

# THE BRITISH REVISITS AYLMER'S HISTORY WITH VINTAGE STYLE AND MODERN COMFORT



**ROCHELLE LASH**  
*Checking In*

If its nearly 200-year-old stone walls could talk, The British would dish about royalty, politicians and musicians.

The British is a darling boutique hotel that opened in May in the historic Aylmer sector of Gatineau. It is the new hot spot along Aylmer's rue Principale, popping with energy and style after a laborious, five-year restoration of a fine heritage building that debuted in 1834.

Loaded with character, the new British has only 10 guest rooms and suites, but it does have loads of attractive space for dining and drinking: a total of 250 seats in the British Café, the adults-only Pub and the family-friendly British Public House, as well as space for 150 in outdoor lounges, plus the Gold Room for banquets. This place is big — and it's packed to its vintage rafters for open-mike night on Thursdays and live music on Fridays and Saturdays.

The hotel also will be the hub for such events as Fête nationale festivities on June 24 and the Canadian Road Cycling Championships on June 29.

The tranquil district of Aylmer is gradually gentrifying, and The British is a major catalyst. Why go? The hotel is a few blocks away from the idyllic shore of the Ottawa River, the Capital Pathway cycling network and the boating action of the Aylmer Marina.

The person with the vision is Mike Clemann, a Swiss-Canadian real estate developer and former investment banker with the Rothschild Group in Zurich. Now he has become an impresario, hotelier and restaurateur. And, in the spirit of Aylmer's small-town friendliness, he also sings and plays guitar on open-mike nights.

"The biggest challenge was to restore a heritage building while preserving its charm — the reconstruction, the preservation and the modernization — all within strict guidelines," Clemann said.

**The look, 2016:** Architecturally, The British is a Georgian-style building with Quebec influences like dormer windows and side chimneys. The reconstruction



The British is a new boutique hotel in a historic 1834 building in Aylmer. *AMANDA RUSSELL/THE BRITISH*

uncovered precious stone and brick walls, arches and the remains of a livery stable.

Today, glass cases display memorabilia: sepia-toned photographs, beer steins, hotel room keys, hand-written notes and newspaper clippings.

The new British went all-out in the decor and fittings of its accommodations that come in four levels: basic and deluxe hotel rooms, plus junior suites and large suites — the Honeymoon and the Presidential.

Designed by Andrea De Caria of the restoration contractors Brookman Industries, they're contemporary, comfortable and bold. Everything is high quality, including the glass showers, marble bathroom vanities, black-out blinds, good-sized windows, bathrobes, natural toiletries from the Truly Earth Friendly and Nespresso coffee machines (the company is Swiss).

The handsome guest room furniture is covered in glove-soft leather and textured linen in neutrals like chocolate, charcoal and ivory.

Modern art livens up the dove-grey walls, and flashes of chrome brighten the tables. Some rooms have electric fireplaces, Juliette balconies or original stone accents. If your room is facing

west, you can see the Ottawa River a few blocks away.

**Eat, drink:** The British Public House, The Pub and the outdoor lounges are smash hits with locals for casual food, live music and lots of beer, including 18 Molsons on tap, Beau's from Van Kleek Hill and Creemore from the Collingwood area. The more than 60 whiskies feature 20 rare choices, such as Basil Hayden's Kentucky Bourbon (\$9.50 for an ounce-and-a-half), Ardbeg single malt Scotch (\$30) and Hibiki Japanese whisky (\$18).

The menu — nothing fancy here — revolves around pizza, rosemary fries, poutine, fish 'n' chips and seven-ounce burgers with creative toppings like Guinness cheese or Sriracha (Thai hot sauce).

Next door, the British Café, in a separate historic bank building, serves house-brand coffee, croissants, soup and sandwiches. After dark, the Café is the spot for music, comedy and open-mike nights — all at no charge.

**1834-2016:** The hotel debuted as The Conroy, a stopover for travelers taking steamboats along the Ottawa River. In 1860, the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII, attended a ball here when he visited to lay the first stone of the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa.

Amid the patriotism of the parades and parties, he dubbed the hotel The British.

How does that fly in today's Quebec?

"I can't change history," Clemann said. "It's been The British since before Confederation, so we're proud of that."

Later, The British played host to Canada's first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, as well as Sir Mackenzie Bowell (the fifth PM) and Sir Charles Tupper (the sixth). It eventually evolved into a show venue that has presented Charley Pride, Ronnie Prophet and Carroll Baker.

The Aylmer Heritage Association named it a heritage site in 1990, and now it is part of a walking tour of the town's nearly 30 historic buildings.

By the time Clemann bought the place in 2011, The British was a notorious gambling joint and a rundown hangout for derelicts, drinkers and druggies. That's all changed.

**The future:** Clemann is considering the addition of a 50-room hotel wing and a 10-storey condo tower. The British might be the most exciting thing to happen in Aylmer since the Prince of Wales breezed through town.

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IF YOU GO

**The British:** 819-682-3000, thebritish.ca; 71 rue Principale, Gatineau/Aylmer sector. Rooms, Sun.-Thurs., \$159-\$179; junior suites, \$189-\$209; two larger suites opening end of June; on Fri.-Sat., \$169-\$189 for rooms and \$209-\$219 for junior suites; including Wi-Fi, bottled water, parking, in-room coffee. One accessible room available.

**British Public House & Pub:** 819-682-3000, from 11:30 a.m. daily; kids' menu, gluten-free and vegetarian choices available. Live music Fri-Sat.

**British Café:** 819-557-4757; from 7 a.m. Mon.-Fri., 8 a.m. Sat.-Sun. Open-mike Thurs.

**Outaouais tourism:** 800-265-7822, tourismeoutaouais.com.

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