

Seaport Stay

With a nod to history and the promise of modern amenities, The Merchant Inn fits right into Salem.

BY CHARLOTTE ROTH

In 1789, Salem merchant Joshua Ward was granted the rare honor of a visit to his home by then-president George Washington. The home where Washington spent a night was originally constructed in 1784, centrally located on Salem's Washington Street. Remarkably, the building has remained under the control of private owners throughout its lifetime. "I'm constantly surprised that a building with so much rich history is privately owned, and not a museum," says current owner Todd Waller. Waller and his wife, Kim, opened the home to the public in November 2015 in its current incarnation: the historic Merchant Inn, which honors Ward's legacy with a playful tagline: "Rum, pepper, and a little bit of mystery."

The inn represents the best of what Salem has to offer: a sense of history and gravitas melded with modern amenities and a contemporary reimagining of the space, thanks to an extensive renovation by Waller and a variety of local craftsmen. "The project was really a labor of love," says Waller. "It's such an amazing building, and everyone who worked on it really appreciated the history." The renovation maintained the home's historical treasures, including the characteristically Samuel McIn-



tyre staircase and woodwork and original fireplaces in the common room, complete with firebacks said to have been made by Paul Revere. The idea was to maintain the building's character "while also making it appeal to the modern-day traveler," says interior designer Rachel Reider.

The blend of classic and contemporary is most obvious in the guest lounge, where "rich jewel-tone fabrics are paired with more modern-

day furniture frames," Reider explains. "The juxtaposing of old and new come together to create a layered, warm, and inviting atmosphere for guests to gather." The lounge has become a popular place for guests to relax in the evenings, says Merchant manager Jennifer Rein. "We encourage [people] to grab a bottle of wine and cheese or dessert from one of the local shops to bring back to the lounge," she says. "It's a wonderful way for

Interior designer Rachel Reider used rich jewel tones throughout the inn.

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guests to enjoy our space while supporting other local businesses.”

The hotel’s 11 comfortable, well-appointed rooms vary in size and style, but never in quality; each queen and king deluxe room has its own bold décor, high-end furnishings and bed linens, and spa-like bathroom with heated floors. The Washington Room—with its antique eagle wall decoration sourced from APH Waller & Sons, an Essex antique dealership owned by Todd Waller’s father—draws guests with a patriotic streak. The Lark Suite, nestled into the eaves, offers a serene, private experience that often attracts honeymooners and other happy couples, according to Rein. “It’s a really intimate hideaway,” she explains. “There are some fun nooks and crannies, and the light color scheme makes it feel cozy but not cramped.” A luxurious king bed and large bath with a freestanding soaking tub enhance the exclusive feel of the suite, and Waller and



The guest rooms are whimsically appointed. The inn is a Federal-style building, dating to the 1700s. Owner Todd Waller infuses the old inn with a fresh vibe.

Rein have big plans for the room’s skylight, which opens onto the original widow’s walk. “We hope to add a ladder from the suite through the skylight, to open the widow’s walk into a private roof deck for guests,” says Rein.

While the inn’s timeless design and historical importance are part of its charm, The Merchant’s most memorable characteristic is the unparalleled customer service that Waller and Rein provide. Hotel collective Lark Hotels, a group that manages boutique hotels throughout New England and California, serves as The Merchant Inn’s management group; the collaboration was “natural” for Waller. “My number one priority has always been customer service,” he ex-

plains. “Lark Hotels has the same focus.” The Merchant takes the Lark promise to heart: “Amenities you desire. Service you’ll remember. A touch of mischief.”

An additional deck on the second floor, open to all guests, is one of the many amenities offered; guests also enjoy coffee, cold beverages, and healthy snacks at any time during their stay. This year, the owners will introduce small plates for breakfast, a tapas-like alternative to the typical continental spread. Rein and Waller, both longtime locals, are always happy to provide recommendations for restaurants, museums, or North Shore historical landmarks. “There are so many riches in this area for guests to enjoy,” notes Rein. “We’re so excited for our first summer, when guests will be able to get out on the water and enjoy Salem’s maritime culture and history.”

From the start, The Merchant has engaged with Salem’s present as much as with its past. “One of Salem’s greatest benefits is its diverse community of individuals and businesses,” says Waller. “As a central hub of the North Shore, Salem has all the amenities of Boston but at much lower [prices]. Salem’s hospitality industry has really thrived in recent years, and I’m so excited The Merchant can be a part of that.” njs



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