



Courtesy Ritz-Carlton Montreal

Andrew Torriani and the Ritz-Carlton Montreal, or how a busboy became a hotelier

by REBECCA TUCKER

When Andrew Torriani sits down for breakfast at the Ritz-Carlton Montreal, he's particular about his order. The waiter knows his preferred breakfasts, but he says, "they vary." He orders quietly, in French, and some 20 minutes later a hefty bowl of fruit and a carafe of juice arrives. Torriani is not on a diet, he explains, but had worked out that morning and didn't want a breakfast that would weigh down his positive momentum.

Moving forward is Torriani's area of expertise. As general manager of the hotel, Torriani recently oversaw a \$250-million renovation of the property, the first to bear the Ritz moniker in North America. It's a 102-year-old building that has hosted countless royals, all five Rolling Stones and one Elizabeth Taylor wedding. The hotel is currently gearing up for its annual

Montreal Grand Prix party, a \$395-per-ticket event with a "Hamptons Chic" theme, a nod to the building's timelessness, while its pop-up beach-themed eatery at Maison Boulud is a more forward-thinking.

Combining past and present is also one of Torriani's strengths. It's also why his 2006 decision to gut the place was a call he did not take lightly. "One of the things we wanted to do was preserve," he explains. "We knew that we wanted to create a sense of modernity, but not lose the history."

In a way, Torriani is a part of the hotel's history. The 51-year-old grew up in hospitality; his father was one of the most renowned hoteliers in Torriani's native South Africa. When the family moved to Montreal it only made sense that he and his brothers seek employment in the hospitality sector while they studied. (Torriani earned a business degree from McGill.) This is how, in the 1970s, Torriani found himself on the payroll at the Ritz-Carlton, working as a busboy at the hotel's Café de Paris, now Maison Boulud.

"I worked here for seven years as a student," he says. "I basically lived next door, in one of the student apartments. You were right here, you came to work, you stayed out till 4 in the morning, you came back to work the next day."



Andrew Torriani is part of the Ritz's history. Courtesy Ritz-Carlton Montreal

Torriani says he and his brothers often joked about someday running the Ritz-Carlton as a family, but it wasn't until 2003, when his father was approached by the hotel's manager during a search for a new GM, that Torriani found himself coming on board.

"My father was a very noted hotelier — a very prestigious magazine once noted him as one of the Top 10 in the world," says Torriani, who then was working as an executive for Air Canada. "The guy who owned this hotel at the time approached him and said, 'Do you want to come run it?' My dad said no, but he said: 'I think my son would be good for it.' "

The hospitality pro went to meet the hotel's former owner in New York City where, Torriani explains, "He said, 'Well, you know, Andrew, I'd be very interested. But I've had a lot of bad experiences with GMs, so I'd be looking for someone who's prepared to be a partial equity partner.' " His quote: \$3 million.

"I flew back to Montreal and I snuck into the hotel. I went looking around the whole place," Torriani says. "I said, this place needs help. There were some really good hotels in Montreal that had gone through a really bad period." But despite this, he wanted to jump on board — Torriani saw potential. After securing the help of investors, chief among them his brothers, Torriani took over as the Ritz-Carlton's general manager and owner in 2006.

It was then that he started planning the property's revamp, which was completed in 2012. His major asset as a GM seems to be his ability to broker deals through simple conversations. Take the involvement of Daniel Boulud, for instance: A

few years ago, Torriani cold-called the French chef, wondering if he'd like to open a restaurant at the Ritz. Boulud said no. Months later, Torriani got a call from Boulud: "I'll give you 15 minutes," the chef said, "and you give me your pitch." Fifteen minutes became three hours and Boulud opened Maison Boulud in 2012. The hotel's Dom Perignon Champagne bar, which opened in October 2014 — the only one of its kind in Canada — was also the product of "a simple conversation," Torriani says. "Just like this one."

For all its glamour — the hotel's Royal Suite costs \$7,000 per night — the Ritz is family friendly. Torriani will often stay at the property (albeit not in the Royal Suite) with his wife and three children, ages 11, 14 and 16, and over breakfast, I can barely hear the man, who is soft spoken with a subtle but lingering South African accent, over the gleeful shouts of children nearby.

It's remarkably unstuffy and refreshing. "That's conscious," Torriani says. "My family is a big family and everyone has kids." Given his acumen and upbringing, it makes sense that the Ritz-Carlton Montreal is more than anything a family (friendly) affair. ■

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