

Reaching New Heights Columbia Hospitality Poised For Spate Of New Openings In Northwest

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By Kerry Medina

For the first time in its 23-year history, Columbia Hospitality Inc. (CHI) is poised to open as many as six new hotels over the course of a 12-month period. Never before has the management firm debuted so many new properties in one year.

The State Hotel, a 91-room boutique property located in Seattle's historic Eitel Building, debuted this past May and to come this summer is a 142-room location for IHG's Hotel Indigo brand in



Columbia's portfolio includes the Semiahmoo Resort in Blaine, WA. Everett, WA, as well as The Finch, a boutique hotel that will open in downtown Walla Walla, WA, later this year. Meanwhile, Choice Hotels' Cambria flag will debut in Bremerton, WA, next year when The Lodge at St. Edward Park will also open in Kenmore, WA, and Missoula, MT, will welcome The Swift.

"Our business is 23 years old and I feel like we're a start-up all of a sudden," said John Oppenheimer, CEO and founder of CHI. "It's taken 23 years to build it and we always remind ourselves that it could take 23 minutes to erode it," he said, adding that the company's track record for profitability also played a part in securing the new business.

The Seattle-based business is also highly targeted, with Oppenheimer adding that as a boutique operator of 42 properties, the group isn't trying to be all things to all people. "Our sweet spot is to be in small, boutique venues that are part of a community," he said.

These new properties are in addition to the deal CHI signed in June to manage the Icicle Village Resort in Leavenworth, WA, a contract that comes about a year after Oppenheimer became majority owner of The Inn at Abeja and Abeja vineyards in Walla Walla, WA.

CHI also began managing the 38-acre property, including vineyards and a farmstead with guest cottages and suites, in April 2018 with the goal of expanding the property's events and weddings business. "We're about building the brand of the hotel, not the brand of CHI," Oppenheimer explained. Nevertheless, the group's hotels average over 114 percent RevPAR share relative to their competitive set.

Along with 26 hotels and resorts throughout six Western states, CHI is also the operator of record for a number of West Coast and Pacific Northwest conference centers, golf clubs and courses, residential buildings and “distinctive venues” that include the World Trade Center Seattle and Smith Tower’s 35th floor Observatory in Seattle.

The group additionally operates all of its hotel restaurants (with the exception of the Knob Hill Inn in Sun Valley, ID) in order to provide consistency of service as well as to tie the hotel brand to the restaurant brand.

“F&B experiences drive room revenue and don’t have to lose money because they create the front door and the vibe for the hotel,” he said.

As an example, he points to The State Hotel’s restaurant Ben Paris. Named for one of the building’s original restaurateurs, the new dining venue offers a signature cocktail program alongside duck confit crepes and a signature Ben Paris burger.

Oppenheimer doesn’t shy away from innovation either, but he’ll define it on his own terms. When the Kitsap Conference Center in Bremerton, WA, was at capacity with its weekend wedding business, Oppeneheimer saw an opportunity for more marriages to take place at the venue, creating “Wedding Wednesdays.” The program offers a significant discount to couples who sign up for mid-week nuptials, giving them the chance to expand their guest count beyond their original calculations.

Along with CHI’s operations and management services, the company also does consulting work, most recently for the owner of two hotels in Florida and prior to that, for a family office building three new hotels in Portugal. To date, CHI has consulted on over 200 projects globally.

Oppenheimer maintains that it’s not the guest experience that should sit at the top of the pyramid, but creating a positive workplace for his team that should take priority because that is what ultimately delivers “a spectacular guest experience.”