

PROFILE



## EXCEEDING expectations

### 124 ON QUEEN CREATES A TREASURE TROVE OF DELIGHTS

BY DENISE DEVEAU

When a small apartment rental property in the Old Town district of Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont. came up for sale, 124 on Queen Hotel & Spa owners Nick Capasso and David Jones decided to join forces to build a unique hotel legacy in the picturesque town. Given they had no history in the industry, they relied on their extensive travel experiences to create stays that would check all the right boxes for guests.

"We didn't really know what we were doing when we started, but we knew what we liked in hotels when we travelled," says Capasso.

The 124 on Queen that you see today has come a long way. After 12 years of expansion efforts, the team is celebrating its biggest milestone yet: the official launch of a newly minted

40,000-sq.-ft. signature building on the back of the original site. The new build includes 39 rooms, an expansive cocktail lounge and meeting spaces, plus a world-class spa that draws guests from miles around. Architects for the project were St. Catharines-based Quartek Group Inc.

Factoring in all six of its properties, 124 on Queen now offers a total of 72 guestrooms, ranging from single to full-fledged apartment-style suites.

The owners take pride in the fact that 124 on Queen is far from the typical Niagara-on-the-Lake property. "When we first started, it was still called Victorian Villas," says Capasso. "We realized right away we didn't want to be another traditional, red velvet, dark-wood type of property, so we settled on a new name."

They dispensed with the Victorian

aesthetic typically seen in the town. "We were aiming for a different market," he explains. "Instead, we opted for pastel furnishings, light floors and a contemporary wine-country feel. The cabinets, flooring and furniture are modern, while still honouring the town's heritage."

Suites are generous in size (350 sq. ft. is the smallest), offering a large helping of high-end amenities, custom-designed mattresses, state-of-the-art appliances and electronically programmed fireplaces. Many have kitchen facilities. "We sought out the best materials and structural components and took every soundproofing precaution to ensure guest privacy," says Capasso.

General manager Eric Quesnel, who spent decades with Fairmont Hotels and Resorts, says guests are not experiencing a typical hotel when they stay at 124 on

Queen. "It's much larger than what you see from the street. You are more a part of a community. There is nothing like it in the region, and a great place for world travellers that want to disconnect and have fun."

He points to the newly constructed bar area that serves as the nervous system of the hotel, providing a relaxing and spacious setting for enjoying cocktails and small bites.



The 12,000-sq.-ft. world-class Nordic-inspired destination spa

The floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the courtyard create an al-fresco ambiance, while a small speakeasy dining area in a hidden corner provides the perfect spot for an intimate gathering.

The layout of the hallways on the main floor offers multiple exits to the street, courtyard and storefronts, including a Starbucks, The Budapest Baker, Maple Fudge, OLIV Tasting Room, Pistachio's Gelato and Pastries, Maison Apothecare and Ghost Walks. "We wanted to maintain the connection to the streets and old town," explains Capasso. "It's almost like a village. We're not a 19-storey Hilton. We're quite the opposite, so we made sure that our hotel flowed with the buildings on Main Street."

A particular point of pride is the 12,000-sq.-ft. world-class Nordic-inspired destination spa in the lower level of the new building. It features treatment rooms, a relaxation lounge and a one-of-a-kind hydrotherapy circuit, complete with hot and cold pools, sensory showers, steam rooms, a sauna and snow room.

Getting to this point took years of patience and a keen eye for acquisition opportunities. After purchasing the



The property offers 72 guestrooms ranging from single to full apartment-style suites

original building in 2013, the partners bought an adjacent 2,700 sq. ft. non-heritage building. They replaced it with an 11,000 sq. ft. building, which increased the room count from 16 to 26.

At the same time, they moved Treadwell Cuisine, a popular local restaurant and recognized leader in the farm-to-table movement to the site. The welcoming restaurant features an open kitchen and outdoor patio dining where guests can enjoy the courtyard gardens.

The Gate House was another critical addition in 2018. "We didn't have space for events so spent \$1.5 million on renovations, adding another 10 rooms, a bistro also run by Treadwell, and wedding facilities," says Capasso.

Another acquisition of note is the Caroline Building. Built in the early 2000s, it is home to four one- and two-bedroom suites with full kitchenettes and living rooms.

While the major part of the latest renovation project is completed, Capasso says there is more to come. Hidden below the main property is a new 20,000-sq.-ft. underground parking garage. Plans are to build a green roof and wellness area on top, which will include an outdoor yoga/meditation area, spa cabanas, and reflecting pools.

A key component throughout its history has been a focus on high-level customer service, he stresses. During COVID the owners continued to employ staff to ensure they were ready and able to continue their work when the hospitality sector re-opened.



"Delivering the highest level of service has been a constant since day-1. Certainly, we made mistakes along the way, but we never lost sight of that part of the business."

The new building was originally targeted to open around mid 2021, but like many hotel projects across the country, COVID slowed down the schedule considerably, he adds. "The pandemic was the biggest challenge we have had to face, from managing overhead and staffing to construction and supply delays."

With the worst behind them, Capasso says they are now ready to welcome guests with open arms. "Business has come back very strong as people are looking for somewhere to go. We're seeing a huge surge in corporate groups. Weddings and reservations are off the charts. So far everything has exceeded our expectations." ♦