

“Christmas at The Roosevelt: History & Hospitality at New Orleans’ Premier Hotel” for *VIE Magazine*

By Sallie W. Boyles

Southerners, who’ve written the book on hospitality, especially love Christmas, when decking the halls presents the best excuse to invite friends and family over for any reason—the social event of the season or a spontaneous get-together. Deemed by many as the most welcoming southern city, New Orleans certainly exudes the spirit of the holidays. One landmark in particular, The Roosevelt Hotel, shines among the openly gracious, beautifully adorned charms of the Big Easy. Whether staying at the hotel or dropping by for a look around, those who most appreciate The Roosevelt during Christmas do so with a sense of its history.

The Roosevelt’s predecessor, the Grunewald Hotel, dates back to 1893. The hotel flourished until it was torn down in 1923 to make way for a grander structure with nearly 800 guest rooms. Named The Roosevelt in homage to the 26th President, the establishment hosted a succession of prominent patrons, including political figures. Huey Long, perhaps Louisiana’s most infamous politician to date, had a private suite there; while governor, he built a highway between Baton Rouge and New Orleans to cut 40 miles off his journey between cities!

If only the walls could speak, The Roosevelt Hotel, at the heart of New Orleans’ historic business district, would tell a century of colorful stories featuring celebrated guests—Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway, Ray Charles, Ella Fitzgerald Jack Benny, Marlene Dietrich, Douglas Fairbanks, Audrey Hepburn, Ginger Rogers, Bob Hope, Sonny and Cher. Music and spirits set the tone when The Cave opened at the Gruenwald as one of the first nightclubs in the country. Later, The Roosevelt produced the Sazerac Bar and, in effect, the official cocktail of New Orleans. Likewise, The Blue Room, once a prime supper club venue, staged the hottest acts of the region and nation.

In 2005, following hurricane Katrina, Dimension Development purchased and restored the structure, which had been a Fairmont Hotel since 1965. Displaying previously hidden, handmade plaster work, mosaic floors and coffered ceilings, The Roosevelt reopened in 2009 under Hilton Hotels’ Waldorf Astoria brand. Today’s managers certainly see themselves as stewards of the property with a heartfelt obligation to honor the legacy they’ve inherited.

“One of the great traditions of the hotel has been to celebrate the holiday season,” says General Manger Tod Chambers. Having been with Hilton Hotels for 20 years, he joined The Roosevelt in 2008 to prepare for the reopening. Chambers expresses that he now has “the job of a lifetime,” adding, “We feel very responsible for carrying on the established holiday traditions and offering something spectacular for the community to enjoy.” By far, those who have a hand in producing The Roosevelt’s holiday celebration consider their work—from putting up lavish decorations to orchestrating festive affairs—a labor of love.

The decorations are the talk of the town and represent a collaborative effort among the hotel's management and Kenny Rabalais, a local landscape architect and owner of The Plant Gallery. Having maintained the former Fairmont Hotel's daily arrangements of fresh flowers and greenery over two decades, Rabalais eagerly accepted when The Roosevelt's owners asked him to take charge of resurrecting the tradition of decking the halls. "I was born and raised in New Orleans," he says, recalling childhood memories of his grandparents taking him to see the Fairmont at Christmas. "I feel very protective of the hotel."

For years, the Christmas décor featured a tunnel effect with an abundance of angel hair and big trees. "It was pretty," says Rabalais, "but so much filled the space that it felt a little claustrophobic and concealed the gorgeous lobby. I wanted to create something awesome that showed off the architecture and enhanced the rich colors inside."

To keep the grand corridor open, he and his team created a forest of birch trees. Narrow on the bottom with an expansive canopy above, the scheme optimizes the available space by taking advantage of the high ceilings. Assembled from hundreds of white lacquered natural branches, the trees are covered in thousands upon thousands of white lights and adorned with exquisite, hand-blown glass ornaments. Rabalais explains that his concept allows the smallest child to enjoy the view just by looking up, even in shoulder-to-shoulder crowds. Additionally, the white lights, branches and light-reflecting ornaments create the "Waldorf Wonderland" that dazzles all ages while honoring the sophisticated elegance of The Roosevelt.

