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Hotel Bel-Air's Modern New Look

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After 65 years in one of Los Angeles's loveliest canyons, the iconic Hotel Bel-Air lands firmly in the 21st century.

From [January 2012](#) By [Michael Gross](#)

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Two and a half years ago, while researching a book on [Los Angeles](#), I had dinner in an alcove booth at [Hotel Bel-Air's](#) open-air restaurant with a real estate broker who was a regular. The place was packed and crackled with an energy that seemed driven by anticipatory nostalgia seasoned with a dash of anxiety: the news had just come out that the then-63-year-old property was closing for a stem-to-stern remodeling. The community was curious and a little concerned. Hotel Bel-Air, after all, was and remains a rare piece of living history in a town that hasn't cared much for the past. Would something beloved be lost when it was reinvented?

In October, the new Bel-Air opened, and I flew in again to check it out. I'd heard that former first lady Nancy Reagan, a Bel Air neighbor and hotel habitu e, was "in a faint" about the changes. So my antennae went up the moment I was greeted at the entrance by valet parkers in white sweater-vests, striped shirts, and Chuck Taylor high-tops. As I walked through the porte coch ere and over the familiar bridge, past the hotel's resident swans, nothing seemed too different—until I entered the lobby. Instead of the dark, low-ceilinged reception area that I remembered, the space, created by interior designer Alexandra Champalimaud, whose previous stints include remakes in New York (the Algonquin; the Carlyle; the Pierre) and London (the Dorchester), was open and airy, with big Spanish-colonial arched windows, ivory walls, and a freestanding limestone fireplace. It is a whole new Bel-Air.

Formerly part of the Rancho San Jose de Buenos Ayres—one of the original Spanish land-grant ranches—the Bel-Air occupies a 12-acre sliver of a vast 4,438-acre tract that was once owned by a California pioneer named John Wolfskill. When he died in 1913, Jake and Daisy Danziger—she the

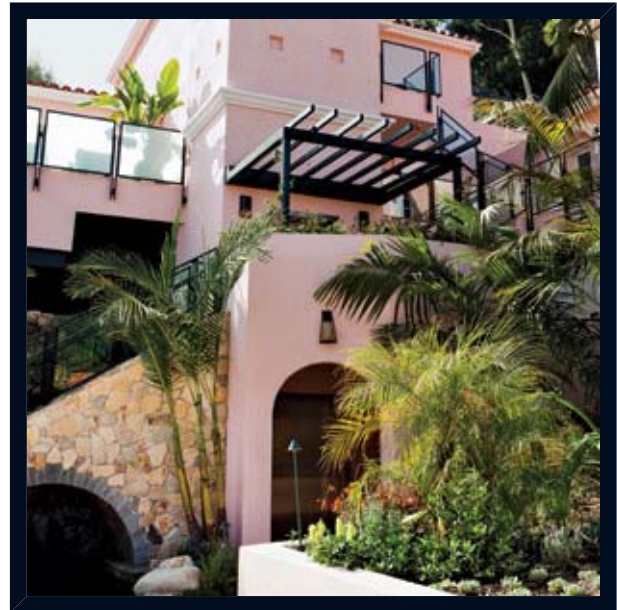


Photo: Penden + Munk

daughter of one of the oilman founders of Beverly Hills—bought half of the tract for a song and turned it into a private estate, centered around a 35-room house that the *Los Angeles Times* said was “the largest and most expensively equipped” in southern California. In 1922, after the couple divorced, the land was sold to Alphonzo Bell, an entrepreneur who’d just struck oil; he took over the house but subdivided the land to create the enclave of Bel Air, which he envisioned as “a community of gentlemen’s estates.”

At the end of World War II, Bell was in financial distress and offloaded his oil company’s office, his land company’s sales room, a community tearoom, as well as the stables and riding ring he’d built for his neighbors, to Joseph Drown, a onetime desk clerk in the first Texas hotels owned by Conrad Hilton (the two were friends and, later, neighbors in Bel Air). Drown turned the structures into the world’s first boutique hotel.

Opened in 1946, Hotel Bel-Air catered to travelers, of course, but also to neighbors, many of them celebrated and wealthy, who used its bar and restaurant as their local hangouts and its grand rooms for parties. Eventually, the suites would be named for such regulars as Marilyn Monroe and Grace Kelly. Lauren Bacall usually took a room near the former riding ring, which Drown had converted into an oval pool, 10 feet deep at one end, so she could swim laps every morning. After Drown’s death in the 1980’s, the property was sold to the Hunt family of Texas and became a Rosewood Hotel. The Hunts kept almost everything the same, but in a bold move, brought in celebrity chef Wolfgang Puck to consult on the food. Puck recalls that after he redid the menu, locals were invited in for a free meal, and two couples complained. Why, they demanded, were the beans and peas artificially colored? Why were they green and not gray? Puck searched the kitchen and when he found shelves full of canned vegetables, he threw most of them away but invited the two couples back to eat the last of them. “Then, they were happy,” he says, chortling. “That’s the last time the Bel-Air served canned vegetables.”

