



Graduate Hotels founder Ben Weprin in his office in Chicago

OFF CAMPUS

COLLEGE TOWN CHECK-IN

Ben Weprin's expanding group of Graduate Hotels is on a mission to make hotels near universities worth writing home about.

by Rima Suqi

The first thing Ben Weprin asks me, after the usual introductory niceties, is "Where'd you go to school?" This isn't something that I'm normally asked, as my last cap-and-gown moment was decades ago. But it is a relevant question as colleges, and college towns in particular, are top of mind for the 39-year-old University of Tennessee grad and CEO of AJ Capital Partners in Chicago. In 2014 Weprin launched Graduate Hotels, a collection of boutique properties in college towns across the country. And while he hadn't heard of my alma

mater (Grinnell College, in Iowa), the Hawkeye state is on his radar and will have a Graduate hotel next year.

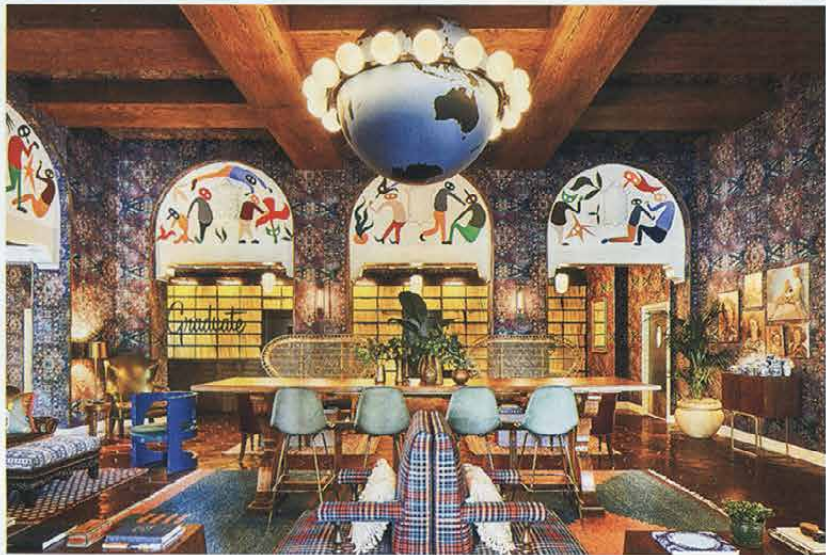
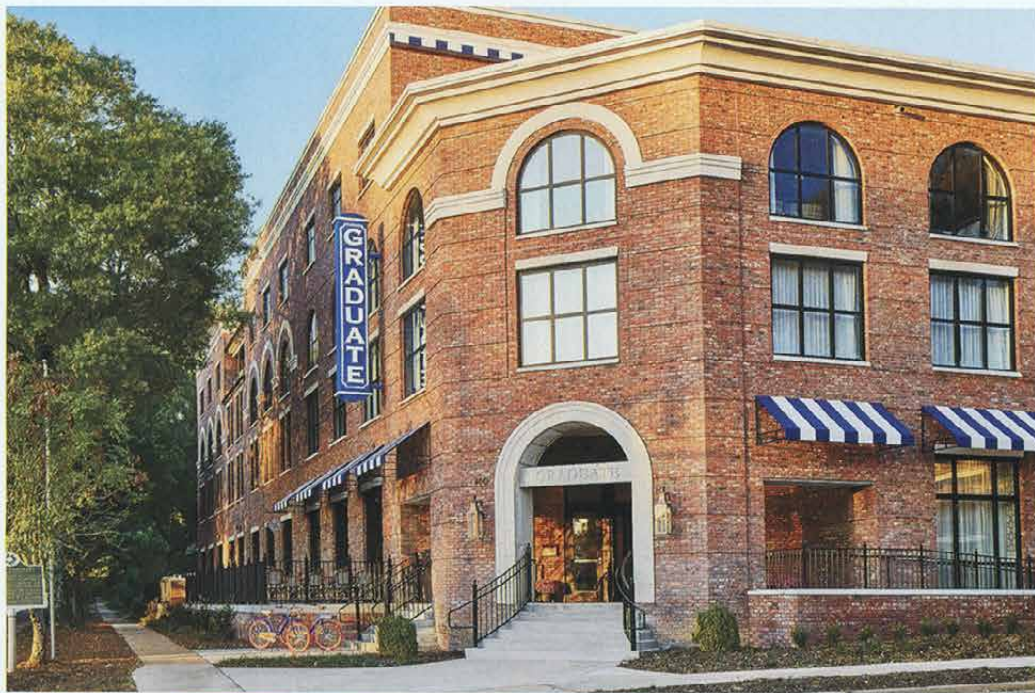
Graduate fills a vacant niche in the college- and university-town market: a well-designed boutique hotel with a great restaurant and bar scene and rooms that hit the under-\$250-a-night sweet spot, providing parents, alumni, visiting professors, and anyone else passing through the area with an often much-needed alternative to the usual uninspiring offerings. "If I'm a parent, and I'm taking my kid to look at UVA, Duke, and Vanderbilt, and I'm staying at an XYZ Express, it's like, 'Crap, I'm going to be stuck staying here for the next four years,'" Weprin says. "What if there was an alternative, a sophisticated hotel that's awesome?" As someone who once drove cross-country on a college tour with a younger sibling

