

THE A LIST



# THE CAPTIVATING PERSONALITY OF YVONNE LEMBI DETERT

BY KAYE CLOUTMAN ● PHOTOGRAPHY BY VINCENT GOTTI



## GET TO KNOW YVONNE

**R**ecognized as an industry leader in Hospitality and Boutique Hotel Design for over thirty years, Yvonne Lembi-Detert is CEO and President of the chic hotel group, Personality Hotels.

Yvonne established the hospitality industry's first boutique hotel in San Francisco more than 30 years ago. Her passion, vision and lead-by-example drive has fostered the success of six distinctive Personality Hotels and inspired hotel professionals around the world.

Yvonne actively directs a top-tier team of hospitality professionals that ensure the growth of Personality Hotels. From overseeing the design of each individual property to participating in daily operations, her leadership and commitment has earned Personality Hotels multiple awards, honors and global media features. Balancing equal roles in business management, finance, operations, leadership and even mentorship, Yvonne has grown Personality Hotels from inception to become one of the most influential hospitality organizations in the industry.

A Bay Area native, Yvonne was immersed in the hospitality industry from an early age, and worked on the Hotel Union Square while still attending San Francisco State College. Her first job was to remodel and convert the property from a pre-war hotel into a modern destination of approachable luxury. Inspired by European hospitality, Yvonne fully realized her inherent connection to design and her commitment to hotel service, and came up with a plan to incorporate this passion into a fresh experiential brand.

"It hit me like lightning one day while I was attending a creative interior design seminar," said Yvonne. "Personality is what the hospitality industry is all about, and that inspiration has driven every aspect of our business."

Personality Hotels has grown into a collection of six hotels in California; Hotel Diva, Kensington Park Hotel, Hotel Union Square and Steinhart Hotel, located in San Francisco; Mariposa Inn & Suites in Monterey; and Flamingo Resort & Spa in Santa Rosa. Engage Hospitality, Yvonne's hotel management company, advises and directs other properties and hoteliers nationwide.

"Listening is the key to success and overcoming tribulations. I have worked very hard to create a company where all of us get along like family, working together with the same goals and constructive and upbeat synergy. Honesty, determination and being upfront with my team are the backbone of our 'Golden Rule,' and these values and ways of conducting business are what have always driven our success."

Yvonne's personal style is injected into all Personality Hotels through her "out of the box" marketing ideas, her distinct approach to design and her "middle of the night" thoughts, that she actually makes come true. Yvonne works closely with her team to



Despite the success, Yvonne admits, "It is the tough times and challenges that make me feel on top of my game. The male dominated world of my industry is just what it is. I am who I am and very proud that it's the women of the world who originally invented the career of hospitality in their very own homes."

The properties in the Personality Hotels group continue to garner awards and to set the standard for dynamic customer service, and Yvonne's hotels have been featured in major media outlets all over the world.

Yvonne is a graduate of San Francisco State University, where she earned a Bachelors of Arts in Interior Design and is honored on their "Alumni Hot Shots List." She lives on the Peninsula just south of San Francisco with her husband and two daughters, two dogs, a cat and four chickens. She is a passionate supporter of the San Francisco SPCA and Taproots, and is an avid gardener.

Every year, Personality Hotels donates more than \$50,000 in room nights to various non-profit organizations throughout San Francisco. At the beginning of 2013 Yvonne, on behalf of Personality Hotels, committed to partnering with Family House, a charity whose focus is to provide housing for the families of sick children while they receive treatment.

**T**he real compassion of a person is rarely witnessed except during the toughest of times. Being a loving mother, a devoted wife and a headstrong businesswoman for almost 30 years has not only put Yvonne Lembi Detert on the global hospitality map, she has managed to catapult herself to the pinnacle of respect among her peers in her field - not only because of her passion and drive for excellence but her ability to step outside the norm, embrace individualism and maintain a truly enchanting personality despite all the recent struggles of a challenged economy. With employees who have stayed with her, navigating the rough business seas together, Yvonne is proof that women are noble leaders and not to be trifled with. When the obvious solution meant cutting back and joining the layoff "bandwagon", she chose to appeal to her nurturing maternal side and find a way to keep her business family intact without subjecting her employees to a demoralizing environment, even if it meant having to tighten their belts for some uncertain duration.

We recently had the pleasure of sitting down and getting up close and personal with the endearing Yvonne Lembi Detert, CEO of Personality Hotels and together with her two lovely daughters, we were left invigorated, inspired, and motivated to be the best one can be.

