

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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an elegant
eagle
eye

Hans Maissen
manages
Pelican Hill and
Oak Creek golf courses
with a high standard
for service.



CINDY YAMANAKA, THE REGISTER

MAKING EVERYONE HAPPY: Sharon MacDougall, left, of Corona del Mar, Pelican Hill Golf Course General Manager Hans Maissen and Janet Anderson of Newport Beach visit in the Clubhouse at Pelican Hill. The Irvine Co. hired him two years ago to upgrade its golf course hospitality.

Mr. Maissen says

These sayings reflect what Hans Maissen has learned in a career that spans the globe:

- A good round of golf is a few good shots and a lot of good misses.
- My father always said, "Nothing is free. You pay for your mistakes and then you learn from them."
- You have two choices when you get out of bed: Am I going to have a good day, or a bad day? It's all attitude.
- You reach a point where it's not how big is the job; it's the quality of life.
- If you don't take time for your friends, time takes your friends.

World hotelier

Hans Maissen, who manages Pelican Hill and Oak Creek golf courses in Orange County, started his career in his father's restaurant in Switzerland, and worked his way around the world. Here are key stops on his hospitality tour.



TRYING OUT THE COURSE:

Hans Maissen, general manager of Pelican Hill Golf Course, takes a practice swing on the 15th hole at Pelican Hill.



CINDY YAMANAKA, THE REGISTER

a passion for the details

By **MICHELE HIMMELBERG**
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

A big New Orleans bash was planned that evening at the Windsor Court Hotel, then rated the No. 1 place in the world to lay down your head for the night. The staff was smoothing linens and setting tables when the ballroom drapes arrived from the cleaners — a bit shorter than when they left.

The staff re-hung them swiftly, thinking the small gap along the floor would go unseen.

But Hans Maissen noticed. Within minutes, the hotel's general manager had someone sewing fringe along the bottom hem to make sure the drapes hit the floor.

That kind of attention to detail earned Maissen the nickname "Eagle Eye" as he worked at some of the swankiest hotels around the world. Today, Maissen has his eye on Pelican Hill (Newport Beach) and Oak Creek (Irvine) golf courses, where people pay as much as \$250 to play a round of golf and find a level of service fit for a luxury hotel.

Hans Maissen

Title: General manager of golf properties, the Irvine Co.

Age: Turns 59 this week

Family: Son Omar, 22, attended high school in Orange County; siblings in Switzerland

Fun fact: Owns two Harley-Davidsons: 1993 Dyna Wide Glide and 2000 Road King Classic

The **Irvine Co.** hired him two years ago to upgrade its golf course hospitality, wooing the Swiss citizen from a hotel career that had enough passport stamps to fill a couple of golf scorecards.

In Gabon, West Africa, Maissen trained employees at a five-star hotel and had to persuade them to wear shoes; they preferred bare feet on the plush carpet. In Saudi Arabia, he worked for princes and sheiks and considers that "penance" paid for where he is now. In London, he took over food and beverage operations for a hotel chain when he barely knew English, one of four languages he now speaks, with some Spanish on the side.

A product of his travels, Maissen is a mix of fine things and work ethic, with a wild

streak that's known to rev up a motorcycle and take off warbling a favorite Willie Nelson tune: "Mamas, Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys." Rooted in humble beginnings, he's the picture of politeness, with a sarcastic wit, a competitive spirit and a hankering for good red wine.

Put all that in a baby-blue golf shirt and matching slacks, with a dark head of hair that belies his 58 years, and you have a professional zealot for getting things right. Be it hotel hallways or fairway greens, it's all about the details; Maissen says.

Here we go on his golf cart, on the South Course at Pelican Hill. Watch out, he's swerving to pour sand in another divot that mars the smooth - grass. And he's stooping again, snatching a scrap of trash nobody else saw.

THE SLIGHTEST DETAIL

"I see everything," Maissen says, scanning the bunkers, one of his first big projects at Pelican Hill. The hazards on the course are filled with crushed marble — 75 percent Augusta white, 25 percent U.S. tan — a mix that makes them white,

but not blindingly bright.

When he sees something askew, it gets a note.

- Tiny brown patches of grass: More hand watering needed; overtime for maintenance.

