

Globe Travel

TRAVEL EDITOR: SARAH MacWHIRTER

QUEBEC

Reincarnation at the Ritz

He was a regular guest with his father, and one half of the last couple to be wed in the Royal Suite. **Jacob Richler** knows the Ritz-Carlton Montreal. So when the landmark hotel reopened its doors after a four-year, \$200-million renovation, guess who was first in line?

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Gear

A picnic-perfect knife that gets you into five-year-old cheese with ease, a leafy top for your locks and shoes that show you the way home

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Concierge

After surviving the angst of high school, this mother-daughter duo is ready to celebrate abroad. Our travel expert points them in the right direction

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Dining at the new Ritz is an elevated experience. Above: Isabel Bordeleau, sommelier at Maison Boulud. CHRISTINNE MUSCHI FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

MONTREAL

Sprucing up the Ritz

This century hotel has reopened with the most modern indulgences. Even the pond for the ducks got an upgrade

JACOB RICHLER MONTREAL

Last Saturday, as Ritz-Carlton general manager Andrew Torriani and I finished up our second course of a perfect seared scallop with puréed spring peas in the hotel's not-quite-open Maison Boulud, I asked him if there was anything he was nervous about as he looked ahead to his official opening on Monday. Say, whether Montrealers would embrace the restaurant's ultramodern design within the Ritz context. Or whether a city that treasured its own on the culinary front – and had, for example, rejected local outposts of such iconic Parisian brands as Fouquet's and Hédiard – would instead embrace a French brand from Manhattan.

"The only thing I'm nervous about is students," he replied.

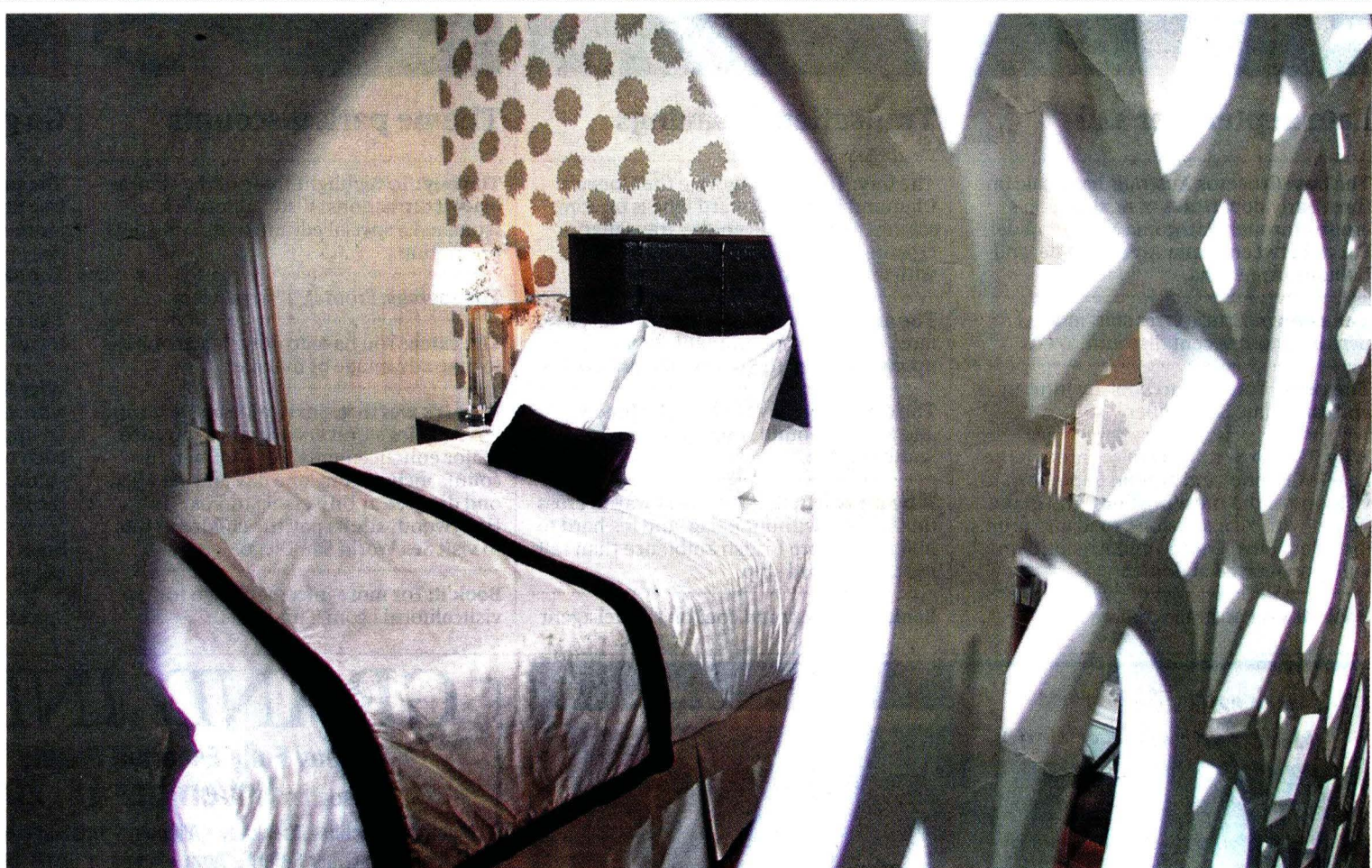
The roaming protesters had just labelled the newly refurbished hotel a target, and there was no question he thought this more of a threat than local restaurant critics. Our next course clinched this impression: seared, wild Scottish salmon, encrusted with a paper-thin slice of *pain de mie*. We have been eating the farmed stuff for so long in this country that hardly anyone can remember what the real thing tastes like. Take it from me: It's wonderful.