**ASSOCIATE PRODUCER:** COCOY VENTURA  
**LIGHTING SPECIALIST:** SCOTT NOBLES  
**ASSISTANT PHOTOGRAPHER:** PIERRE GUSSMAN  
**MUA:** CARLA TERSINI  
**HAIRSTYLING:** JOSETTE VIGIL JELVEH  
**STYLED BY:** KALEO FERREIRA  
**WARDROBE PROVIDED BY:** COLLEEN QUEN COUTURE  
**LOCATION:** HOTEL DIVA, UNION SQUARE SAN FRANCISCO



“ “ **M**y mother is a role model to me - she has taught me that hard work and perseverance can achieve success not only in the workplace but also at home. After many hard days at work, she still finds time to cook a delicious dinner for our family. Growing up and watching her encouraged me to learn how to cook on my own for myself and someday for my family, just as she does.

*- Elizabeth Detert*

““ My mom has been working since I can remember, and it has become a part of our relationship. I can honestly say that my mom is the most powerful, creative working woman I know because she applies her experience to everyday life and teaches me to always stay patient with myself and my growth into adulthood - keeping me focused, determined, positive and kind to myself. As a working mom, she is able to come home and even cook the best most creative amazing dinners, sometimes in less than 30 minutes, like Rachael Ray!

Like any young person - I have my own personal bouts of emotional challenges and it's at these times when my mom has taught me to remain strong and optimistic. Together we give each other advice on life and I really believe that as I grow up this will remain to be the best quality of our relationship.

*- Emily Detert*





# Q & A

## With Yvonne

**GEV:** What is the real essence of the term "Personality Hotels"?

**Yvonne:** The real essence of the term "Personality Hotels" can be found simply in the word "Personality." It hit me like lightning one day while I was attending a creative interior design seminar & I said to myself "Personality" is what the hospitality industry is all about. It's about who the guest is, what they bring to each guest room, and what impression they leave behind, as well as share with their family & friends. Their personality combined with a valuable and memorable hotel experience is a win-win for them, and for us.

**GEV:** You've mentioned about past trials and tribulations within the economy. How did you overcome and deal with it with such grace?

**Yvonne:** Honesty with my team and always making them feel included. Really listening is the key to overcoming tribulations. I have worked very hard to create a company where all of us get along like family, working together with the same goals and electrifying synergy. And with family comes differences of opinions as well. I consider that to be very healthy & detoxifying for all. Honesty, kindness and being upfront with my team are the backbone of our "Golden Rule," and these values and ways of conducting business are what have always gotten me through the toughest of times.

**GEV:** Union Square offers a bevy of choices when it comes to fashion and dining. Give us five recommendations of each please and why?

**Yvonne:** **Fashion:** Kurt Geiger for fun shoes. Vince for urban everyday wear. All Saints for the funky & edgy eye appeal. Barney's for unique designer must-haves. Neiman Marcus for handbags & classic pieces and In Circle club gift wrapping.

**Food:** Gitane for fabulous cocktails & mashed peas. Le Colonial for its ambience & many floor levels of entertainment while dining. 54 Mint especially when it's truffle season. Colibri for the very best guacamole & ceviche. Bouche for its tiny kitchen creating culinary incredible bites. A real secret of mine when my afternoon sweet tooth comes out is grabbing a hot fudge sundae at the Ghirardelli Chocolate shop on Stockton & the new sundae bar at The Westfield Center.

**GEV:** How does it feel to be on top of your game especially in an industry which is male-dominated?

**Yvonne:** I feel the same as the day I started my career in the hospitality industry, full of passion and creative vision to make engaging and memorable things happen for all the guests who come through the doors of PH's. I was just doing, never questioning whether I was on top of my game. Doing to make things better with fun creative ideas and lasting impressions. Of course I have faced and danced with all sort of different experiences in my 30 year career. It is the tough times and the challenges that make me feel on top of my game. The male dominated world of my industry is just what it is. I am who I am and very proud that it's the women of the world who originally invented the career of hospitality in their very own homes.

**GEV:** How do you embrace your Inner Diva?

**Yvonne:** Knowing that I have accomplished many positive & productive things throughout the day at work, sometimes I'll run out of the office for a fresh air break or for a quick shopping spree at Neiman's. When I feel the urge to be different or spontaneous; I splurge for a concert, wine adventure or a culinary experience. Last minute Inner Diva, I like to just be me working on my back porch from home. I'm an easy-going Diva!

**GEV:** How did your daughters find themselves on board managing the hotel and what do you think were the greatest contributions they have given so far?

My daughters come into the world living & breathing hospitality. I brought them to work throughout my maternity leave, because this industry is so nurturing. With all of our room attendants loving babies, the environment and the availability for me to be able to bring them to work was ideal. Every summer vacation for them was spent learning the industry and doing everything from working in the laundry rooms folding sheets & towels, to answering phones, to room inspections, to entering data. Emily & Elisabeth were the opposite of Eloise.

