



The Bruce Hotel, in Canada's most renowned theatre town, is a five-minute walk to the Stratford Festival's main stage. PHOTOS: THE BRUCE HOTEL

AS YOU LIKE IT IN STRATFORD, ONT., HOTEL

The Bruce features spacious spaces, handsome decor, New Canadiana cuisine



ROCHELLE LASH

Like a Shakespearean play, The Bruce Hotel in Stratford, Ont., is a classic. But it is a modern classic, in Canada's most renowned theatre town.

This tranquil and genteel getaway is Stratford's best lodging bet, with fine food, handsome decor, 25 grand rooms and suites and an indoor pool, all surrounded by extensive grounds.

The Bruce is an impressive brick manor with the air of a Tudor heritage property, even though it was built less than three years ago. And built very well.

The entire hotel — both the public and private spaces — is so spacious that I thought Lady Macbeth might sweep by in a hooped gown of velvet and silk.

In fact, the proportions are large because The Bruce was designed to be 100 per cent wheelchair accessible.

The hotel is a five-minute walk through Queen's Park to the Stratford Festival's main stage, and the hotel's owner, Jennifer Birmingham, is a strong supporter of the theatre.

Birmingham named her hotel

after her father, Bruce Birmingham, who was president of the Bank of Nova Scotia about 20 years ago.

True, it's not currently festival season, but the hotel is romantic, the prices are moderate and the town holds lots of non-Shakespeare happenings from March to May.

Act I, Details: The Elizabethan stage is set in The Bruce's lobby lounge with a mural of an antique map of the world as it was imagined in 1564, the year Shakespeare was born.

On the different floors, The Bruce has set up a small lending library, a chess table and guest pantries with coffee, tea and bottomless cookie jars.

The interiors feel modern because the spaces are exceptionally large and the windows expansive. But the furnishings are traditional. The lobby sports sturdy tweed furniture and rich wood panelling around a wood-burning fireplace. A baby grand piano awaits an inspired player and friends to sing along.

Act II, Rooms: The 21 rooms and four "petite suites" are prettily decked out with a faux-antique look — crystal teardrop chandeliers, vintage lamps and solemn colours like cranberry, mauve, pearl and moss.

This is a top-drawer venture with linens and bathrobes by Frette of Italy and toiletries by Molton Brown of England.

If you're staying for a week of theatre, you'll have space to spare. Each room has a dream closet, a coffee cupboard and either a private patio, balcony or Juliet balcony. Bathrooms are super-sized and luxurious, with double vanities, walk-in rain showers, soaking tubs and loos behind closed doors.

Shakespeare is never far away. Evening turnaround includes printed quotations such as: "a wise man knows himself to be a fool," from As You Like It.

Act III, Food: The Bruce is a hot spot for all occasions — lunch, snacks, tea, cocktails or formal dinners with fine wines.

Executive chef Arron Carley brings expertise from the Toronto favourite Canoe, as well as the world-famous Noma in

Copenhagen. Carley calls his cuisine New Canadiana, and uses Canadian ingredients, honey from the hotel's beehives and seasonal herbs from his garden to present creative plates of Ontario beef, Quebec venison and B.C. fish, as well as delicacies like wild mushroom tart, octopus or beef tongue.

Veggie dishes are inspired and earthy: root vegetables prepared with cloudberry, crème fraîche and crab apple vinaigrette; or pumpkin enriched with maple sage butter and chèvre.

Pastry chef Gilad Rozenberg also stands out for unique desserts such as dark chocolate and quince, as well as grilled peaches with English toffee, Canadian whisky and zabaglione; or a ricotta tart with caramel, Ontario

walnuts and sea buckthorn.

The lounge menu is popular for the Bruce burger, wild B.C. salmon, a croque-mademoiselle with smoked pork and Avonlea cheddar, pumpkin gnocchi, fried chicken and Quebec-inspired poutine.

In summer, drinks, lunch and dinner also are served on the pastoral patio, and The Bruce will open a new garden gazebo as a chef's table — a private gourmet space for up to six guests.

Act IV, Festival: The 2017 Stratford Festival season, April to October, will feature 14 productions including Molière's Tartuffe, Guys and Dolls, the Renaissance tragedy The Changeling, and the Bard's Timon of Athens, Romeo and Juliet and Twelfth Night.

To mark Canada's 150th birthday, playwright Colleen Murphy has penned The Breathing Hole, which follows a polar bear for 500 years, from Europeans' first contact with aboriginals to an encounter with a 21st-century cruise ship.

Act V, Not Shakespeare: Non-Shakespeare happenings include the year-round Savour Stratford Chocolate and Bacon & Ale Trails; the Savour Stratford Maple Trail culinary tour, until April 30; the Junction 56 Distillery tour, Saturdays, year-round; and the quintessentially Stratford Swan Parade, with costumed spectators and white swans waddling through a park to the Avon River, April 1-2.

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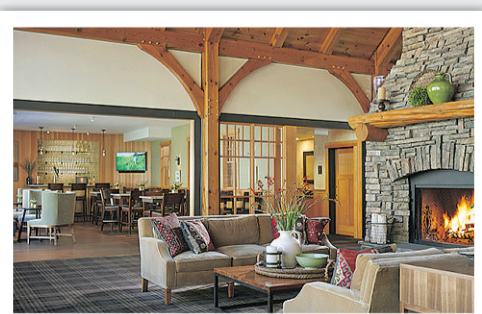
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