

SWERVE EATS + DRINKS *meet the maker*

a long history of local

hospitality

Hotel Arts Group vice-president Mark Wilson went from busboy to head honcho by working at one great Calgary hotel after another. *by John Gilchrist*

Talking to Mark Wilson about his almost three-and-a-half decades in the Calgary hotel and restaurant industry, I start to wonder just how old he is. He speaks fondly of local hotel icons Phil Libin (Empress Hotel) and Harvey Sheftel (Blackfoot Inn), as well as long-gone institutions such as the Corral Drive-In and the Sweet Tooth Sundae Palace. He reminisces about his years at the Westin Hotel and can roll off the former names of the hotel he manages today—Hotel Arts—from personal memory (from past to present: Noble, New Noble, Westward Inn, Holiday Inn, Hotel Arts).

Wilson, vice-president of the Hotel Arts Group and general manager of Hotel Arts and Kensington Riverside Inn, has been around the block a few times. But the odd thing is, he looks identical to when I first met him 20-odd years ago, during his tenure as maître d' of the Westin's hallowed Owls' Nest dining room: well turned out, great posture, approachable smile, the look of someone who knows what's going on.

So here's the math: Wilson started as a \$1.75-per-hour busboy at the Empress Hotel when he was 11. (His mother was the hotel's catering manager so he had an "in"—and a ride home to Acadia.) One year out of high school he took SAIT's Hotel and Restaurant Administration diploma program (he now sits on its advisory board) while working part time at the Westin and with Cara Foods. Freshly graduated from SAIT, he went professional at the Westin, rising from bartender to waiter to service captain to maître d' by the time he was 24. That's when I first met him, poised well beyond his calendar years. (A 24-year-old maître d'? At the Owl's Nest??)

Two decades later, Wilson runs two of this city's largest and busiest boutique hotels. The most unusual part of that is that he's done it without ever having worked outside of Calgary.

Wilson always wanted to be where he is today, managing a high-quality hotel. The Westin liked his abilities, as did the Hyatt, where he worked in the early 2000s. He could have entered a Hyatt training program that would have shaped him into a GM. But he would have had to leave Calgary, spending years in various Hyatts around the globe as they groomed him into their corporate family. His own family came first, and he opted to stay in his home town with wife Kerry and their children Chelsea and Adam.



When, in 2005, the opportunity arose to open Hotel Arts as its first GM, Wilson jumped at it. His food-service experience was crucial in setting up the hotel's Raw Bar and its banquet facilities. He later opened the Hotel Arts Group restaurant Olives at Arriva near Stampede Park and reshaped the former breakfast room at Kensington Riverside Inn into one of the hottest restaurants in town—Chef's Table. His experience on the "rooms" side of the hotel business paid off too, with every one of the Holiday Inn's rooms being gutted and revamped as Hotel Arts.

The best part? Wilson was able to work with a small group—including then owner John Torode—to make it all happen. No asking permission of a faceless head office thousands of miles away, no waiting weeks for a decision that may or may not come. Just a group of local folks getting down to work and pulling off a quality project. Exactly what Wilson's hotel mentors would have expected from their former busboy. **S**

Hotel Arts, 119 12th Ave. S.W., 403-266-4611, hotelarts.ca.

PHOTO BY DAVID DEAN

BUSTS TO BOOM

The former home of one of Calgary's dinker stripper bars, Hotel Arts' Raw Bar has a titillating past. The small, raised private dining area was once the dressing room for the performers. (Or should that be the undressing room?) Seems Raw Bar was an inspired name for the current incarnation of this lively dining room.