

The Brown Palace

story by LEAH M. CHARNEY photographs by JOSHUA HARDIN

Presidents, royalty and locals converge
in the Denver hotel at the heart of city life

POP! THE TELLTALE sound of a champagne bottle uncorking reverberates in the hotel's eight-story atrium lobby. People young and old – the tattooed, the golf-shirted and three blondes clad in yoga pants and perfect makeup – cross paths heading for elevators, restaurants and a large revolving door leading out into downtown Denver. Ladies in big hats sip tea, while an immaculately dressed Cuban man in a Panama hat checks in for a stay celebrating his 55th birthday.

Light pours in through the ornate stained-glass ceiling, making the polished golden onyx columns shine. One floor below, through a heavy wooden door and a staircase away from the bustle above, another set of people intersects, moving food, linens, trays and supplies through labyrinthine underground hallways.

This is a day in the life of The Brown Palace Hotel & Spa, where scenes like this have played out since the hotel opened in 1892. Through booms and busts, The Brown Palace has remained a fixture of life in Colorado.

The hotel opened less than a year before 15 percent of Denver's population fled following the silver crash of 1893. It survived two world wars and the Great Depression, and has hosted nearly every president since Theodore Roosevelt. Colorado has grown and changed over the years, but the lively thrum at the grand dame of Denver hotels has always been a constant, with the hotel remaining continuously open every single day for 128 years.

Until the pandemic forced a 64-day closure in 2020, that is.

LIKE MANY ON the Front Range, Nick Moschetti associated The Brown Palace name with two things: history and luxury. His career took him from his hometown of Longmont across the United States, running properties in Ohio and Texas before he returned to Colorado. When the management company for The Brown Palace called to recruit Moschetti for a job as general manager, he wasn't looking for a new gig. But the opportunity to work at The Brown Palace? That was an assignment he couldn't pass up.





Crown Palace Hotel



ONE WAY





His first day was March 9, 2020. That week, the hotel was completely booked out, with every guest and meeting room in use. A few weeks later, everything had changed. Cancellations abounded, especially after the city and the state both issued lockdown mandates. Though hotels were exempted from shutdowns, the number of guests trickled down from the hundreds to the dozens to less than a handful. By the first week of April, Moschetti and hotel ownership had a final tough conversation.

“As hard as that message was for me to hear – the enormity of the thought of being the first time The Brown Palace has ever closed to guests – there was no other choice,” Moschetti said.

A locksmith had to be dispatched because the lock on the front door was rusted shut; no one had ever used it before. Associates wept as the doors were locked.

With the front desk staff gone, the main phone number was rerouted to Moschetti’s desk. All other staff were furloughed or laid off except for a few others who reported every day, like the engineering team. No one knew for sure when they would reopen.

THE EERIE QUIET was something no one had experienced in more than a century. Perhaps the last person to see The Brown Palace so still was founder Henry Cordes Brown, just before the hotel first opened.

Brown first came to Denver in 1860. He later filed a Homestead Act claim for 160 acres of higher ground east of downtown, which was then concentrated nearly a mile away in Auraria and Larimer Square. His peers thought he was crazy and called the land “Brown’s Folly,” convinced that the relatively new city would never stretch that far.

By the time construction on the Colorado State Capitol began in 1886, on land donated by Brown, Denver had spread. Brown could charge a premium for lots in the areas known today as Capitol Hill and Uptown and quickly amassed a fortune. He decided to sink \$2 million, close to \$60 million in today’s dollars, into a new venture. He selected the lot located across Broadway from his home, previously used to graze the family cow, to open a hotel that would rival luxury lodgings in much larger cities.

The H.C. Brown Palace also included

the most modern infrastructure of the time. Coal-fired dynamos generated all the property's electricity, and a standalone artesian well supplied water. The hotel was built to operate as its own little world. The well remains operational today and is as deep as nearby Republic Plaza, Denver's tallest building, is high.

As Denver grew into a metropolis, The Brown Palace became woven into the life of the city. The Brown has hosted royalty, celebrities and powerful politicians. Of all the presidents who have visited, Dwight D. Eisenhower made the biggest impact. In 1952, Eisenhower – whose wife Mamie was from Denver – used The Brown Palace to launch and then run his presidential campaign.

“During his administration, they stayed here so often that The Brown Palace got to be known as the ‘Western White House,’” said Debra Faulkner, the hotel's historian and archivist. Today, one of The Brown's three Presidential suites bears his name. A fourth suite is named for the Beatles, who stayed in August 1964.

Other notable guests include Oprah

Winfrey, Thomas Edison, Taylor Swift, a Romanian queen and an English prince. Buffalo Bill Cody frequented the hotel bar. The Denver Broncos were founded in the lobby. Margaret Brown, no relation, also enjoyed an extensive relationship: “The Unsinkable” Mrs. Brown checked into Suite 625 just two weeks after the Titanic disaster and used the hotel to stage her press conferences.

With six on-site food and beverage outlets, a boutique spa and salon, 20,000 square feet of meeting space, 241 guest rooms and suites, and hundreds of employees, the hotel remains almost a tiny city unto itself.

IN THE EARLY days of the pandemic, when Moschetti needed a break from answering phone calls, he would take walks through the empty hotel to get to know the building.

