Elora Mill and Spa opens after eight-year wait

JAIME MYSLIK
ELORA



HEAD CHEF JOHN BAKKER, OWNER AARON CIANCONE AND MANAGER GEOFFREY WILD

From solariums and elegant ballrooms to a rooftop pool and exclusive chef's table, luxury has arrived in Centre Wellington.

The long-awaited Elora Mill Hotel and Spa officially opened on July 6.

"It's a place to come and celebrate the really special occasions," said Elora Mill general manager Geoffrey Wild.

"It's not where you're going to come for dinner every night, but it's where you're going to come and celebrate birthdays and celebrate special occasions and ... enjoy world class cuisine right on your doorstep."

Stepping onto the mill site at 77 Mill St. West in the heart of downtown Elora is an experience.

From the outside, the structures look similar to old photos of the original



mill. In fact, Wild said the mill is decorated with just those types of images.

"You'll find these all the way throughout the whole building," Wild said.

"So most of these come from the Wellington Archives; they were kind enough to allow us to scour through there, so we found probably about 60 pictures that you can see throughout the mill, from just really cool things about Elora back in the day, back in time."

The nod to the original look comes largely from a fluke encounter.

Aaron Ciancone, owner and president of Pearle Hospitality, the mill's parent company, was driving by All Saints Anglican church in Hamilton in 2016.

"Our owner drove past ... and they were busy demolishing this church and he just kind of hung out the window and said, 'What's happening with this stone' and they were like, 'Well, it's going to go through a reclamation yard' and he was like, 'No, I'll send trucks,'" Wild said.

"So he bought all the stone and that one church ... was enough stone for everything that we needed here.

"It is stone that was originally quarried out of the Grand (River), not here in Elora necessarily but it's the same stuff ... It's nice to bring a little bit of that back."

The Elora Mill Hotel and Spa offers fine dining, luxury accommodation, a full service spa and a choice from three wedding venues.

"It's been an expensive journey and it gives me great pleasure to be standing here and celebrating the re-birth of the Elora Mill," Ciancone said at the July 5 opening celebration.



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GEOFFREY WILD,
ELORA MILL GENERAL MANAGER

"I was thinking about that moment in time when I was with my family and we had to make a quick decision about submitting a bid on this property."

He had consistently heard people had been to Elora and thought it was a beautiful place - but not many had returned to the village.

"And I was one of them and it was really at that moment that I said ... people had so many fond memories of this place, but it really needed a little bit of love and care and attention," he said.

"And so it was at that point that I realized, 'let's take the leap of faith, let's submit the bid, and see what happens,' and it was only a few days or a few weeks later ... we were successful.

"So that's when my heart dropped and the journey began."

The Elora Mill was built in 1833 as a grist mill and ran as a mill until 1974. In 1975 it opened for the first time as a hotel.

However, after changing ownership a number of times, the Elora Mill Inn was left in a state of extensive deterioration when Pearle Hospitality took over eight years ago.

The inn officially closed at the end of October 2010 and at that time it was thought the building would remain closed for about 18 months.

In reality it would take eight years.

One of the road blocks that Pearle Hospitality faced was the Grand River flood plain - the mill was built directly in it. Mill officials worked with the Grand River Conservation Authority and the Ministry of Natural resources to come up with a solution.

The mill project also sparked resistance from some members of the community, as:

- protesters voiced opposition about the removal of trees on the south side of the Grand River; and

PHOTOS: JAIME MYSLIK

- a group of citizens asked for a two-year moratorium on growth until the township could prove how it was going to maintain the 19th century small-town scale, character, atmosphere and quality of urban areas.

In March of 2016, the mill received approval for its heritage permit application.

In December of that year, mill owners learned the hotel would receive tax incentives through both the Wellington County and Centre Wellington Community Improvement Plans (CIPs).

Wellington County CIP tax incentives, applied only to yearly tax increases, include:

- covering 100 per cent of the tax increase in year one;
- 80% in year two;
- 60% in year three;
- 40% in year four;
- 20% in year five; and
- in year six the company will be paying the full tax increase amount.

Centre Wellington also provided tax incentives through a CIP program.

Those incentives also apply only to yearly tax increases. The company will receive an 80% exemption for the Elora Mill for 10 years from April 8, 2016.

In total, the CIP incentives will save the Elora Mill $640,000 over 10 years.

"Way back in 2015 the council recognized this project was not only good for visitors, it was good for this community," said Centre Wellington Mayor Kelly Linton. "It was good for Centre Wellington.

"That's why ... we committed that we would fast track the project and do everything within our control to make sure the application process went quickly and that we didn't put up any unnecessary administrative roadblocks, that we could move ahead with this project."

After eight years, the first phase of the Elora Mill Hotel and Spa development opened in July.

"Every single physical feature of the Elora Mill and Spa is centred around the customer experience," Linton said at the ribbon cutting.

"You've demonstrated that one of the key success factors for any organization is to put yourself in the customer's shoes first and then





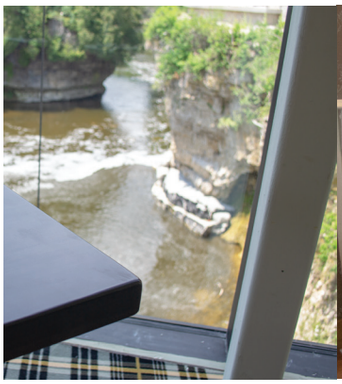




PHOTOS: JAIME MYSLIK











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>
> KELLY LINTON, MAYOR, CENTRE WELLINGTON

build on that foundation. That's a great example for government and businesses everywhere to learn from."

In preparation for the mill opening Centre Wellington revitalized and rebuilt Mill Street in Elora.

"I understand that this is a once-in-a-generation project; it's revitalizing downtown Elora, it's rebuilding our heritage assets, it's rehabilitating a brownfield site across the river and reclaiming a south bank of the Grand River," Linton said.

"And is a huge boost to our economy: $150 million in investment, 150 full-time jobs.

"Bottom line is this project is good for Centre Wellington."

Elora Mill and Spa officials say the company is committed to working with the local community.

In her introductory remarks, emcee Barbara Lustgarten-Evoy explained at the opening that about 80% of mill staff is from Wellington County.

"Pearl Hospitality ... (is) sourcing out and using local food whenever and wherever possible," she added.

"So thank you ... for that and ... for not just coming in and making this your home but for coming in and making this your home and including all of us in the journey."

In addition, Wild explained the mill would use local artwork on consignment throughout the mill.

"We want to be using local art ... If any one of our guests are interested we'll allow the curators to facilitate the purchasing of the artwork," he said.

The Elora Mill Hotel and Spa has been in operation since July 6 and the first phase of the project is now near completion.

Pearle is in the process of developing the south side of the river into luxury condos, a convention centre, wedding chapel, above- and below-ground parking and shops.

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