

West Coast Revival

Legendary Sooke Harbour House enters a new chapter rooted in comfort, community and coastal flavour

BY SUSAN LUNDY

We're seated in the dining room of Sooke Harbour House, gazing at the ocean through a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows and sipping an Okanagan red poured with a flourish from a long-necked decanter. Chef Brianna Burke has just placed a "sea-cuterie" board on the table. A work of art in itself, the board offers a generous spread of bite-size delicacies from the sea, including smoked sablefish, pepperoni salmon and plump, juicy prawns. This is a dish we won't forget.

For decades, Sooke Harbour House occupied near-mythic status on Vancouver Island. It's a place known for its oceanfront setting, pioneering farm-to-table cuisine and historic charm. After several turbulent years and a four-year closure, the iconic property has reopened following extensive renovations and under new ownership.

During our two-night stay, it was easy to conclude: Sooke Harbour House is back.

The property itself dates back more than a century, with additions built over the decades, including a major architectural expansion in the 1980s. More recently, the entire property underwent a substantial renovation that modernized the rooms, restaurant and infrastructure, while maintaining the soul of the original inn.

"There's such a strong sense of place and beauty here," says owner Luke Evanow.

All but one of the 28 rooms face the ocean, and ours—a ground-level, pet-friendly suite—is spacious, with modern furnishings, a king-sized bed and doors that open onto a seaside porch and seating area. Soon we're sitting in the sun with our dog stretched out beside us while a soft breeze rolls off the ocean. Eventually—not wanting to leave this serene spot—we order from the happy hour menu, and clams, prawns and a burger arrive at our table.

Evanow says the scale of the rooms is one of the hotel's defining features, noting, "The average size is twice the size of a normal hotel room."

