



5,342 views | Aug 10, 2020, 04:48pm EDT

Peyton Manning Teams Up With Graduate Knoxville To Deliver Guests A Nostalgic Journey

Katie Kelly Bell Contributor

ForbesLife

I cover what's interesting in wine, spirits, food, and travel.



Reception at Graduate Knoxville—homage to the Vol...
GRADUATE HOTELS

[+]

University of Tennessee football fans have yet one more incentive to don the orange and head to Knoxville—to celebrate the [Graduate Knoxville's](#) hotel debut and its nostalgia-soaked bar and restaurant [Saloon 16](#), operated in a partnership with NFL legend and UT alum, [Peyton Manning](#).

The hotel building is a fully renovated modern space, but its soul is a nostalgic treasure, which makes a visit to Graduate Knoxville more of an experience than a hotel stay. Manning's passion deserves a good bit of the credit for that. In characteristic fashion, Manning didn't merely lend his name to the partnership—he took a deep dive into every detail, from naming every item on the menu to selecting every song for the jukebox. It all has meaning explains Manning, “I wanted to pay tribute UT history and to the people that were a part of my student experience, making this a special place for people to come and remember when.”

Mission accomplished. A stay here is as much an immersion into the lore and history of UT as it is a celebration of Tennessee's humble and warm hospitality. For Ben Weprin, Graduate Hotels CEO and founder, this property was as much of a passion project as it was for Manning. Weprin graduated from UT a few years after Manning, and the two have invested in other ventures together. Says Weprin, “Doing this project with Peyton is almost surreal, and he was so generous—with everything from his personal memorabilia to his time.”



Saloon 16 at Graduate Knoxville GRADUATE HOTELS

Manning admits he was anxious that Saloon 16 not “be all about me,” but much like the vivid “Vol Orange” hue, Manning is hard to ignore. He led the Vols to four bowl games in four seasons and to a SEC Championship title 1996. Regardless, he says, “I didn't want people to walk into Saloon 16 and think, ‘wow, this is a lot of Peyton,’ but it is me, along with the many other people who have been a part of this journey with me.”

Saloon 16 is a temple of nostalgia, oozing Tennessee pride and showcasing Manning's youthful journey as an athlete. Anchored by a mahogany top bar that dates back to the 1800s, complete with beer mug sliding track, the space also boasts a wall mural featuring some of UT's sports legends, (picture Johnny Majors mounted on horseback, shooting at gators and bulldogs—cowboy style). Says Weprin, "The saloon is a direct reflection of Peyton—if he was to build a bar in the basement of his house this would be it."



Lobby of Graduate Knoxville GRADUATE HOTELS

During the design and menu planning, Manning incorporated homage to everything from classic Knoxville watering holes to former student athletes, players, and coaches—even one of his long-time UT professors made the cut.

Every item tells a story—consider the framed back of a case of Bud Light. According to Manning this mundane object was the product of his roommates' frustration during his junior year. "We shared an apartment off campus, and just before the holidays lots of our neighbors would come by and ask me to sign things to give as Christmas gifts. Soon people just started dropping things off and leaving them to get signed. I didn't mind, but my roommates had had enough so they wrote out an exchange system on the back of this Bud Light box and pasted it to the door. If you wanted a signed jersey, you had to bring a case of beer or baked goods (blueberry muffins or chocolate chip cookies)."



Saloon 16 at Graduate Knoxville GRADUATE HOTELS

Manning's Saloon 16 is all about UT athletics, while the rest of the hotel features Rocky Top lore and hews to the Graduate Hotels' cheeky riffs on university traditions (such as the key-cards with student ID's from famous alumni). Each room and public space gets the Tennessee Vol treatment. Yes, there is orange, but here it's done tastefully—complemented with blue and white accents, and vintage touches that celebrate the city of Knoxville. The front desk is a depiction of a boat—a clever nod to the Vol Navy tailgate, and walls are decorated with artwork by two-time Pulitzer finalist and UT grad, [Marshall Ramsey](#). Look for the UT mascot, Smokey, on bedside lamps and bathroom wallpaper.



Guest room, Graduate Knoxville GRADUATE HOTELS

When asked why it took so many years to finally open a Graduate Knoxville (this is the brand's 22nd property), Weprin explains, "We were waiting on this specific property—we wanted to be in the university's center of gravity so we targeted this location." And, Manning was the perfect pairing. Says Weprin, "Doing this whole thing has made it clear to me how much he loved the school—not just playing football. He loved his professors, his friends, and working on this hotel really unlocked all of the reasons why he loved it. Peyton is a VFL—Vol for Life—he embodies that more than anyone I have ever met."