It tasted so good that for a moment it brought me back 20-odd years, to when wild Atlantic salmon was still plentiful, and the Ritz-Carlton made the best smoked salmon in town. Back then, when I suppose it was assumed that all sensible men of comfortable means would go fly-casting for salmon on the Restigouche or the Cascapédia rivers, it was one of the privileges of being a Ritz-Carlton member cardholder that you could turn in a freshly caught fish at the front desk and have it transformed into two smoked sides for \$35.

I remember this because my father, Mordecai, had a Ritz card (the attraction was that it entitled one to cash cheques at the concierge desk, which was very handy when you did not know how to use a bank machine). And in the 1980s, when we went fishing together and did well, it was always my job to drop off our salmon at the front desk for smoking. And when we went fishing together and did poorly, it was my job to buy some pretend catch at Waldman's Fish Market and take those to the Ritz instead.

We lived, and still keep, an apartment diagonally across the street, in the Château Apartments, another Golden Square Mile landmark. When we moved there from Westmount in 1980, my father enjoyed showing visitors to the living-room window to point out how short a distance it was to the entrance to the Ritz bar. When I was a CEGEP student, and less interested in, say, demonstrating than I was in earning money for nocturnal expenditures, I took a summer job there as a dishwasher.

Back then, Torriani was working as a captain in the hotel's Café de Paris. His brothers Anthony and Jonathan, old school friends of mine, worked the door and the front desk. Now, their company, Monaco Luxury Hotels and Resorts, con-



Rooms are fresh and full of conveniences; the Oval Room has been refurbished with gold leaf and hand-painted mouldings.

PHOTOS: CHRISTINNE MUSCHI FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

trols a majority stake in the Ritz, where in 2007, my wife and I were the last couple to marry in the Royal Suite, where Liz and Dick got hitched in 1964.

All that to say that there are plenty of luxury hotels in Montreal but only one Ritz-Carlton. Only one hotel that created a name that became synonymous with the pinnacle of luxury and service all over the world.

That nifty fact and its 100 years of colourful history make the Ritz-Carlton (not part of the luxury chain) unique for Montrealers, many of whom have long looked upon the place with proprietary pride. Or at least they did, until the hotel took them for granted, fell on hard times, and finally, under new ownership, was closed in 2008 for a major rethink.

