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*Front
of house*
Meet David
and Kate Levin

*The shape
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to come*
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trends for 2013

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FRONT *of* HOUSE

This month, we meet David and Kate Levin, the father and daughter team who own and manage the luxury 5-star Capital Hotel in Knightsbridge and its equally stylish sister property, the Levin



As you walk up the stone steps towards the entrance of the Capital Hotel, a brightly polished plaque at the door simply states 'David Levin Hotelier.' It almost feels as though you are entering his private residence rather than the business that he has built up over the last 41 years. For a 5-star property with one of the swankiest addresses in London – quite literally a stone's throw from Harrods – the hotel still manages to retain the warmth and understated exclusivity of a discreet pied a terre.

Mr Levin happily admits that he is an old school hotelier who has invested in the notion of hospitality, of keeping things small and very much in the family. The Capital is run by his daughter Kate and together they offer such a high level of personalised service that the bulk of their business comes from repeat guests. In fact, Kate says the guests will frequently call and enquire whether 'our room' is available and can be a little disappointed to hear that other people have taken up residence in what they consider to be their very own home-from-home.

The fact that guests feel so comfortable here is due to the careful thought that has gone into each of the 49 guest bedrooms, which are all individually furnished and decorated. Classic print fabrics, fireplaces, antiques and works of art leave you in no doubt that you are staying in a quintessentially English hotel. The Capital's philosophy that bedrooms should be "a refuge of elegance

and comfort" is also clearly evident in the Savoir beds with hand-stitched mattresses, large down pillows and duvets and sheets of fine Egyptian cotton.

Each of the rooms also includes an array of Kiehl's toiletries – the company which was founded as an old-world apothecary in New York's East Village over 150 years ago and now produces bespoke bathroom amenities for high-end hotels. This is typical of the attention to detail that makes the Capital so popular, with every possible need taken care of, with a complimentary shoeshine, an umbrella for use during a guest's stay and traditional turndown so often lacking in many of today's modern hotels. However, one of the 'services and facilities' that doesn't feature in the promotional material is the way that both Mr Levin and his daughter greet guests, as if they are welcoming old friends into their home.

Mr Levin has been in the hospitality sector for most of his life, starting his career as a commis waiter at the Malmaison Restaurant in Glasgow before going on to work his way through all of the key departments of British Transport Hotels. The long shifts and hectic stints in kitchens, housekeeping and reception paid off when he was offered a managerial position at the Lochalsh Hotel in Kyle of Lochalsh, overlooking the Isle of Skye. He always had ambitions of opening his own hotel and when an apartment block in London became available for renovation, Mr Levin





seized upon the opportunity to convert this into a 50-bedroom hotel and restaurant.

At the time, everyone – his colleagues, the bank, hotel professionals – thought he was mad because the hotel was so small and 5-star luxury properties had to have a minimum of one to two hundred rooms. This was also an era when boutique still referred to an exclusive retail outlet and had not yet been coined by the hospitality sector; but that was about to change. Ignoring the well-meaning advice, construction started on the Capital Hotel and Restaurant, which opened its doors to the public in 1971. Not only was this one of the first London hotels to offer luxury accommodation on a small scale, it was also the first to feature a fine dining restaurant and employ an English chef – Richard Shepherd – but then Mr Levin was used to going where others fear to tread having established the UK's first gastro pub in 1964 at the Royal Oak in Berkshire.

Mr Levin has worked alongside some of the UK's top chefs including Brian Turner, Paul Merret, Gary Rhodes and more recently the seafood-championing Nathan Outlaw. While playing golf in Cornwall, Mr Levin happened to visit the Michelin-starred fish restaurant in Rock where Nathan was working, serving his diners sustainably sourced fish simply cooked to allow the individual flavours to shine through. Within the space of just 24 hours Mr Levin had secured the services and the name of one of the UK's most exciting and up-and-coming culinary talents.

Outlaw's Seafood and Grill at the Capital was yet another bold step from the hotelier and appears to be yet another first, with so few restaurants in London specialising purely in Michelin-starred fish dishes. So far, reaction to the new-style eatery has been extremely positive, appealing not only to the hotel guests, but also passing trade. Mr Levin estimates that between 40 to 50 per cent of business is currently coming



from diners from outside the hotel – a rare statistic in London. Admittedly there are still those reluctant to savour a menu that clearly demonstrates Nathan's expertise and flair and reflects the best of the day's catch, whether it's wild sea bass fillet or grilled whole lemon sole, and in deference to guests' tastes, a vegetarian option and a token meat dish are included on the menu.

As well as the establishment of the new fish-inspired restaurant, Mr Levin is also the owner of a vineyard in the Loire Valley and the London Bakery, which supplies artisanal bread to some of London's finest hotels and restaurants – both of which are served at the Capital. He also manages a block of apartments opposite the hotel that offer city dwellers rented accommodation with hotel services such as housekeeping, 24-hour concierge, maintenance and car parking – a rarity for the centre of Knightsbridge. He is also one of the few hoteliers in the country that can offer guests alternative-style accommodation as they leave the cosy confines of the Capital and step just next door to an adjoining, highly contemporary hotel.

A smaller, sister property to the Capital, the Levin is an elegant 12-bedroom hotel

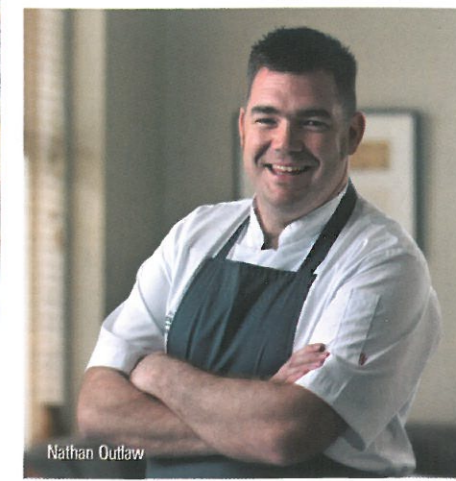


in 1930s style, which bills itself as having "sumptuous furnishings, fine art prints and exquisite eye-catching designs." Its most striking feature has to be the 18-metre chandelier cascading down through the stairwell, with its 400 strands of light-emitting optic filaments. Like the Capital, there is an intimate atmosphere to the property and the library of Penguin classics and honesty bar in the lobby add to the air of staying in a tycoon's London townhouse. Tucked away in the basement is Le Metro Bar and Brasserie, which is reputed to serve some of the finest fish and chips in London and is busy both day and night with corporates lunching and weary shoppers. Surprisingly, it's the more modern Levin that attracts an older clientele, with



the young and hip preferring the 5-star comforts of the Capital next door.

Mr Levin says that his ultimate vision was always to create "a grand hotel in miniature" and both the Levin and the Capital clearly combine the level of luxury and facilities that guests would expect from a high-end hotel. However, even he admits that this initial grandiose ambition overlooks the fundamental principle of creating a successful hotel, and that's the provision of a personal and attentive service. Mr Levin was approached by a consortium with the aim of buying the Capital and using it as a blueprint to establish a chain of hotels in every capital city. Thankfully, Mr Levin refused and both the Capital and the Levin are still firmly under the family's control, continuing to offer inimitable hospitality and remaining "a quietly elegant bastion of haute couture."



Nathan Outlaw