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Red Carpet Toronto

By SUSAN CATTO

When Toronto's Hazelton Hotel started accepting reservations from Hollywood's biggest studios a few months ago, its limestone façade and Yabu Pushelberg-designed rooms were as unfinished as the daily rushes screened by movie directors at the close of each day's filming. But by lunchtime on Sept. 6, the opening day of the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), the terrace at ONE, the Hazelton's signature restaurant, was filled with diners. Uniformed doormen guarded the discreet smoked-glass entranceway and photographers and fans gathered across the street to await star sightings.

The Hazelton's commitment to open in time for TIFF — which it did, with just 10 days to spare — appears to be paying off handsomely. Its 77 rooms and suites are fully booked, as is its restaurant and its event room complete with a 103-in. plasma screen television. Over the 10-day course of the festival, the cream of the industry's actors, producers and studio executives will move through the mohair-lined private screening room, which cost \$2 million to build, seats 25 and averages six vip screenings a day.

Now in its 32nd year, TIFF has become a regular stop on the schedules of the world's most glamorous stars, from heartthrobs Brad Pitt and George Clooney to young stars Jake Gyllenhaal and Keira Knightley to legends Woody Allen and Michael Caine. According to organizers, more than 500 actors, directors and other film talent will attend TIFF this year. And preparing for the celebrity influx each September has become a year-round preoccupation for Toronto's hospitality industry.

The care and feeding — and styling and waxing — of TIFF's visiting celebrities is big business, not only because studios and stars can afford to pack private party rooms, drop thousands of dollars on clothes and spa treatments and book impossibly expensive hotel suites. There's the buzz factor, too. It's probably no coincidence that the exclusive Windsor Arms hotel chose the weeks before TIFF to open Twenty Two, its new cocktail lounge. For the restaurants and hotels at the epicenter of the film festival, attracting a famous clientele creates the sort of cachet that keeps customers coming through the door months after the last private plane returns to Los Angeles.

There is, of course, an art to keeping the likes of Reese Witherspoon and Cate Blanchett happy. Ask the staff at the Hazelton, or at any of Toronto's luxury hotels, restaurants or spas for that matter, and they'll insist that all their customers are vips, every day of the year. But the truth is that a star-heavy client list comes with specific challenges, from extra security requirements to star-struck staff. "We take a lot of antacid pills," says Oscar Valverde, General Manager of Sotto Sotto, an intimate, 60-seat Italian restaurant on posh Avenue Road. In a single evening during the 2005 film festival, he says, Sotto Sotto served Johnny Depp, Keanu Reeves, Sean Penn, Viggo Mortensen, Pierce Brosnan, Tim Burton, Helena Bonham Carter and Jodie Foster — at separate tables, with guests — all at the same time.

This year, they've added two extra waiters to the usual staff of five, stocked up on three times the usual amount of liquor and champagne, spent \$10,000 on plates and cutlery and added a fresh coat of paint to the walls. But it's harder to prepare for the famous clients who show up without reservations, or the private parties that swell to twice their originally booked size once everyone's entourages have squeezed through the door. "It's like playing chess," says Valverde, who has commandeered tables and chairs from the kitchen to seat unexpected guests.

Just down Avenue Road at the Four Seasons Hotel, the booking patterns are more predictable. "We take bookings starting from the end of that year's festival for the next year," says Melanie Greco, director of public relations. The major studios typically reserve blocks of 30 to 40 rooms each in the 380-room hotel, parceling them out to the talent as the festival approaches. A nightly crowd of fans wait behind the barricades on the sidewalk, hoping to see famous faces (a staffer tidies up after them with dustpan and broom each morning) and the hotel beefs up on security within its airy lobby and in its restaurants.

Like most hotels, the Four Seasons has extra concierge staff on hand during the festival to manage special requests. Most are relatively mundane — fixing hems, sending up flowers — but it's a point of pride in top hotels to cultivate a blasé, never-say-no response to even the most bizarre entreaties. When the pillowtop mattress and sumptuous bedding at the Four Seasons proved too high a hurdle for one star's small dog, carpenters were dispatched to build doggy stairs — and to paint them pink, as requested by the doting owner. Over at the Windsor Arms, an élite enclave with just 28 rooms and suites, a guest staying there once asked to have his Jacuzzi tub filled with strawberry Jell-O. "We bought it powdered, we let it gel on big sheets ... cut it into cubes and we filled the bathtub for him," says Karen Poppell, director of sales and marketing.

Naturally, Poppell won't name the fellow who likes his bathwater on the red and jiggly side. For those who deal with celebrities, discretion is crucial. That extends to face-to-face interactions with the stars, something that managers urge their staff to perform with respectful nonchalance. "Try to act like nothing is happening, that's one of the most important things," says Dino Gurusamy, director of sales at the luxury boutique Hôtel Le Germain. At the high-end Vikaspa, where clients such as Nicole Kidman and Hilary Swank go for last-minute nail-polish changes, estheticians are accustomed to wielding their brushes in silence while celebrities close their eyes or even fall asleep. "They're usually very humble and say, 'Thank you, what you're doing is very great.' But they can't chit chat like a [regular] client would," says owner Vika Goodale of her famous visitors. "Usually they're very tired and very stressed."

After all, even with every creature comfort at their disposal, the stars illuminating the film festival often have schedules nearly as grueling as the staff who serve them. And when they're away from the red carpet, the press conference or the -galas, the last thing they want is more pressure to perform. "We teach [our staff] that celebrities are people too," says Joel Carman, owner of Yorkville's Over the Rainbow, where Rachel McAdams and Hilary Duff buy their trendy clothes. "If we want them to come back, it's important to leave them alone."

Leave the stars alone — while, of course, catering to their every whim. Toronto's hospitality hot spots have perfected that crucial balance in the last few years. Or in the case of the Hazelton, the last few weeks.