- Beverage carts too far apart between holes.

- Sprinkler head broken, fourth hole.

Those notes go to the department heads, who know that Maissen will go to the fourth hole to see that the sprinkler was repaired.

"The staff might say, 'Oh, that Maissen. What a pain in the neck,'" he admits. "But if I can't get it right for myself, how are we going to get it right for the customer?"

Maissen's obsession with detail once got him voted to a list of best-dressed men in New Orleans. That's where he met Zaven Yuralian, then a football coach with the New Orleans Saints. They became fast friends, Yuralian says, because they're a lot alike: meticulous, hardworking, demanding.

"If you're going to be on top, or stay on top, you have to insist that the little things are being done right," Yuralian said. "Not almost, but exactly right. If the spoons were out of place, Hans made sure it was done right."

One of the first things Maissen changed when he took over Pelican Hill and Oak Creek was the way the staff greeted customers. It's now "How are you today, Mr. Yuralian," not a "Hey man, how you doin'?"

"Very classy," Yuralian said. "It fits a club like that."

Other details Maissen demands:

- Every cart goes out with two bottles of water in the mini ice chest. A player assistant roams the course to replenish water and provide a first-aid kit, extra tees and cards.

- Player assistants often clean a golfer's clubs during the round — "not just at the end when (employees) are standing there waiting for a tip," Maissen says.

- Golfers get a towel that's half wet and half dry. Wet to clean things — "Dirty balls don't go in the hole," Maissen says — and dry to wipe their hands when they're through.

DISCIPLINE AND ATTITUDE

Ready to tee off on a hole perched over the Pacific Ocean, he lingers to appreciate the spectacular view. He says Orange County is the best place in the world to live, and he has hopped all over the globe.

He quit school at 14 to work in his father's Swiss restaurant, became an executive chef at 23, then joined the hotel industry. He took the only job available, desk clerk, and vowed to become a general manager. After 10 years and many stops, he made it.

"He didn't (grow up) having everything, and that's part of his success," said Amy Odinet, who worked for Maissen at the Windsor Court. "Nothing was beneath him. He was always willing to do whatever it was he was asking you to do."

Odinet, now working at the Ritz-Carlton in New Orleans, remains loyal to her old boss because "he was always so fair and good to you." Even as he regularly raised the bar for his staff.

"You do not let him down; you do *not*," Odinet said in a N'awlins drawl. "And do not try to cut corners, whatever you do."

Maissen expects a lot from employees, but also gives back. He orders a catered lunch for the golf maintenance crew every two weeks, on payday, and enjoys it with them.

An employee asked him once how he got the top job at the Windsor Court.

"Easy," he quipped. "Twenty-five years of hard work."

KNOW YOUR STRENGTHS

On another hole, he's ready to putt when he realizes he grabbed his pitching wedge instead of his putter. Unwilling to slow down play and willing to improvise, he

lines up the wedge and guides the ball in the hole.

On the course, he sometimes guides a struggling player, pointing out where to aim on the greens he knows so well. The hints come like a butler opening a door, so subtle you hardly notice.

Eric Prevette, his boss at the Irvine Co., admired that style when they both worked in the hotel industry. He says Maissen is an unusual breed of hotelier, equal parts human relations and business sense.

"He's a great communicator," Prevette said, "and in the dozen years I've known him, he's never not met a budget."

Maissen said the number of rounds played at his courses increased by 15 percent over last year, without a reduction in fees — \$250 for a weekend round at Pelican Hill and \$135 at Oak Creek. That's a positive trend when rounds are down 4 percent nationally, and some analysts say the market's future is murky.

One way Maissen attracted business was by introducing the Players Club card, a loyal-guest kind of perk that also tied marketing for the two courses together. For \$500, golfers get reduced fees on the two courses and discounts in the pro shops.

"It's not a club, but it gives you a feel of belonging," Maissen said.

For what they're paying, golfers expect a great experience. If they don't get it, they can fill out "guest care" cards. Maissen, who keeps tabs on everything from the strategic position of the new trash cans at Pelican Hill to the cleanliness of the bathrooms, sends a letter to every guest who fills one out.

"The last thing I want is people to leave and go home unhappy," he said. "We do our best. But if we make a mistake, I want to know about it. Every detail."

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