In 1995, the hotel was purchased by Prince Jefri Bolkiah of the royal family of Brunei. And in 2008, it was bought by Dorchester Group, a subsidiary of the Brunei Investment Agency, which also owns London’s Dorchester and the new 45 Park Lane hotel; Le Meurice and Plaza Athénée, in Paris; and the Beverly Hills Hotel, all managed by Dorchester Collection. Occupancy at the hotel had dipped, and the clientele, while still glamorous, was aging. So Dorchester used the wealth of its owner to reboot the Bel-Air, bring it into the 21st century, and, says Dorchester Collection CEO Christopher Cowdray, “seduce the younger generation.”

As I wandered the hotel over the next few days, past the pale-pink Spanish-mission buildings and through the gardens with their 483 specimen trees and more than 4,000 plants, the magic first conjured by Drown was still tangible. But now, the Bel-Air also offers much that is new. Some of the changes are practical (the hotel is earthquake-resistant), some ecological (the Swan Lake now uses recycled water), and many are as classic as those that have endured for six-plus decades, but with a modern twist.

Like the lobby, the hotel’s 103 rooms have also been reconceived by Champalimaud. Gone is the old look: chintz, wooden armoires, needlepoint rugs, and white tiled bathrooms. The rooms are now a contemporary take on Hollywood Regency, done up in a light palette of cream, black, and white,

with natural wood ceilings, sand-colored limestone and marble floors, and big prints of dreamlike flowers by botanical artist Miron Schmückle. I was especially impressed by the \$3,000 computerized toilet, which lifted its own lid. There are 12 lavish new rooms and suites that come with travertine patios, private spa pools, outdoor fireplaces, and canyon views. Behind these doors, you'll feel like a character in a Slim Aarons photo—beautiful and extremely fortunate.

At the north end of the hotel, there's a La Prairie spa, another Champalimaud creation, with striated black plaster walls in the reception area and creamy ceilings detailed with three-dimensional flowers. It's within a new 12,000-square-foot building that also contains a fitness room and three loftlike guest rooms, all occupying the site of what was once the Marilyn Monroe cottage and a self-parking lot that, a Hollywood agent whispered to me one day, was long used by the famous to facilitate trysts far from the prying eyes of the valet desk and other guests.

Originally, I planned to eat several meals outside the hotel, but after my first dinner at the expanded restaurant designed by David Rockwell and run by Puck—bacon-wrapped dates, a microgreen salad with olives and goat cheese so fresh I wanted to slap it, and sautéed diver scallops drizzled with sunchoke purée—I never left the property.

Rockwell's long list of credits includes Trump SoHo and Nobu Dubai, along with production design for several Academy Awards ceremonies and Broadway shows, so I wasn't surprised by the theatricality of the dining room, which provides a perfect perch for discreetly watching the action. A marble fireplace anchors the room and retractable windows look out onto the terrace. Aware of the desires of its pampered denizens, Rockwell updated the patio restaurant with heated stone floors and custom-upholstered director's chairs, and added more coveted banquettes that ring the room. He also expanded the alcove tables over the front garden and included special banquettes that allow easy vectoring between views of nature and the equally compelling one of power players mingling under a trellis that will soon be overgrown with the bougainvillea that were cut back during construction. One night at dinner, I watched Larry King, a male friend of his, and two California blondes straight out of a Beach Boys song move tables several times. Was he looking for a new favorite spot?

Rockwell also rethought the formerly old-fashioned hotel bar. Though he retained the original fireplace and woodwork, he replaced the piano, stripped and refinished the walls in deep graphite gray, removed several view-blocking columns, and added French doors leading to a new terrace for alfresco drinking. It's still cozy enough to allow for private conversation, but with its stars-in-waiting waitstaff, outdoor tables, and potent cocktails (I had one named for John Wayne that kicked like a horse), the updated bar seems sure to attract the sophisticated young crowd Dorchester Collection wants.

The directive for the hotel's overhaul was to "bring the Bel-Air ever so slightly forward and let people catch up," Champalimaud says; to combine "how we are today with the magic of who came here and their lifestyle." She and Rockwell met that challenge forcefully. "I care about the people who love this place," Rockwell says. And then he offers a rejoinder to any skeptics who feel the Bel-Air should have stayed the same: "Judge it in a year or two when it grows in—it's a living, breathing organism."

Doubles from \$590.

Michael Gross is the author of the new book Unreal Estate: Money, Ambition, and the Lust for Land in Los Angeles (Broadway Books).



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