

Hôtel Birks is Montreal's chic new hospitality bijou

Stately update of the Phillips Square building draws on ancient Greece, Rome



ROCHELLE LASH

Once again, the illustrious Birks name is proving itself to be the pre-eminent purveyor of luxury in Montreal.

This time, the commodities are not diamonds and gold. They're possibly even more precious: a serene night in sumptuous surroundings and fine food and drink in an ooh-la-la brasserie.

The landmark century-old Birks building on Phillips Square has been transformed and reborn as Hôtel Birks, the new sparkling jewel of Montreal's flourishing hospitality scene.

Design-wise, it reflects timeless chic in a historic context. The lustrous interiors shimmer with light, glamour and sensuality.

The stately exterior resonates with the grandeur of beaux-arts accoutrements inspired by ancient Greece and Rome — a curved facade, towering arched windows and ornate cornices.

The crowning achievement is the bold addition of two glass-enclosed storeys atop the original four-storey structure. Neuf Architectes built the vertical extension to be slightly recessed, so the distinctive fifth-floor accommodations have terraces and the breathtaking sixth floor is home to new penthouses.

Bigger than boutique but still intimate, Hôtel Birks opened gradually this autumn, with about 130 posh rooms in six styles and two spectacular suites with kitchens, plus reception spaces and Clefs d'Or concierge service.

Le Spa, the fitness room and a few accommodations are being finalized. The delightful Henri Brasserie Française is already a hit with Montreal's café society. When it's all done, Hôtel Birks likely will earn a five-star rating from Tourism Quebec, joining a handful of other top-tier establishments in Montreal.

The entrances to Hôtel Birks and Henri Brasserie Française are on Phillips Square, and the renowned Maison Birks jewelry

store still lights up Ste-Catherine St. All three enterprises connect via an indoor glass corridor, so you can pick up a sapphire ring or gold bauble on the way to lunch or drinks.

The look: Created by Montreal interior designer Nicole Vekemans, Hôtel Birks' lobby is richly appointed with cream marble, burnished brass and the crystalline radiance of glass and mirrors.

The leather and linen sofas and chairs are sheathed in the most delicate whites and greys — alabaster, ivory, pearl, taupe — frosted with silver trim for a seductive sheen. It's a classic look with cool, contemporary lines, warmed by fireplaces, wood panelling and columns topped with cherubs.

The guest rooms are equally luxurious, with subtle gold accents, white damask bedcovers, traditional dark wood furniture and natural linen drapes. There are several styles of rooms and suites, all with 55-inch smart TVs, and some with gas fireplaces or the iconic high, arched windows. The suites have kitchens for private entertaining or long-term stays.

The bathrooms are white marble and equipped with glass showers, signature Hôtel Birks toiletries and sliding doors that open to the bedroom, with downtown views. Some bathrooms have soaking tubs and double vanities.