and stayed in many XYZ Expresses, I see the choice as a no-brainer. There are Graduate hotels in Ann Arbor, Michigan; Madison, Wisconsin; Oxford, Mississippi; Charlottesville, Virginia; Tempe, Arizona; Athens, Georgia; Berkeley, California; Richmond, Virginia; and Lincoln, Nebraska. A property will open in Minneapolis later this year, with Seattle, New York City's Roosevelt Island, and Bloomington, Indiana, on deck for 2018-19.

When scouting cities for future Graduate hotels, Weprin, who has an MBA from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, looks for what he calls "enlightened communities," where people go to the town for reasons besides the schools, but where the school is the anchor, breeding "creativity, culture, and commerce." Weprin generally prefers a historic property with a connection to the community. The Graduate in Berkeley had once been the Hotel Durant; the Ann Arbor property was the Dahlmann Campus Inn. He also researches a school's endowment and alumni engagement. "A large endowment signifies that there is real loyalty and commitment from alumni," he says, "and that means people are happy to pay more money to stay at a hotel that's interesting."

Every Graduate hotel is designed to capture the spirit of the university and the local community, but not in an in-your-face way (no pennants and only the occasional mascot). Weprin's team researches the heck out of every town it goes into, becoming founts of information—to the point where Andrew Alford, AJ Capital's chief creative officer, jokes, "One of these days I'm going to kill it on *Jeopardy*."

One of the few obvious nods is evident upon check-in: Each hotel's room key cards are replicas of student IDs of



The Graduate hotel in Oxford, Mississippi, above; the lobby of the Graduate hotel in Berkeley, California, which opened in May

notable graduates of the local school. In Berkeley, one might have Gregory Peck (class of 1939); in Richmond, Tina Fey (1992) in Oxford, New York Giants quarterback Eli Manning (2004). Less obvious examples include the drapery behind the front desk of the Lincoln property, which replicates the one Johnny Carson (1949) stood in front of when he did his *Tonight Show* monologues. Rooms in the Berkeley hotel, which opened in May, feature fashion sketches by Oscar-winning costume designer Edith Head (1919) and the lobby contains 8,590 issues of *National Geographic* because they're the same

Pantone-yellow color as the university's. For Bloomington inspiration, Weprin recently rewatched *Breaking Away*, the 1979 film that takes place there.

This was not Weprin's first foray into hotels. "The hospitality Godzilla bit me—not the bug, the Godzilla—while I was working for Larry Levy" in the aughts, he recalls. Levy is a Chicago developer and restaurateur who at the time was also an investor in Auberge Resorts. When Weprin visited Esperanza, an Auberge property in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, as a Levy employee, he saw an infinity pool for the first time and experienced amenities like compli-

mentary foot massages and free Popsicles. The seduction was complete. In 2008 when Levy decided to divest himself of Auberge, he gave Weprin 30 days to gather the capital to buy it.

There's a plaque on Weprin's desk that says *Everyday I'm Hustlin'*. Those words seem to define his life—from his early years as a baseball-card dealer (an apparently lucrative business he started at the age of nine with his brother, Andrew, who still works with him) growing up in Dayton, Ohio, to his first "real" job as a 16-year-old salesman at the local Just for Feet, where he routinely beat weekly sales goals. It should come as no surprise, then, that Weprin came up with the money to buy Auberge (and found AJ Capital). That was in 2008's fourth quarter, when, as Weprin likes to say, "the world was falling apart."

But AJ Capital was on a bit of a roll. In addition to Auberge, it acquired and renovated the Hotel Saint-Barth Isle de France (later sold to LVMH) and the Malliouhana Resort in Anguilla. More recently it took on the Pontchartrain Hotel in New Orleans. In Chicago, its portfolio includes Hotel Lincoln, the Thompson, Soho House, and the lauded Chicago Athletic Association, designed by the New York firm Roman and Williams. (Weprin is now the main partner in Roman + Williams Guild, the firm's shop, which is set to open this fall in New York.)

Lately Weprin's had his eye on the Nassau Inn, in Princeton, New Jersey, as the site of a future Graduate, but the owner hasn't been inclined to sell. He'd also love to put a hotel on Nike's campus in Beaverton, Oregon.

Hotels have been good to Weprin and have given him a platform to achieve his main goal, which is to "meet interesting people," he says. He counts Manning, J Crew chairman Mickey Drexler, and SoulCycle cofounder Elizabeth Cutler as friends. "I'm not bashful about it," he says. "I'll find a way to meet them. I like to ask questions about how they got to where they are." With a smile, he adds, "Nobody doesn't like a scrappy hustler." ♦

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