Roosevelt New Orleans to reopen

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From the Blue Room's jazzy rhythms spilling out into the foyer to the sweep of a debutante's gown crossing the Grand Ballroom threshold, the famed Roosevelt Hotel in New Orleans has touched the lives of millions.

Now, the 115-year-old hotel — known for its luxury, entertainment and world-famous celebrity guests — is returning to New Orleans reborn as a WaldorfAstoria Collection hotel.

The historic property, shuttered since Hurricane Katrina in 2005, is scheduled to reopen in late spring 2009 with 505 rooms, signature restaurants, cocktail venues, entertainment space to rival any in the Gulf South and the 12,000-foot Spa Guerlain.

Originally opened in 1893 as the Gruenwald, the hotel was rebranded in 1923 as The Roosevelt in honor of President Theodore Roosevelt. It changed hands and was renamed The Fairmont in 1965.

In more than a century of operation, The Roosevelt became "the place" to be for movie stars, sports figures and politicians. Gov. Huey Long maintained a room in the hotel which was open to almost anyone who wanted to drop by for a visit. Louisiana legend has it that he even built a 90-mile highway so it would run directly from the State Capitol in Baton Rouge to the hotel. The Roosevelt is known to hotel aficionados as having inspired Arthur Haley's 1965 novel Hotel.

Tod Chambers, recently named general manager of The Roosevelt, pointed out that the renovation, which is well under way, is a meticulous makeover. "Sam Friedman has retained the historical nature of the building," said Chambers.

Friedman, a native of Natchitoches, is a member of the ownership group First Class Hotels, LLC. His goal is to return The Roosevelt to its original luster and bring back its fabled splendor. The cost of the renovation is expected to exceed $135 million, making the project one of the largest private investments in downtown New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina.

"Flooding damaged the old Fairmont's basement following Katrina. The basement contained all the mechanical things that ran the hotel," said Chambers. "The structure itself did not get flooded. Maybe only eight or 10 windows got broken.

"Part of the restoration included all new plumbing, all new electrical (wiring) and all-new heat and air-conditioning," said Chambers. "And it isn't in the basement."

He said the entire building has been stripped down to the concrete walls, except for the lobby and some meeting spaces. "From ceiling to floor, wall-to-wall, all of the guest rooms are completely new," said Chambers.

In the process of restoration, ceilings that were lowered over the years were removed, revealing a lot of earlier details. "People are restoring all of those old plaster details," said Chambers. "Each of the

beautiful chandeliers is being taken down, hand-cleaned and repaired," he said.

Among key elements in the restoration are the legendary Sazerac Bar and the Blue Room. "All of the original woodwork is being restored in the Sazerac," said Chambers. "The original Art Deco murals were covered during Katrina and they are being restored. There will be entertainment in the Sazerac seven nights a week, and a television will not be there. It wouldn't be appropriate to the room's character."

In the golden era of supper clubs from the 1930s to 1960s, the Blue Room was host to some of the best-known names in entertainment, including Tony Bennett, Louis Armstrong and Sonny and Cher. "We gutted the Blue Room to the studs," said Chambers. "We will rebuilt its look back to the 1950s. And Sunday brunch will be brought back."

The former Fairmont Court will become a high-end coffee shop serving chocolates, gelato, desserts and cordials in the evenings. "Under the old carpet, we discovered a terrazzo floor with 'R' images, and there's a 20- to 30-foot coffered ceiling with a crystal chandelier," said Chambers. Award-winning New Orleans chef John Besh will have an Italian-concept restaurant and the hotel will offer high-end, in-room fine dining.

With more than a century of hosting and catering major events, the hotel will boast more than 50,000 square feet of meeting and event space. The 20,0000-square-foot Roosevelt Ballroom can now be divided into five sections. There's also the Waldorf-Astoria Ballroom and a total of 22 meeting rooms, some of which will be named for local theaters and famous politicians.

The hotel's 505 guest rooms, including 125 suites, will feature marble bathrooms as well as flat-screen TVs, mini bars and contemporary amenities. Of the 125 suites, six will be special butler suites designed like New Orleans famed shotgun houses. Located on the second floor they will be serviced by a private butler's hall.

Because of its longstanding role in community life, The Roosevelt will reprise its extravagant Christmas holiday decorations and events that enchanted children and adults for decades, making it a destination for families.

Architect for the renovation is Steven J. Finegan Architects of New Orleans and the construction manager is Brice Building Co. of Metairie.