Presently, Emily is working at PH's corporate office 3 days a week creating the graphics for our website and packages. She also designed The Perrier Lounge at Hotel Diva in conjunction with our partnership with Nestle Waters. My goal is to have Emily renovate one of our hotels in the future, as she graduated for San Francisco's Fashion Institute & Design FIDM last year. Elisabeth is heading off to college this year. My wish for her would be to fall in love with business and find a passion to make her way back to Personality Hotels. Youth is exciting!

**GEV:** What is the best thing about having a business in San Francisco?

**Yvonne:** San Francisco is an emerging city. It's in the hub of technology and full of culture. SF is a romantically deep-rooted city but change is always happening. What is there not to love about SF? It's where my heart is and where many leave theirs.

**GEV:** Who are your biggest influences? And how do you inject your personal style into each one of the hotels?

**Yvonne:** The most influential individuals in my life are: My mother who always reminded me to be creative, write poetry and dream. She said creativity was the root of business. My father who believed in me and gave me chance to prove myself. He taught me that "opportunity only knocks once." One of my professors at SF State who taught a course on Alternative Thinking. My mentor, Jack who always listens to me, pushes me and reminds me of my strengths. And my husband Marc, whose patience and understanding throughout my career has been encouraging. He never ever talked me out of anything that I felt passionate about and also reminded me to be patient and direct.

My personal style is injected into all PH's with the marketing ideas I create, the purchases I make, the "middle of the night" creative dreams that I make come true, my crazy visions, trends in fashion that I use in other outlets, and my passion that rubs off on my team.

**GEV:** What are your sources of inspiration for your hotels? Hotel Diva most especially.

**Yvonne:** The sources of inspiration for all of PH's begin with the location of the property, the neighborhood vibe, the surrounding culture, and the bones of the hotel. From there I like to create a purpose for what style the design will be. I purposefully search for designers/architects that have not designed hotels before, so as to be inspired with new and fresh ideas. Hotel Diva was such an easy inspiration because its location was directly across the street from The Curran & ACT theatres. DIVA was the perfect name.

**GEV:** Best advice you can give aspiring entrepreneurs and hoteliers?

**Yvonne:** The very best advice I could share is to work hard, be spontaneous, and be prepared to change gears quickly. It's the tough times that will make you a stronger business person and continue to use the practices that got you through the tough times during the good times as well. Never let your dreams and aspirations go to your head. F.E.A.R. is False Evidence Appearing Real. Be optimistic. Be real. Have fun. Keep your office door open as an invite for an open door policy.

**GEV:** What is your view of the boutique hotel industry now?

**Yvonne:** My view on the boutique industry now is that services are increasing to appeal to a broader demographic of guests. Boutique hotels are more popular because travelers are more savvy and looking for something that is different and creative. The internet has made everything so competitive and accessible. The Y generation is a new guest demographic. This is the reason why boutique hotels need to be more flexible in design & marketing. The key is to listen to and learn from your guests.

**GEV:** Describe your staff in one word and what is the best thing about having them as part of your team?

**Yvonne:** One word could never describe the team of unique personalities that give their energy & time to PH's. During the toughest of times (the last 3 years) each of their best attributes bloomed. Devoted. Inspirational. Motivating. Diligent. Willing. There, that's five words.

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**GEV:** What has been your biggest achievement so far?

**Yvonne:** This is such a wonderfully loaded question with so many wonderful answers I hold so dear to my heart with fond memories. I would say the very best achievement that I have accomplished thus far in my life has been the ability to raise a family with 2 delightful daughters (and keep a marriage alive for 27 years) while growing into a leadership role & being a groundbreaker of a cultivated boutique hotel company with vision, patience, love and the confidence to carry on through the toughest of times. Also, the ability and joy in , celebrating the positive times as well. The word 'multitasking' is a magical word in my book!

I would also like to recognize the triumph of being awarded a permit to build a 157 room hotel on Union Square at 72 Ellis St. My goal would be to see this new build complete in memory of my brother, whose dream was to make this happen for our father.

A true accomplishment for me is being told I made a difference to individuals and that I am their mentor and made an impact on their lives.

Keeping the momentum of running a business with so much infused creativity, the responsibility of employees and the understanding of the reality of the bottom line is a "quiet" achievement that I remind myself of without any ego.

Being told over & over again by our guests that Personality Hotels has the most comfortable beds ever!

Lastly- keeping family relations connected in business is so important. I can have a disagreement with my father, but at the end of the day we can release the anger and drama, and still have dinner together! ■



**Visit Hotel Diva**

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