



APRIL SAUL / Inquirer Staff Photographer

**Rittenhouse Hotel general manager David G. Benton says employees can make almost any decision that affects a guest and "isn't illegal, immoral or dangerous."** Front-desk manager Lucia Pernot says Benton "doesn't rule with an iron fist." He is only the second general manager in the hotel's 16-year history.

## Sweet dreams, \$250 a night

By Tom Belden  
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

*Rittenhouse  
Hotel thrives  
without chain  
name in elite  
market for  
rich, famous.*

### ONLINE EXTRA

Read more about the early troubles and ultimate success of the Rittenhouse Hotel at <http://go.philly.com/rittenhouse>

When the Rittenhouse Hotel wanted to do something memorable for its guests the weekend before Valentine's Day, general manager David G. Benton had the easy job. He gathered 10 employees and pulled out a notepad.

"They threw the ideas out, and I just wrote them down," said Benton, only the second manager the 98-room luxury hotel has had since it opened 16 years ago. In a service business, Benton said, "when things bubble up from the staff, it can only make you stronger."

The brainstorming produced dozens of ways to celebrate, including a fountain of flowing chocolate in the lobby and clocks hung over the front desk showing the time in Loveland, Colo.; Romance, Ark.; Valentine, Texas; and Kissimmee, Fla.

Listening to his workforce, Benton said, provides the foundation for pleasing the hotel's wealthy guests. And keeping demanding customers happy has been key to the Rittenhouse's staying atop the hotel game in Philadelphia — practically from the day it opened and in the face of formidable competition, hotel consultants say.

Before the Four Seasons Hotel opened in See **HOTEL** on C6

### Top-Rated Hotels

Hotels in the Philadelphia area that receive top designations from AAA:

#### Five Diamonds

- Four Seasons Philadelphia
- The Rittenhouse
- Ritz-Carlton

#### Four Diamonds

- Hilton Inn at Penn
- Hyatt Regency at Penn's Landing
- Omni at Independence Park
- Park Hyatt at the Bellevue
- Renaissance at Philadelphia Airport
- Sheraton Rittenhouse Square (closing April 1)
- Sofitel Philadelphia
- Westin Philadelphia.

# Condos help hotel prosper

**HOTEL** from C1

1983, people seeking a luxury hotel after a day of business in Philadelphia usually headed to New York or Washington. Today, the Rittenhouse, the Four Seasons, the Ritz-Carlton, the Park Hyatt at the Bellevue, and a handful of others compete vigorously for the business of the limited number of executives and wealthy individuals willing to pay the city's highest rates.

Each of the city's luxury hotels has its devotees. The Philadelphia Four Seasons is frequently ranked as one of the world's best hotels by travel magazines and guidebooks.

The Four Seasons, the Ritz-Carlton and the Park Hyatt, as part of international chains, have loyal customers who use the brand around the world.

But it's the Rittenhouse, from its prime location anchoring the west side of Rittenhouse Square, that wins the battle of numbers used to measure how well lodgings perform financially, industry experts say. "It's tough for the Rittenhouse, particularly without having a national brand name behind it," said Ed Watkins, editor of *Lodging Hospitality*, an industry magazine. "It can do it only by being consistent, all the time."

Frequent guests can attest to just how consistent it is. "The Rittenhouse is my favorite hotel in the world," said Aaron Rosand, a globe-trotting concert violinist who stays at the hotel two or three days a week when teaching across Rittenhouse Square at the Curtis Institute of Music. "I can't recommend it highly enough."

With such satisfied customers, the Rittenhouse is able to command the highest average daily room rate in the region — more than \$250, according to lodging consultants. Its revenue per available room — the percentage of occupied rooms multiplied by the average rate — was \$189 a day last year, almost twice that of other luxury hotels and three times the average for all hotels in the region, the consultants found.

Including revenue from restaurants and other services, the Rittenhouse is one of the nation's top performers per room, based on annual surveys conducted by *Lodging Hospitality*. In 2003, the Rittenhouse placed first among urban hotels, with sales per room of \$159,142. Last year, it came in second, at \$166,091 per room, trailing only California's Peninsula Beverly Hills Hotel. (Many Four Seasons and Ritz-Carlton hotels did not participate in the surveys.)

To Benton, the Rittenhouse's financial performance flows directly from an atmosphere in which his 289 employees are comfortable making virtually any decision that directly affects a guest and "isn't illegal, immoral or dangerous."

Benton cites one example after another of



APRIL SAUL / Inquirer Staff Photographer

**David Benton helps guest Kristin Herzog** of Hartford, Conn. Benton says employees take initiatives, citing the parking valet who fixed a radiator hose for a guest without asking.

employees' taking responsibility for small tasks that, he believes, can make a guest never want to stay anywhere else. It was the valet-parking attendant who, without being asked, repaired a faulty radiator hose of a guest's car, and the front-desk staffers who took charge of finding the \$5,000 software program that helps concierges keep track of guests' requests.

"He doesn't rule with an iron fist. He makes you see things," said front-desk manager Lucia Pernot, who has worked at the hotel since it opened. "If a couple here for their anniversary is checking in and they say, 'This is the first time we've been away from our kids,' you don't have to ask about upgrading them to a suite. You just do it."

The Rittenhouse counts among its clientele the rich and famous — and those who want to be near the stars. It's where Luciano Pavarotti, Tom Hanks, Bruce Willis, Oprah Winfrey, and former Presidents George H.W. Bush and Gerald Ford have stayed. Benton writes welcoming notes to each guest, often personalizing them, such as having the note to Riccardo Muti, former conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra, translated into Italian.

The hotel's signature dining room, Lacroix, was named best new restaurant in the country by *Esquire* magazine in 2003. The hotel is mentioned dozens of times a year in newspaper columns when its meeting rooms are booked for fund-raisers, wedding receptions and bar mitzvahs. Its ballroom

## The Rittenhouse

**Address:** 210 W. Rittenhouse Square

**Number of floors:** 33 (top two-thirds are condos)

**Opened:** June 19, 1989

**Number of rooms:** 98

**Average daily rate:** \$250-plus

**Owner:** Rittenhouse Development Co.

has even been used for memorial services for recently deceased residents of the condominiums above the hotel rooms.

The Rittenhouse condos — which sell for \$1 million and up — are a key part of the building's success, helping provide revenue in the hotel's three restaurants, spa and shops, the consultants said. The hotel is owned by the Rittenhouse

Development Co., a partnership between Philadelphia real estate executive David G. Marshall and a General Electric Co. unit.

The Rittenhouse never would have been built if the top two-thirds of the 33-story building were not condos, said Warren Marr, a director in the Philadelphia office of the PricewaterhouseCoopers L.L.P. consulting firm, who tracks all Philadelphia hotels.

"There are no high-end hotels being built now without condos as part of them," he said. "The Rittenhouse was one of the first ... to do that."

The Rittenhouse does not always delight each customer, of course. Guests have reported that on rare occasions the heat has not worked properly, and before Lacroix opened, service in its restaurants could be slow. But Peter R. Tyson, a hotel consultant who has followed the Rittenhouse since it was first envisioned in the 1980s, said such lapses were rare. "They wouldn't be getting the room rate they are," he said, "if it weren't just about perfect most of the time."

Contact staff writer Tom Belden at 215-854-2454 or [tbelden@phillynews.com](mailto:tbelden@phillynews.com).