

NEWPORT BEACH [714]

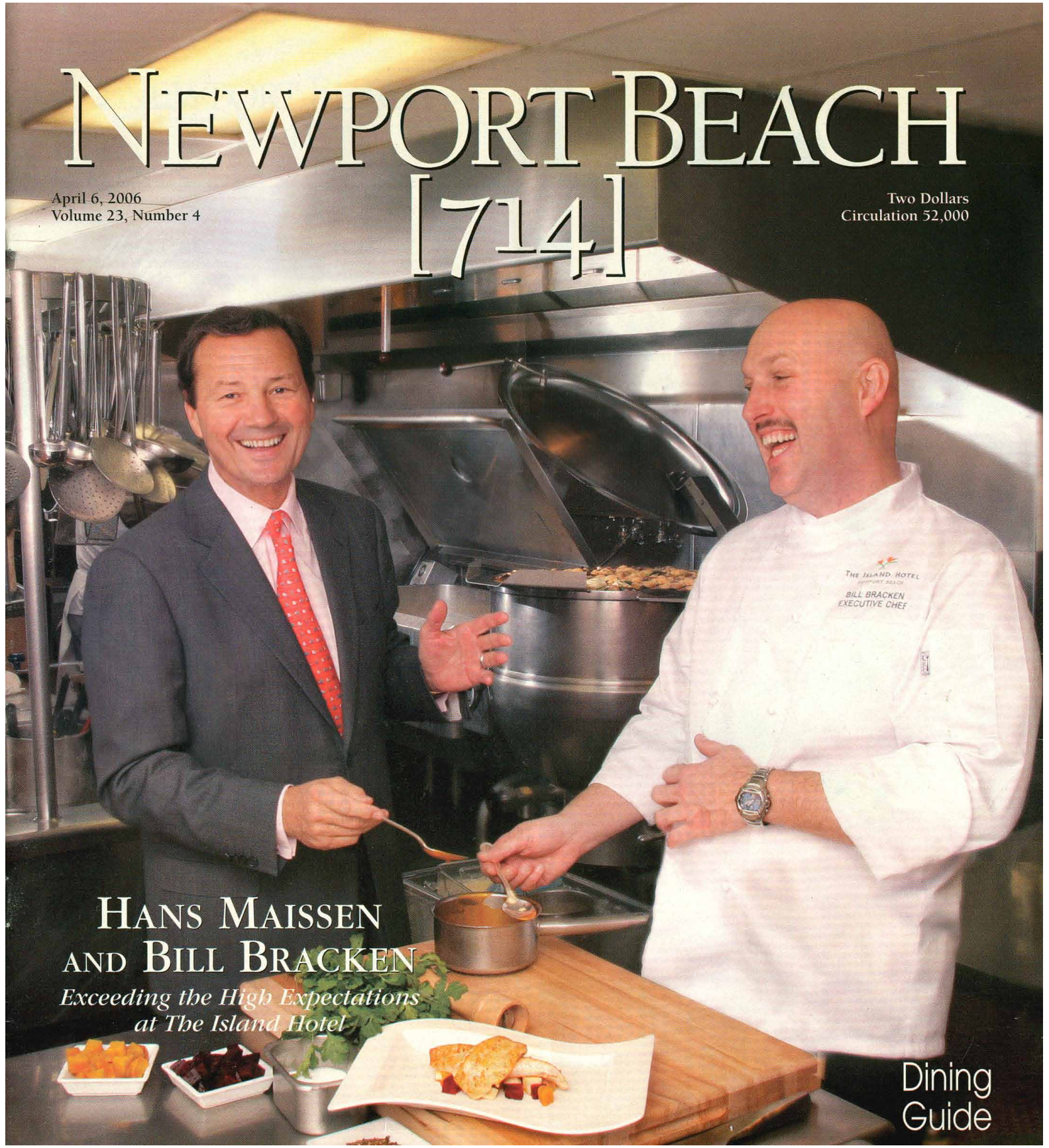
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**HANS MAISSEN
AND BILL BRACKEN**
*Exceeding the High Expectations
at The Island Hotel*

THE ISLAND HOTEL
NEWPORT BEACH
BILL BRACKEN
EXECUTIVE CHEF

Dining
Guide





Bill Bracken and Hans Maissen

Hansjoerg Maissen, the general manager of The Island Hotel in Newport Beach, knows the importance of having top-of-the-line fine-dining amenities at a luxury hotel. Maissen, who has come to Newport Beach after running some of the top hotels in the world, worked as a chef early in his career and uses that experience to guide the hotel's culinary staff to excellence.

"I live and breathe food and beverage," he says. "I believe the food and beverage side [of a hotel] is extremely important in establishing yourself in the local community." With that in mind, one of the most important members of Maissen's team at The Island is Bill Bracken, the hotel's new executive chef, who previously garnered acclaim and recognition as executive chef and manager of food and beverage at the world-renowned Peninsula Beverly Hills. "He brings a lot of enthusiasm, creativity, and motivation," Maissen says of Bracken.

