

CEO of Charleston hospitality business likes to upgrade older hotels

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Latest project

Avocet Hospitality intends to open The Vendue hotel in phases beginning in April, in time for the Cooper River Bridge Run.

The \$5 million renovation involved the installation of a hallway to adjoin the four historic warehouses that comprised the former Vendue Inn, the Library Restaurant and the Rooftop Bar.

When the 45-room hotel is fully reopened in May, the first floor will house a gourmet restaurant named The Drawing Room, and The Press, a coffee shop facing East Bay Street.

The Vendue will be dedicated to local art, with gallery spaces woven throughout the property. The rotating exhibitions will be designed and managed by Megan and Robert Lange of Robert Lange Studios, a local art gallery.

The hotel also includes 26 Vendue, the 39-room hotel across the street. Avocet acquired the neighboring Anchorage Inn for \$3.9 million in August and tacked on its 19 rooms, one of which was converted into a hallway between the two buildings.

Jonathan Weitz has become something of a cosmetic surgeon in the hospitality industry. While he'd likely do well with a ground-up approach, he has a proven track record in the revival business.

In eight years, he's taken a vacation rental business on Folly Beach and turned it into Avocet Hospitality Group - the parent company behind Tides, Folly Beach's only full-service hotel; The Vendue, a dual-property boutique hotel under construction in the former Vendue Inn in downtown Charleston; and roughly 400 vacation rental properties on Folly Beach and the French Caribbean island of St. Barths.



[Enlarge](#) Art will play a big role in the renovated Vendue Inn. (Brad Nettles/Staff) 2/19/14

Each project has involved some sort of renewal, a task Weitz calls "repositioning." Given the growth of Avocet Hospitality, it's a niche he doesn't plan to abandon anytime soon.

Avocet Hospitality, which Weitz co-owns with wife Lisa Weitz, will expand its collection by at least five more hotels in the next eight years.

Most likely, he'll keep searching for renovation opportunities rather than plots of land.

"It's a lot more fun to reposition something," he said. "We're in the business of rebirth."

Tidal tug

Weitz grew up on Adger's Wharf in downtown Charleston, not far from the Vendue Inn, which he bought in 2012 to transform into an art-centric boutique hotel.

The property he acquired included two hotels at 19 and 26 Vendue Range, but most of the renovation efforts are centered on 19 Vendue Range, which housed the former Vendue Inn, the Library Restaurant and the Rooftop Bar.

"I got an opportunity to do this right around the corner from where I grew up. It's very special," he said during a preview tour Feb. 20 of the unfinished hotel at 19 Vendue.

In his earlier years, Weitz was headed anywhere but the hospitality industry. He graduated from Clemson University with a bachelor's degree in finance, and later earned a law degree from the University of South Carolina.

After law school, Weitz got a job at Nexsen Pruet, a large Columbia-based real estate law firm with a Charleston office.



Enlarge The Vendue Inn renovation will make the interior of all the buildings into one.
Brad Nettles/Staff

Many of the clients he worked with were real estate and golf course developers throughout the Lowcountry.

"I started to get a taste for hospitality at that point," he said. "I was like, this is pretty cool, not the legal side of it but the hotels, commercial development, that sort of stuff."

It wasn't long before Weitz was hired by Kiawah Island Golf Resort to help developers navigate the legal issues surrounding the construction of The Sanctuary Hotel.

"I started sitting in on architecture and design meetings. ... Within four months, I was mainly involved with the development side and building the hotel amenities," Weitz said.

Bill Goodwin, the Richmond, Va.-based billionaire owner of Kiawah Island Golf Resort, eventually encouraged Weitz to oversee his company's \$17 million renovation project of The Hermitage, an early 20th-century hotel in Nashville, Tenn. At the time, it was operating as a tired-looking Sheraton hotel, Weitz said.

"We were breathing new life to this hotel that had a tremendous history, but had just lost it over the years," he said. "That's where it got in my blood to try to identify opportunities where there is something that's got a lot of potential ... that just needs to be repositioned."

The Hermitage is now Tennessee's only Forbes Five Star and AAA Five Diamond hotel.

Stacking up

Over the next decade, Weitz made redevelopment the central theme of his newfound career path.

In 2006, he and his wife acquired Islands West Realty, a vacation property management firm on Folly Beach, for \$300,000. At the time, the business managed about 89 properties on the island. Now operating as Avocet Properties, it's one of the largest vacation rental businesses on Folly Beach with about 200 properties.

Two years after starting Avocet Properties, Weitz acquired the oceanfront Holiday Inn at the end of Center Street for \$21.7 million.

"Being the only beachfront hotel on the island, we felt that Folly Beach deserved something better and something different than a chain hotel. Folly

Beach has always championed itself as being on the edge of America, being different. So we looked at it as an opportunity to do something special," Weitz said.

The Tides hotel was opened in 2009 after a \$5.5 million renovation, which included the creation of Blu Restaurant and Bar, a popular seaside watering hole for locals and guests. Since then, the company has invested another \$3.5 million in capital improvements.

The reinvestments have been paying off, Weitz said. Hotel revenue has more than doubled, and the food and beverage earnings from Blu have tripled, he said.

Meanwhile, Weitz and his wife were busy starting another vacation management business in their family vacation spot, St. Barths. The pair discovered the need for English-speaking hospitality professionals on the island to help guests with reservations and concierge services. They partnered with the French vacation realty group Ici et La to act as a liaison for its American guests.

Today, Weitz could be standing in a courtroom or crunching numbers at a bank. Instead, he's scurrying back and forth between rooms at Vendue Range, talking about art installations with Robert Lange and discussing interior design with his wife.

But his education was hardly earned in vain.

"No matter where you are in business, numbers count and the law counts," Weitz said. "Those two things, having the ability to understand the numbers and understand the law, allows you to get into a business that you enjoy and that you can be successful at."

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