

INSPIRING BUSINESS



THE ART DECO
MASONIC HOTEL
2 Tennyson Street, Napier
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masonic.co.nz

Beautiful Phoenix

- the rise and rise of Napier's
Art Deco Masonic hotel

We celebrate a true Grand Dame

BY HELENE RAVLICH

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Short Rib on the menu at Emporium



Emporium Bar



Pacific View Suite Bedroom

Just a few years ago, a much-needed, sensitive and gently executed makeover began the restoration of Napier’s Art Deco crowning glory, the Masonic hotel. Since then the historically significant property’s faded glamour has been nurtured back to its original brilliance, but with a thoroughly modern mindset.

The pair responsible for the hotel’s transformation and its ensuing success is Craig Hay and Neil Barber, who courageously took over the grand lady, dusted her off, carefully rethought her purpose and came up with a refit that has brought her unique beauty well into the twenty first century with much aplomb.

Originally established in 1861 on Napier’s foreshore, the Masonic was always perfectly positioned at the heart of the city. A fire early in its lifetime saw it replaced with a structure of little beauty, but in the early hours of May 23, 1896, yet another fire started in the kitchen and the second hotel was destroyed. Something had to change and the owners re-thought the hotel’s purpose, hiring Sydney architects Masfield & Sons to design an impressive three-storey building with deep ornate balconies “on the very edge of the sea, overlooking... the everlasting ocean”.

The newest Masonic hotel was a beauty – and very grand, claiming early on to be “the largest and best appointed in the colonies”. Visitors included Mark Twain, who it has been said wrote fondly about the sound of the sea so clearly audible through open windows. The new era Masonic was a hit, but once again fate was to intervene.

The earthquake of February 1931 destroyed the grand structure, but amazingly, once again, the owners set about commissioning a new hotel, with Wellington architect William John Prouse at the helm of the plans. The end result was a perfect example of Art Deco grandeur, and soon the hotel “unequaled in the Dominion for design and beauty of furnishing” was seeing check ins by wealthy locals, their equally well heeled guests and even the Duke of Gloucester and the Queen, through the 1930s to the 60s.

From that point however, a series of new operators appeared to be attempting to mask the Masonic’s particular brand of beauty, with era-friendly but ill conceived makeovers becoming commonplace and its Art Deco flame increasingly diminished. Rooms became tired and old, and staying at the Masonic became something of a last resort and definitely not the desirable proposition that it once was. Co-owner Barber has said that even up until five years ago the reception staff was embarrassed to hand over keys to the rooms, with most coming in under the one hundred dollar mark. Now it is quite the opposite.

It languished in its most coveted spot until the inspired – and inspiring – Barber and Hay took over its mantle, and how far the old girl has come. Over a local pinot gris at the hotel’s Emporium Eatery & Bar Barber begins to tell their story, which began when the two came to Hawke’s Bay in 2002 (although Hay grew up there). After

buying and flawlessly renovating a circa 1898 colonial homestead south west of Hastings called Greenhill, they were looking for a fresh challenge, and the Art Deco Masonic promised exactly that – and much more. “We took over the operational management of the hotel in 2010,” Barber tells me, “but we have actually owned it since the late nineties, with no clue about exactly what to do with it.” The renovation of Greenhil had proved a great motivator however, and the pair decided that it was time that the Masonic was restored to its former glory, but with a twist.

Work began and plans were commissioned, and both agreed that although the most obvious route for the hotel would have been a faithful Art Deco makeover, given its position they wanted to do something different. Instead, the new interiors embrace the history of the hotel as a whole, as well as feeling quite contemporary in the process. The interiors, by designer Tom Skyring give only a nod to the 1930s rooms but look back further, and are colourful, plush and quirky, whilst always maintaining an effortless sense of cool. Visitors arriving in reception feast their eyes upon a new inlaid Art Deco-style floor, but paired with a late Victorian-style light fitting, the original royal warrant from the 1950s royal stay and a large Margaret Woolley triptych from the 1970s. The lift carrying visitors and their luggage across the few floors (its buttons merely say “U” or “D”) is almost Steampunk in feel, with all of the quirks that entails.

The work has most definitely paid off, with high occupancy, a raving media presence and accolades, including the Supreme Award at the recent Hospitality New Zealand Awards for Excellence held in Nelson towards the end of 2015. Barber and Hay’s Art Deco



WELCOME TO NAPIER'S FRESH, NEW EAT STREET

Tennyson Street – and Hastings Street just off it – is where you'll find the Art Deco Masonic Hotel, and also a plethora of other highly recommended, innovative and exciting eateries. The line up includes:

INDIGO

24 Hastings Street, Napier

Offering a truly contemporary take on Indian cuisine, Indigo is also home to New Zealand's largest whisky collection courtesy of owner Paul Anderson. His passion for whisky makes for a natural partner to Indigo's award winning fine dining Indian, and the place is packed most nights.