Along with the birch forest, 50 fresh Frasier Firs offer an old-fashioned Christmas warmth and scent. To prevent the trees from overwhelming the hall, Rabalais shaves off their backs and places them flush against the walls. Thousands of red poinsettias (and some white ones to accent the darker areas), orchids, amaryllis, pine boughs and magnolia leaves also add natural freshness, beauty and seasonal color. Elaborate garland, laden with lights, berries and bows, further grace the entrances, enticing all to step inside.

Another much anticipated holiday feature is The Roosevelt's gingerbread village. Varying the theme each year, Deborah Heyd, The Roosevelt's Pastry Chef, aims to replicate the flavor of New Orleans in an unexpected manner. In 2010, for instance, she captured the eclectic assortment of New Orleans' homes (from the mansion to the Cajun cottage), and built a village of local restaurants in 2011. Scoping out the city, Heyd found this year's models in Storyland, City Park's fairytale playground with larger-than-life storybook characters.

"I wanted to choose a kid-friendly theme that would bring back memories for adults," she says, referring to her candy-coated Peter Pan, Moby Dick, Alice in Wonderland, Puff the Magic Dragon, and others. She also represents the amusement park's rides with a rotating gingerbread carousel, like the prized antique at City Park, and a miniature toy train set.

Using approximately 100 pounds of gingerbread and 30 different kinds of candy, Heyd begins the task of crafting the 11' x 6' fantasy all by herself at the first of November for the great reveal on Thanksgiving weekend. Although a pastry chef is busier than ever during

the holidays with weddings, parties and the hotel's events, Heyd loves her work. "I like the fact that people wake up to my pastries in the morning," she says, "and go to bed with my desserts at night."

For Rabalais and his team, the planning process begins right after Christmas. "Before we take down the decorations, we have a walk through, making notes on how everything looks and considering what we can do to improve upon it next year." The physical work of unpacking, sprucing up, and replacing begins in September; the decorating itself commences one week before Thanksgiving. Remarkably, every detail is in place on the evening before Thanksgiving. The full reveal, however, occurs a few nights later when the light switch is flicked at the official grand lighting ceremony.

"My favorite thing to do is to come back after it's all done to observe a crowd of people enjoying the experience," says Rabalais. "I'll stand about ten feet from the door, listening to everyone's comments, hearing the kids saying, 'Oh, wow!' So many look forward to it, and their joy always gets me into the spirit of Christmas."

In addition to the thousands of locals and tourists who tour the lobby, countless others arrive with invitations to private parties and reservations for The Roosevelt's holiday brunches, teas and dinners. "We kick off the season with a traditional holiday brunch on Thanksgiving and continue to feature jazz brunches all through December," says Tod Chambers, noting that The Roosevelt's Christmas Eve dinner and Christmas Day brunch, each serving 700 to 800 people, are traditions shared by generations. "Many come after their church services," he adds.

The Teddy Bear Tea, another family tradition, tempts all ages with teatime edibles and beverages, but the magical décor and holiday characters, like the Ice Princess, Rudolph, and Mr. and Mrs. Claus, most captivate the children, who also delight in receiving their own commemorative Teddy bear. "We begin taking reservations in September and will sell out by mid to late November," says Chambers. Amazingly, he anticipates 7,000 will attend the Teddy Bear Tea from the first of December to Christmas Eve.

"We're here every weekend during the holidays," Chambers admits, "but we enjoy putting on a show. We look forward to coming to work and sharing the experience with our friends and guests. All of downtown is beautiful, and we love doing our part for the city and the region."

For more information about The Roosevelt New Orleans, readers can visit www.therooseveltneworleans.com or call 504.648.1200.