He wondered what was locked in the filing cabinet he passed every time he went on walkabout. After tracking down the key, he had to hunt down yet another when he discovered a locked fireproof safe

inside. Finally, the treasure was revealed: a gold-embossed log that notable guests sign when they stay. Moschetti flipped through the pages, past rock stars and presidential candidates to where actor Kevin Bacon had drawn a little cartoon of himself with a thought bubble that said, “This place is great!”

Moschetti's pilgrimages nearly always started from his office in the annex tower across the street, which originally opened as Brown Palace West. Though a second-floor sky bridge connects the two buildings, Moschetti often used the employee-only tunnel running underneath Tremont Place into what he describes as “the central nervous system,” located directly under the historic lobby above. Everything branches off from here. Hallways fork in all directions marked by the occasional staircase.

A vast kitchen acts as a hub to send orders throughout the hotel: crab cakes and prime rib sandwiches to the Ship Tavern restaurant; pastries and sandwiches to the atrium lobby for tea; snacks to the coffee shop; food for all banquets and events; and all room service orders.

On the opening page, The Brown Palace's facade takes on a magical glow thanks to light reflected from skyscraper windows. At left, John Kite plays piano in the hotel's eight-story atrium lobby. Nicole, Hailey and David Bender enjoy traditional English tea.



Moschetti could peer into the darkness of the 10-foot diameter Fish rotary oven, a beast of a baking marvel invented two years before the telephone and installed during the hotel's construction. He hoped the day would soon come when it would once again be filled with scones for afternoon tea – a recipe that also dates back more than 100 years.

During the closure, Moschetti was getting hundreds of calls a day just about tea from people looking for normalcy. As the weeks ticked by, Moschetti and the team geared up to reopen. Some services at the Spa & Salon resumed in time for Mother's Day, but the hotel otherwise remained closed. Finally, a reopening date was set.

"I had spent two months walking around dreaming about hearing the piano playing in the lobby and the buzz of the hotel guests checking in and passing employees in the hallway," Moschetti said.

He excitedly began bringing back associates. Everyone, regardless of their job position, delightedly dusted and polished to prepare the building for its grand reopening.

Nearly as soon as the doors were flung open on June 10, 2020, after the first guests checked in, the first piping hot cup of tea was poured. John Kite, The Brown's resident pianist for the past 34 years, slid across the piano bench. Emotion and unmitigated joy poured through his fingers onto the keys. Everyone in the room was riding the same wave.

"It was like greeting an old friend again," said Moschetti of gazing out upon the guests enjoying that first tea as he thought back on all the dedicated staff members who made it possible.

UPSTAIRS, ABOVE THE lobby, more signs of life re-emerged. The Brown Palace hadn't just returned to normal; the hotel had used its downtime to renovate and improve.

During the Depression, the Boettcher family, the hotel's longest owners from 1922 to 1980, converted the eighth and ninth floors into apartments to provide the hotel with an additional revenue stream. Some residents lived there from the 1930s well into the 1980s, mingling among hotel guests. During the 2020 closure, renovations planned before the pandemic were sped up, including taking the guest rooms



Shawn O'Connor

Hand-painted wallpaper adorns a private dining room in the Palace Arms. Brown Palace Historian Debra Faulkner wears period fashion as she gives historic tours. A sky bridge over Tremont Place connects the main building to additional facilities.





History Colorado

The Brown Palace stands alone not long after its 1892 opening. The city has since grown up around the hotel, which now neighbors some of Denver's tallest buildings.

at the top of The Brown down to the studs. At the same time, the Presidential and Beatles suites were also remodeled, as were several meeting rooms and the Club Lounge on the second floor.

The Palace Arms restaurant, the property's crown jewel dining outlet, also underwent a major overhaul. Though the crystal chandeliers, white-glove service and suit-and-tie dress code are gone, the Palace Arms retains its stunning atmosphere and fine-dining experience. Dishes cater to the tastes of both longtime regulars and foodie Millennials; there's even a rotating vegan option, so omnivores and herbivores can all dine together.

Executive Chef Kim Moyle is responsible for overseeing all six of The Brown's dining outlets. Remaking Palace Arms was her first undertaking. The new grass-fed beef, which comes from Fitch Ranch in Parshall, between Kremmling and Granby, is sold by the ounce and butchered in house. All the fat is removed so diners "pay just for that prime bite," she said.

By the time the one-year anniversary of The Brown's triumphant return came,

everything was nearly back to business as usual. Moschetti and the team continue to look further ahead.

Every amenity is now open; staffing numbers, along with guest demand, continue to rise; operating hours continue expanding. Downstairs, a pastry chef named Amber spins the rotary oven's massive crank, wheeling the interior around and around while deftly using a wooden paddle to pull scones out. Upstairs, Kite plays the piano amid clinking cups and the tinkle of spoons scraping china bowls of Devonshire cream.

Just before Labor Day, Moschetti finally got the chance to bust out the private guestbook when Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi came through town. She told Moschetti she tries to stay at The Brown Palace whenever she's in the area. After signing the ledger, she took the elevator up to the eighth floor to settle into a room named for another California politician who also loved visiting the hotel – Ronald Reagan.

No matter how vastly people may differ in ideology, they can always agree on The Brown Palace. 🍷



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