GEORGIA ON TENNYSON

42 Tennyson Street, Napier

The owners of Georgia describe their mission as "bringing bangin' specialty coffee and alternative brewing methods to the good people of Napier," and they aren't kidding. Think perfectly brewed Flight coffee, pastries from Yabon Artisan Bakers and much more.

BISTRONOMY

40 Hastings Street, Napier

Chef James Beck and wife Amber launched Bistronomy in style last September, with a menu that celebrates the seasonal. "One part local, one part global" is how they describe themselves, infusing fresh Hawke's Bay produce with far-flung ideas to create dishes "which will often surprise and always delight".

MISTER D DINING

47 Tennyson Street, Napier

Housed in a vast industrial space, Mister D Dining was founded by two veteran hospitality duos: Dan and Joanna Tosswill and Prue Barton and chef David Griffiths, who met in 2011. Prue and David are the founders of Auckland restaurant Vinnies, which they sold in 2009, and the impeccable menu echoes their pedigree.



Brulee at Emporium



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Masonic took out the overall prize recognising the hotel as a premium accommodation provider on a national level, and Barber said at the time that it was a thrill to win the award, for the Masonic but also for Hawke's Bay.

The beautifully appointed Emporium Eatery & Bar was opened in 2012 and is key to the new direction of the hotel. Providing a great hotel restaurant was key to Hay and Barber's vision, as well as giving locals a place to come, play and stay for a while. With a menu meant for sharing and the most extensive beverage list around, Emporium Eatery & Bar recently won a 2016 Beef and Lamb Excellence Award, which came as no surprise to Barber and the hotel's Food & Beverage Manager, Shaye Bird. Under the helm of Executive Chef Damon McGinniss its fare has developed and flourished, and Bird says that the aim for Emporium and for the hotel's other food and beverage options - The Rose Irish Pub and the nearby Brazen Head Bar - is to "pull things back to basics a wee bit, and to do those basics well". He says that when he took on the role in 2012 he looked around at local eateries and saw some amazing dining locales opening up, which sought to elevate the region's culinary offerings to new heights in terms of style, innovation and finesse. "They were doing an incredible job and still are," he says, "so the idea of trying to compete with them at that elite level seemed pointless. We wanted to create a place where people could drop in every day, for a meeting or a coffee with friends - but with a fantastic menu and bar offering." Barber says that they always wanted Emporium to be both a bar and a restaurant, "and it's ended up around 45/55, in favour of food".

Another element that influenced the creation of Emporium was the fact that as a hotel eatery, opening hours had to be flexible. "We open at 7am and close 11pm at the earliest," says Barber, "and we are the only place in town where you can get a proper meal at 10 in the evening. If you arrive into Napier on the last flight and ask a taxi driver where you can still eat there is only one answer."

Once again Napier's glamorous foreshore hotel is there to greet all its guests in style - as it has been since 1861. ■



Short of space behind the bar?

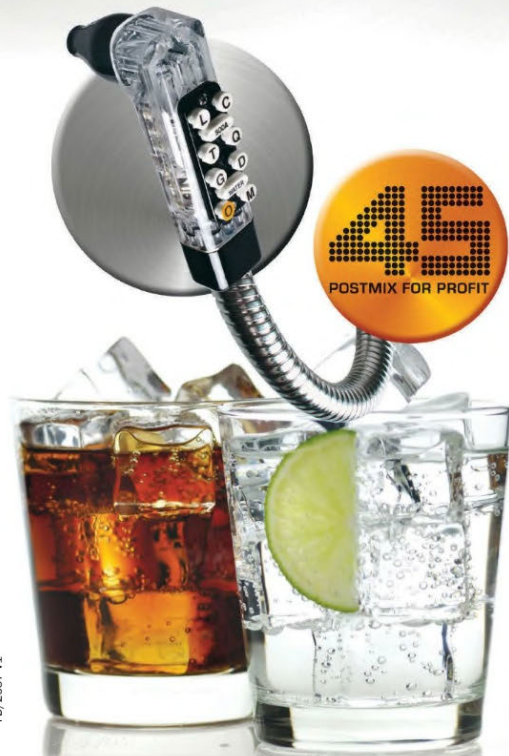
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