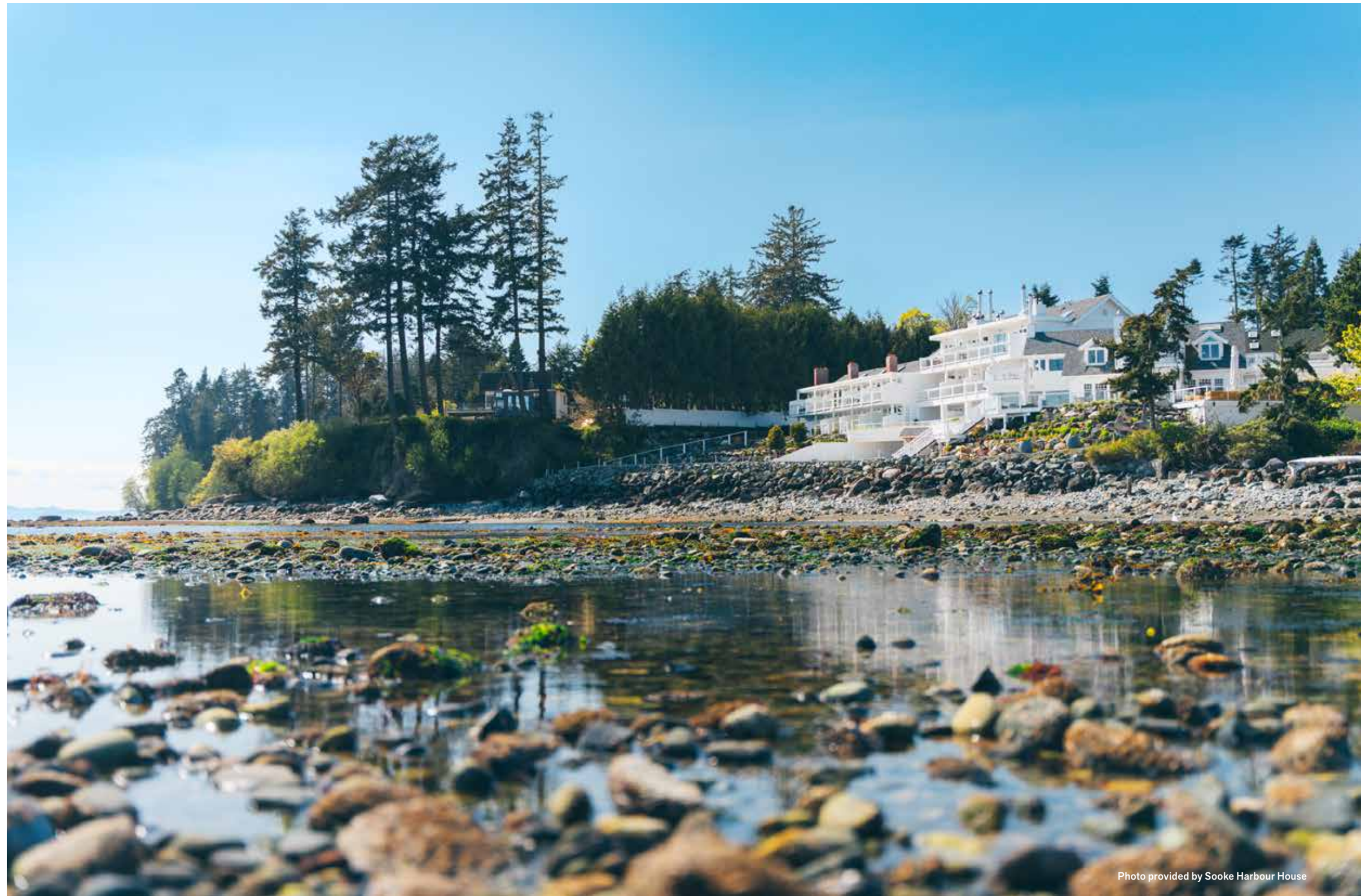


Photo provided by Sooke Harbour House

Upstairs rooms, accessed through maze-like hallways, are huge, some with quirky rooflines and doorways, and many with mid-room soaker tubs and antique furniture. Indigenous artwork is found throughout the hotel, including carvings by Victor Newman, a Kwakwaka'wakw artist from Sooke. All the rooms have access to the outside.

"You hear the waves crash," Evanow says. "You walk out your door to your own private deck or balcony."

Outdoors, walkways wind through lawn and garden areas and along the waterfront. Sooke's beautiful Whiffin Spit is just steps away and we stroll the length of it, both in the evening and early morning, breathing in the salt air and nodding to other walkers.

"It's hard to be unhappy in this place," says general manager Danielle Carriere, who joined the hotel recently after working in hospitality across Canada.

Building a sense of welcome has been central to the hotel's relaunch, she adds, and, indeed, the service during our stay is exceptional.

"We have a small but mighty team," she adds. "A lot of people on our team are from Sooke, born and raised, and I love that they're proud of where they come from and proud of what we're building here."

Partnerships with nearby businesses and producers are also important, resulting in locally sourced items, like bath products, and curated experiences that highlight the area. Danielle mentions collaborations with local adventure companies, including ziplining excursions and e-bike rentals for use on the nearby Galloping Goose Trail.

"It's really about highlighting the things that make Sooke special," she says.

The hotel is also working to become more accessible to locals—not just overnight guests. Plans are underway for an expanded garden café, where Whiffin Spit walkers, families and residents can stop in for coffee, pastries or a glass of wine. A vast, covered patio plus a full sun lounging area, located close to the water's edge, add to the summertime capacity of the café and dining room.

"We want to welcome people," Evanow says. "I want this deck full of families that are just grabbing a coffee, living their lives and enjoying their memories."

Connections to all things "local" really shine in the hotel's culinary program. Sooke Harbour House helped define the farm-to-table movement in BC long before locally sourced ingredients became a restaurant mainstay.

"Honouring the legacy of Sooke Harbour House starts with understanding why it mattered in the first place," says chef Burke. "The restaurant built its reputation on hyper-local sourcing, seasonality, foraging and creating a West Coast dining experience. Preserving that philosophy is more important than preserving any single dish."



Seasonality is key, along with "ingredients that taste like the ocean meeting the forest."

"Sooke doesn't need food that feels overly manipulated," Burke says, adding, "The landscape already gives you so much character. The job of the kitchen is to translate that onto the plate."

"I think the goal is for someone who loved Sooke Harbour House 20 years ago to still recognize its soul but also feel that it's alive and moving forward."

That balance between honouring history and embracing reinvention defines the entire property. While there are nods to the hotel's storied past, the focus now feels more about creating a contemporary West Coast retreat rooted in comfort and authenticity. The renovations themselves reflect that approach, with cleaner lines, more neutral palettes and a design philosophy that allows the surrounding landscape to take centre stage.

That vision is continuing to evolve well beyond the current relaunch. Plans for the property include an expanded chef's garden, greenhouses and a wellness area centred around a Nordic-style thermal circuit with pools, steam and cold plunges woven into the landscape. The goal, Evanow explains, is to create spaces where guests can move naturally between ocean views, gardens, food and relaxation.

As we spend our days strolling, lounging, sipping coffee at the café and enjoying sea-cuterie in the dining room, that vision pretty much sums up the experience. **LIV**

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