So last Saturday, when, after four long years of renovation, the doors reopened to admit

some trial-run business, it caused a bit of a stir. The official opening was still two days off, but the familiar doormen were unmistakably out on Sherbrooke Street for all to see. As they walked their old beat, passersby kept asking them if they could come in for a quick look. And one after another they were welcomed, doors held open with a ceremonial flourish.

No doubt, things were less inclusive for the original opening night on New Year's Eve, 1912. But times change, and old hotels must change with them – or fail. Especially when their familiar, shabby charm has turned to rot, as it had at the Ritz when it entered the new millennium.

The \$200-million invested in the Ritz-Carlton by its new owners (Monaco Luxury Hotels and Resorts, and their partners) has paid for a lot of that. But the simple question as to what is

new and what remains provokes a complicated answer.

On the face of things, it is still very much the old Ritz. The reception desk is still in the same spot César Ritz chose for it, and so is his grand winding staircase. The elevators have not been relocated. The Palm Court, modelled on that at the Ritz in London, has seemingly not been disturbed.

But up close, in the details, nearly everything is new. The marble floor in the lobby that you thought was original is not – it's nicer. The panelling in the Palm Court has been entirely rebuilt to the specifications of long eclipsed original splendour. Same with the gold leaf and hand-painted details on the mouldings in the Oval Room. And so on.

And aside from those heritage rooms, the hotel was almost entirely gutted and rebuilt. You will find continuity in aesthetic features like the renewed light fixtures, reupholstered and restored furniture, reframed and cleaned paintings. From the bottom, where the vast basement kitchens were completely ripped out and replaced, to the new saltwater pool at the top, nothing old and dysfunctional remains – right down to the pipes and wiring.

The latter is only an unexciting topic to those who never stayed in the old hotel, and blew out an electrical socket with a hair-dryer, or waited 10 minutes for a hint of hot water to emerge from a shower in the Royal Suite. Those habitués will be shocked by the new, modern conveniences.

The new windows still open, but when closed completely nullify the sounds of downtown. Air conditioning is all but silent. In the darkness of night, if you swing a foot from bed to floor a discreet floorboard-height light automatically illuminates the path to the loo. And when you get there, the electronic, washer-jet equipped Toto from Japan will automatically lift its lid to

reveal a heated seat. The rooms are even equipped with heat sensors and motion detectors so that the climate-control system can save energy when the room is vacant – and maids know when it is appropriate to enter, or, say, risk encounter with a naked, aroused and very forward foreign dignitary.

This juxtaposition of old-fashioned and modern at play in the reinvented Ritz-Carlton is declared by its new face: The old façade is integrated with a glass cap and western flank encasing the shared living spaces of the new condominiums. But the theme is asserted most loudly at Maison Boulud, where the design of the restaurant, bar and gardens was handed over to the Japanese design firm Superpotato.

From the slatted ceiling to the glass-encased gas fireplace, the design is as modern as can be – a world apart from the lobby to which it is attached. The Ritz Gardens, excavated and then totally rebuilt for the shooting of *Barney's Version*, was bulldozed once more and created in an entirely new image. A glass-in terrace can be used in inclement weather. The ducks are back, but their pond has been upgraded with stone walls and a small waterfall. And the design of the entire dining area now seems all of a piece, instead of the old haphazardly patched-up mess.

After two early meals in Maison Boulud, I would venture the biggest difference is in the superb cuisine. One never ate this well at the Ritz before. Not even close. Even chef Daniel Boulud's smoked salmon is a step up. The only downside is that, according to his website, he sells his for \$85 a side. Two for \$35 is a thing of the past; being the best in town, very much not.

If you go: 1228 Sherbrooke St. West; 514-842-4212; ritzmontreal.com. Rooms from \$425 a night, one-bedroom suites from \$900. Special to The Globe and Mail