The Island Hotel had long been managed by The Four Seasons, but The Irvine Company, which owns the property, took over management at the beginning of last November. This presented a challenge that Maissen and Bracken have enjoyed working to overcome as they took over as part of the transition. Loyal guests and community members alike have been accustomed to expecting nothing but the best from the Four Seasons brand. It's been up to Maissen, Bracken, and the rest of the staff to ensure that guests' expectations are still met and exceeded. "People had a lot of high expectations and we had to meet them. We had a lot of focus because of that concern in the community. The entire hotel recognized we had to live up to expectations," says Bracken. "Our guests can rest assured we will *surpass* their expectations."

"The reactions we've had from our clients have been great," says Maissen. "We anticipate our guests' needs and fulfill their expressed and unexpressed wishes." He adds that 80 percent of the staff stayed on during the management transition, keeping familiar faces around for repeat guests. "I've seen clients who didn't even know there was a change. That's been a good first step," says Maissen, who is also looking ahead to continue to improve the hotel in any way, especially when it comes to fine dining. He says the hotel is working on plans to bring "a fresh look" to Pavilion restaurant "based on the in-house talent of Ali Sharifi [director of food and beverage] and Bill Bracken." Still, "Pavilion has a long history in Orange County of being a respected restaurant," says Bracken, but "We're looking at everything....We're constantly looking at the menu to see what's popular and what's not." Bracken believes in having an evolving menu that is based on the foods in season. "At the same time, you can't change the menu so much that the familiarity is gone for your customers," he says.

As Bracken points out, "Even though the building is over 20 years old, we're starting from scratch in many ways." So as part of his efforts to ensure that guests' culinary expectations are all surpassed, Bracken and Sharifi have assembled a team of recognized talent to help in the kitchen. Joshua Nudd, chef de cuisine, was brought in from the Kahala Mandarin Oriental in Hawaii. Nudd used to work with Bracken at The Peninsula Beverly Hills and Bracken says he brings a "fresh, young approach to cooking." Michael Owens, who had been pastry chef at The Peninsula, is now The Island's pastry chef. Doug Schonseld, banquet chef, was also brought from The Peninsula. "We've got a good group put together. In this industry it's tough [to accomplish]," Bracken says. "We have a group of people who have a wealth of experience."

Bracken's own wealth of experience began accumulating when the self-described "simple guy from Kansas" cooked with his mother and grandmothers in his childhood home of Wathena, Kan., (population 1,200). He modestly says his path to success came with the help of "a lot of luck and a lot of blessings from above." After high school Bracken won a scholarship to the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y. and later began working at The Island's previous incarnation (Four Seasons Newport Beach), working his way up to executive sous chef. Bracken went to The Peninsula Beverly Hills in 1994 as executive chef. During his tenure, the hotel's Belvedere restaurant received the AAA Five-Diamond Award for eight straight years. "I was lucky to work in an environment where I could flourish and grow," says Bracken of his experience at The Peninsula. "After you reach a certain stage of success, you develop a certain style, and people hire you because of that."

Bracken describes his culinary style as being full of honesty and integrity. He explains that some chefs forget to put taste as the number-one priority and his goal is to never follow that route. Of course, presentation is also very important in Bracken's philosophy. "I don't just throw something that tastes

good on a plate," but never forget that taste should come first. The Island Hotel obviously liked Bracken's style, and Bracken is very excited about his new position. "It was a great time to come on board with the Irvine Company....Whatever they do, they do it well."

Maissen's professional career also began in the kitchen. Growing up in Basel, Switzerland, Maissen's family's apartment was behind the kitchen of his father's restaurant, and Maissen began working there at age 14. He became executive chef by age 23 and then attended the Zurich Hotel School to begin a new career path, which would include working in Greece, Saudi Arabia, Switzerland, England, Germany, and the United Arab Emirates. He also managed the Grand Hotel du Cap-Ferrat in the South of France and was a regional director for Marriott.

With all the locales around the world where Maissen has managed hotels, he is used to having top restaurants at the properties. (This is not surprising, considering his culinary background, which Maissen says has "always been very beneficial" to his hotel career.) He was managing director of the Windsor Court Hotel in New Orleans for seven years and under his direction the hotel's Grill Room restaurant received the Mobil Five-Star rating. (Last year, only 15 restaurants in the country were given that coveted recognition.) "I feel that having a great restaurant in the hotel helps very much," he says. It clearly helped the Windsor Court. Under his direction, the hotel was named number-one in the world in *Conde Nast Traveler's* Reader's Choice Survey in 1998. But Maissen says the key to the Windsor Court's success was its emphasis on service, which he has brought with him to The Island Hotel.

"We have a sophisticated guest-care system," says Maissen, explaining that members of The Island staff report all feedback from guests—positive and negative—as soon as possible so that Maissen can direct personalized attention to the guest based on specific comments. "We need to hear the good things and bad things," says Maissen, and those reports are analyzed each week by Maissen and his management team.

"People want a comfort level when they come to The Island Hotel. We're not trying to reinvent the wheel. We're reinforcing the principles of good management. I'm running out of my office 10 to 20 times a day to meet guests. The motto of our hotel is: 'The answer is yes. How can I be of service?'" says Maissen.

With that attitude, Maissen, Bracken, and the rest of The Island staff should be tasting plenty of success.

—JOHN IRWIN