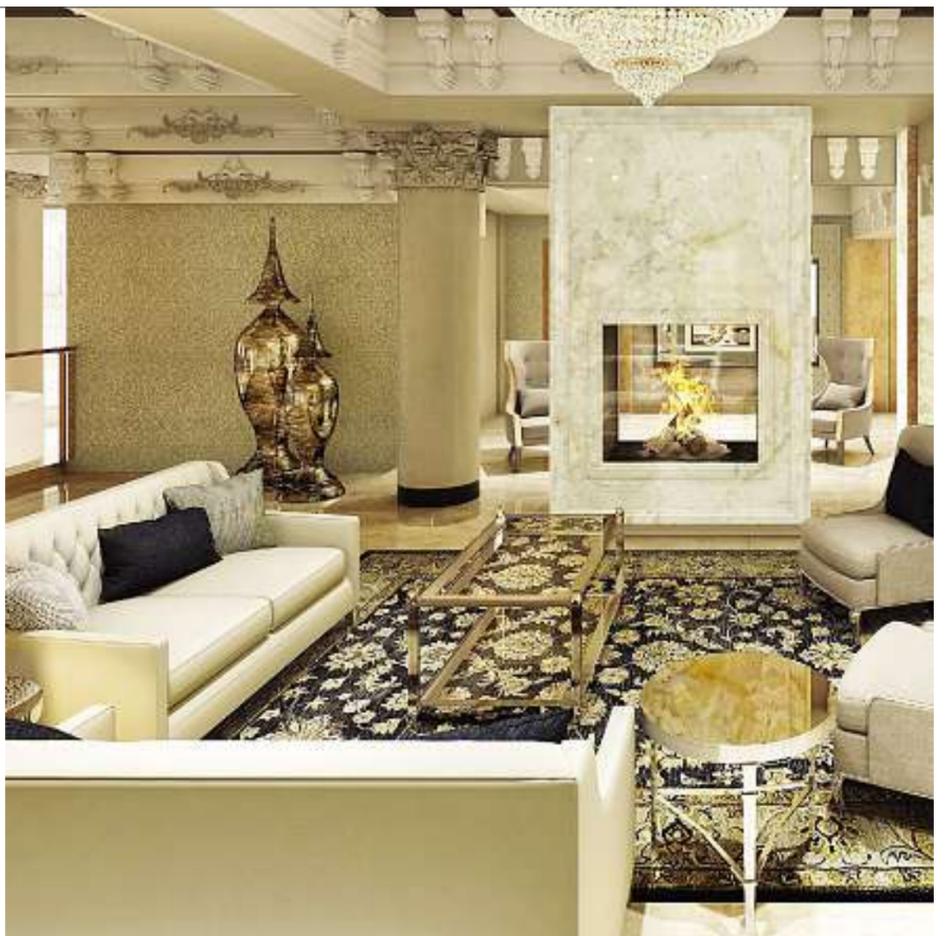
The brasserie: Designer Zébulon Perron fashioned Henri Brasserie Française to be so true to the Paris eateries of the early 1900s that I thought Jean-Paul Sartre or Édith Piaf would sashay in for a glass of absinthe.

It's a dazzler, radiating a sexy, come-hither glow.

"My inspiration is to preserve the original decorative and architectural elements," said Perron, "so we restored Birks's stained glass, pendant lamps and ornate carved ceiling."

Henri's centrepiece is an impressive brass bar, lavishly decked out with mirrored walls, hundreds of cocktail glasses and tantalizing displays of magnums of Champagne (with a choice of about 25 types of French bubbly, including many by the glass).

Henri Brasserie Française is a



The lobby of Hôtel Birks, above, is richly appointed with marble and brass. The luxurious guest rooms, below, come in six styles. *HÔTEL BIRKS*



spirited but serious destination. The table settings are rather formal, with white linen, heavy silver flatware and cut crystal glasses. The booths are covered in voluptuous velvet in Birks blue, a nod to the jewelry store's coveted gift boxes.

The cuisine is French-inspired, strong on gourmet comfort food and prepared with mostly local, seasonal ingredients.

"It's accessible dining," said Jack Cheam, Henri's food and beverage director (formerly of

Maison Boulud). "Patrons come for lunch and dinner, yes, but also for an aperitif and appetizer, an espresso and a croissant or a more festive indulgence of Champagne and oysters."

Both lunch and dinner offer seafood, poultry, salads and steak, plus deluxe hamburgers. Lunch has a two-course table d'hôte, and dinner adds venison tartare, cured salmon plus sharing dishes for two: rib steaks, roast chicken and grilled fish.

rochelle@rochellelash.com

IF YOU GO

Hôtel Birks Montreal: 514-370-3000; outside Montreal, 844-LEBIRKS (844-532-4757); hotelbirksmontreal.com; 1240 Phillips Square.

Rates fluctuate with availability and are approximate. A sample online price, for Friday, Dec. 14: several levels of rooms, \$300-\$610; suites for up to four people, about \$720. For Monday, Jan. 14, rooms cost \$270-\$580; suites, \$730-\$780.

Rates include Wi-Fi, evening turnaround/shoeshine/chocolates, in-room Nespresso, bathrobes, hypoallergenic bedding on request, fitness room, newspapers. Extra: spa access, treatments; valet parking, \$40 overnight, or \$25 restaurant.

Henri Brasserie Française: 514-544-3674, restauranthenri.com; lunch table d'hôte, two courses, \$26-\$29; dinner, à la carte.

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