

# Ingrid Jarrett



## 2017 Hotelier of the Year

by Joanne Sasvari

Ingrid Jarrett is on her way to the Slow Food Canada summit in Saskatoon. After that, she's attending a board meeting in Whistler, organizing a food film fest in Osoyoos, preparing a presentation for hotel schools in Australia & Bordeaux, and developing a regional culinary tourism strategy with the Thompson Okanagan Tourism Association to support the Biosphere Designation.

If none of those sound like the typical tasks of a hotel general manager, well, Jarrett is no typical GM, so it's no surprise that she won BC's 2017 Hotelier of the Year.

"I'm always looking for a different way to do things," says the general manager of Watermark Beach Resort in Osoyoos. "I was told a long time ago: Find the problem no one else can solve and solve it, or find someone who can."

Jarrett is not just the Watermark's GM, she's also its vice-president of business development, as well as a director (and past president) of the BC Hotel Association, vice-chair of Slow Food Canada, past chair of TOTA, and president of her own company, Ingrid Jarrett Management Consulting.

Mostly, though, she is one of BC's most passionate advocates for the hotel and tourism industry.

Perhaps it was inevitable that hospitality would become her career. "I grew up in the Okanagan. My dad was a forester, so I grew up all over small-town BC," she recalls. "My first job in the industry was what was then called a chambermaid." After studying hospitality at the BC Institute of Technology, she was hired by Canadian Pacific Hotels (now Fairmont) at Hotel Vancouver and was part of the opening team at Chateau Whistler. In 1993, she became the first director of operations at The Fairmont Palliser in Calgary, one of the first women to hold such a senior position at a major Canadian hotel.

After that, she took some time out to become a cattle rancher with her husband and three children. It didn't work out the way she'd hoped, but having a family fundamentally changed the way she approached her work.



“I became focused on what worked for me and my family,” she says. “It’s rare in our corporate world that it’s recognized that what’s best for the family is also best for the business.”

With her family in mind, she moved to Kelowna in 2006, and started her own company, which was contracted by Boutique Hotels and Resorts of BC to open a series of high-end properties including Whistler’s Nita Lake Lodge. The Watermark was meant to be the last of the series.

“That was 2008, when the economy tanked and the brand disintegrated,” Jarret explains. The developer-owners suddenly faced owning a resort still under construction without a management company, so they did the smart thing: They asked Jarrett to become general manager to oversee the opening and build the business. “And I have now been there for nine years,” she laughs.

Since then, Watermark has become a consistent success story in a region at the mercy of the seasons, the weather, and the economy. “We’re meeting targets that others aren’t meeting,” she says. So how does she do it?

She credits a strong team that includes hotel manager Paul Scanlon, who oversees day-to-day operations, and owners who trust her to run with her grand ideas. “Very few hoteliers have the opportunity to be big thinkers,” she says. It helps, too, that she stays in the hotel when she’s at work. “I have a really immersive opportunity to experience what the guest is experiencing. It allows me to look at Watermark with fresh eyes.”



Being a resident GM also allows her to experience first-hand the problems that beset the industry, such as staffing. That’s why she’s approaching international hotel schools seeking interns to work at BC properties. “In order to graduate from their schools, they have to have international experience,” she says. “We have a desperate need for qualified employees and I think in the long term this can create the workers and leaders of the future.”

Most importantly, though, Ingrid believes that success comes from building relationships with other businesses—wineries, restaurants, producers, tour operators, and even neighbouring hotels—that become advocates for each other and the entire region.

“I have a very strong background in operations and I’m a strong relationships person,” she notes. “This is part of my business approach. It’s a female approach to business, an approach to business that builds community.”

It’s also a lot of work, she cautions, and not for the faint of heart. The payoff is in watching her region thrive and her hotel become a model for others to emulate.

“I think human connections are increasingly important in almost everything we do,” she says. “I just want to keep doing everything I can to be a good neighbour. People just want to work with us. That goes a long way.” ■