

Businessprofile

Prince of Wales Hotel

Rising to the challenge with aplomb, Rowena Ellis has transformed what was a run-down business into a thriving hotel in tourist-driven Gulgong.

The Prince of Wales Hotel in Gulgong offers guests a warm welcome and friendly atmosphere. Built in the late 1800s, the building is one of Gulgong's oldest, and since 1976 has been owned by the local Ellis family.

Managed by daughter Rowena, The Prince of Wales Hotel today is a reflection of her determination and business acumen. Born and bred in Gulgong, Rowena's enthusiasm for the business is palpable, as she describes the transformation she has wrought in just four years.

Having cut her teeth on a five year stint from 1995 to 2000 as manager and licensee, Rowena was busy pursuing an alternate career path when in 2005 the current licensees moved on without warning, leaving little more than a shell.

"I had two days warning to come back to the pub which literally had nothing in it. We didn't have a chair to sit on. We had no beer. We had a blackboard out the front saying 'BYO chair, ashtray and beer,'" she says, shaking her head. "So people came in with their fold up chairs and their eskies!"

In a massive understatement, Rowena admits it has been a challenge to build the pub back to where it is today. While the original plan was for Rowena to step in while the business found it's feet again and then move on, she's found that after putting her heart and soul into the business, she can't walk away.

"When I came back we had two staff members, now I manage a staff of 17 and each and every one of them loves being here

as much as I do. They take just as much pride in where the pub is now as I do - it's not just a job for them."

Rowena became a self-confessed "queen of eBay" as she sought to refurbish and re-establish the charming old pub and once that was done, turned her attention to bigger renovations. The car park out the back was converted into an undercover beer garden graced with lush greenery and further out she has had seven modern motel units built.

"What we lacked was accommodation. The pub itself has five typical 'pub' rooms, but I wanted something that would attract a classier clientele to the pub and the town," she explains.

With the help of Sunrai designs in Mudgee and Tony Ruming, a local Gulgong builder, the motel rooms were designed and completed in April 2007.

While directing the rooms in a tasteful and contemporary décor, Rowena took the time to also have a new logo for the hotel designed, to reflect both the heritage nature of the hotel but also highlight the "updated trendy flair" she was cultivating.

Within six months of the motel rooms being completed Rowena was securing a 100% full capacity from Monday to Friday with contract workers, who were thrilled with the Wi-Fi wireless internet access, Austar reception shown on LCD flat screen TVs and, most importantly, the packed lunches that came as part of their package.

It was the weekends that Rowena then concentrated on, and

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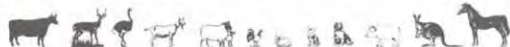
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she had such a good time on a girl's weekend away to the Hunter Valley that she made the savvy move to put together similar packages for The Prince of Wales Hotel.

Rowena has the personality best suited for the hospitality industry, and she says that in another life she would like to be an event planner. So it is no surprise that she executes the Girls Weekend Away packages to perfection.

"Depending of course on the group and their expectations, I can totally plan the weekend; they arrive on a Friday night to a glass of local wine and a gourmet homemade pizza where they can enjoy live entertainment in the bar. Saturday morning we prepare a hot country breakfast before they head off on a pre-arranged tour of local Gulgong or Mudgee wineries. Saturday night features more local wine and a two-course meal at our restaurant and is followed on Sunday by a Swedish massage and a picnic lunch platter in the beer garden before they head home."

Rowena realises it is essential for her staff to know the wines on the hotel's menu – of which all bar one are local – and she took them on a wine tour so they can vouch for what they sell.

"It's pretty important that my staff know their stuff when it comes to the local wines," she says.

In addition to the increased staff capacity and new accommodation, Rowena reopened the kitchen, which now supports two full-time chefs who go above and beyond 'pub grub'. Think hearty dishes of lamb shanks and mash, or enticing crispy pan-fried duck breast with spiced poached pear and plum and cinnamon jus.

Not that Rowena hasn't been recognised for her efforts by both the community and those in the industry. In 2007 The Prince of Wales Hotel won the Gulgong Gold Nugget 'Best Tourism Innovation' award, and in 2008 was a finalist of the HMAA Accommodation Industry Awards for Excellence of NSW 'Most Improved Accommodation'.

"When I came into the hotel in 2005 I had a lot of dreams and ideas for the business. My parents have trusted me to do these things and the ideas have worked and helped to benefit the business," says Rowena. "I think 2009 will be the year all our hard work pays off and I can't wait to share the hotel with new guests and visitors to Gulgong." ❖



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