat*. During Chicago's warmer months, our outdoor Terrace is perfect for al fresco dining overlooking Chicago's skyline. Z Bar presents beautiful city views of Chicago's iconic Michigan Avenue. An array of globally inspired cocktails, boldly flavored food, and the latest tunes from around the world are featured at Z Bar.

### How will the property celebrate its 20th anniversary this year and will you discuss the leadership of your team in reaching this milestone?

I am impressed with the tenure of our team. Twenty percent of our colleagues have been with the hotel since we opened 20 years ago which is an inspiring number in our industry. To commemorate The Peninsula Chicago's 20-year anniversary, the hotel is offering a variety of ways for guests to partake in celebrating this milestone, while also giving back to the community:

- To show our appreciation for their loyalty, guests can receive 20 percent off the best available rate for guest room or suite reservations when reserving at least 10 days in advance for stays through December 31, 2021.

- Over the years, select menu items have become favorites at the various Peninsula restaurants. Now through 2021, a selection of classic favorite menu items are available in The Lobby.

- "The Pen 20" is a specialty cocktail with an Asian influence of jasmine pearl tea, French lavender and topped with Champagne – now that's worth celebrating.

- The Peninsula Chicago is making a one-for-one meal donation to the Greater Chicago Food Depository through 2021 with a donation of a meal for a person in need for every culinary classic ordered, as well as The Peninsula 20th Anniversary Dumpling and The Pen 20 celebratory cocktail. To date, we have donated 18,000 meals.

### How proud are you to see the strength and resilience displayed by The Peninsula Chicago's team in addressing the challenges caused by the pandemic?

I am so proud of our team. We have such dedicated and loyal employees that are the heart and soul of our hotel and the reason why our guests feel connected to the property. I love that our employees are anxious to get back to serving our guests.

### Will you highlight The Peninsula Chicago's focus on building a diverse and inclusive workforce to mirror the diversity of the guests it serves?

It is essential that our workforce is diverse and inclusive. The hospitality industry has positions in all levels and skill sets, from culinary to engineering and everything in between. Our industry traditionally attracts international staff as well which mirrors the diversity of our guests. We seek to employ colleagues with varied backgrounds and from communities throughout Chicago for the very reason of creating an inclusive and diverse team that reflects our community and clientele.

### The Peninsula Hotels has a commitment to art and celebrating emerging artists. What are The Peninsula Chicago's art initiatives?

Since 2016, The Peninsula Chicago has been the premier hotel sponsor for EXPO Chicago, the city's annual contemporary art fair which brings together some of the best galleries, artists, and collectors in the world. Annually, the hotel transforms The Lobby to showcase internationally acclaimed artists' work for the public and guests to enjoy for a six-week special exhibition. We love shining a light on emerging talent as well as transforming our lobby into an even more grand art gallery. Over the years the hotel has featured numerous artists' work including Kerry James Marshall, Tony Tasset, Nick Cave, Gaetano Pesce, James Nares, Iván Navarro and many more.

This fall we will install work by Chicago artist Bob Faust titled "with all, and still..." and this exhibit is on display in The Lobby on the fifth floor of the hotel through 2021. This is the latest exhibition of The Peninsula Hotels' "Art in Resonance" program, a global initiative in support of contemporary architecture. This exhibit is a series of layered, billboard-scaled works created from photographic details captured by Faust from eight of Chicago's 77 neighborhoods. The result is a colorful and immersive experience that feels as if the billboards have been transformed and transported to our hotel lobby, providing an industrial counterpoint to the elegance of the surrounding hotel spaces. A QR code allows guests to view the photographs at the origin of each work, and in doing so, understand more about the Chicago neighborhoods that were the inspiration for the panels. ●