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The gloves are an important part of the uniform for butlers-in-training at Buckhead's soon-to-open St. Regis.

More than hired hands

Hotel has butlers: New arrival to Atlanta hospitality scene offers elite service.

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In a private room on the seventh floor in the yet-to-open St. Regis hotel, Philip DeAngelis reviews his elegant troops.

Standing before him in a newly tailored gray uniform is Thomas Gauthier, who has led covert missions involving bathing suits and Cinderella's autograph. There's Ricci Wright, who can use her soothing voice as a crowbar. And Lelli Walker, who came to this country less than a year ago, bound for sublime surroundings.

More than 150 people applied to work as butlers at the new Buckhead hotel, which opens Tuesday. These three were chosen.

For the past few weeks they've been through butler boot camp, as

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Butlers: Can-do attitude, demeanor of servitude

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the courtly DeAngelis, head butler at the St. Regis New York, has instructed them in the ways of genteel subservience. In an ungilded age of *égalité* — and in a town where people might think “Rhett” when they hear “butler” — part of their job will be training guests to use them.

“The butler can get an image as a prima donna,” said DeAngelis, an 18-year St. Regis veteran who communicates with raised eyebrow rather than raised voice. “You need people who are hard-working, not afraid to get their hands dirty. You’re not going to just be standing around in a uniform looking good.”

He paused as he noticed Gauthier looking flummoxed, having forgotten his gloves.

“They’re important,” DeAngelis calmly told his charge. He had but to deposit the two words into the air and Gauthier vanished, like steam from a teapot. Then DeAngelis went on to explain that a butler walks a line as fine as monograms on old silver.

“They need to be well-mannered, they need to be discreet,” he said. “They need to be trustworthy, friendly, very hands-on — but not too familiar.”

DeAngelis knows of butlers who have been asked to stand as witnesses during hotel guests’ weddings, and one who was even asked to select an engagement ring. When the occasional request becomes too chummy or untoward, the butler must not blanch.

“I apologize, but that’s outside the scope of my duties as a butler,” is the correct response should a guest request, ahem, *company*, or certain pharmaceuticals.

Not that such unpleasantness happens often, DeAngelis said.

“The butler always has to remain calm and collected on the surface, like a duck on the water,” he said, “padding underneath.”

Liaisons of luxury

The trio he is training will

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PHILIP DEANGELIS
Head butler with the St. Regis hotel in New York City



Philip DeAngelis (second from left), head butler at the St. Regis New York, is training the first three butlers for the St. Regis hotel that will open soon in Buckhead. Going over checklists are (from left) Ricci Wright, Thomas Gauthier and Leili Walker.

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Wright gives a leather belt the white-glove treatment as she practices packing for guests who might request the service.



Walker, practicing folding and packing clothing, has a master’s degree in hospitality from a university in her native Brazil.

greet each guest upon arrival and walk with him or her to the room. They’ll offer to pack and unpack, arrange for tea, shoe shines or car service, and point out amenities such as the bathroom mirror that becomes a television screen. If guests are allergic to down pillows or want the furniture rearranged or just don’t like the lamps, the butlers will see that appropriate changes are made. They’ll run white-gloved fingers over the housekeeping staff’s work.

“The butlers are the liaison between the guest and the hotel,” said DeAngelis. Asked about tipping, he demurred with grace.

“We don’t really talk about that,” he said. “It’s not supposed to be a tipped posi-

tion. We just tell people, if they’d like to do something upon completion of their stay, that’s up to them.”

The trio he is training is eager to serve guests at the hotel, where standard room rates start at around \$220.

Gauthier, a Detroit native, exudes the charm he once used to persuade Bowling Green State University men to pledge Pi Kappa Alpha during his tenure as rush chairman there. During a stint at the St. Regis’ Aspen property, a guest once prevailed upon him to round up bathing suits for her three young daughters — in the middle of winter.

“She wanted a different one for each child. One was a one-piece, one was a bikini, one was, what do you

call it, a tankini?” Gauthier recalls. “Have you ever been to Aspen? You can’t just drive to Target or Wal-Mart.” But he made it happen, just as he did at his last job, as concierge of a luxury Disney hotel in Orlando. When a guest asked him to track down a princess dress for her

daughter, he not only procured the item but delivered it along with a signed photo of Cinderella.

“That mom was in tears,” he said, allowing a smile to tug at the corners of his mouth.

Atlanta native Wright, who graduated from Westlake High School, worked at several Enterprise rental car locations after the University of Michigan. At her most recent post, working the concierge desk at the Buckhead Ritz-Carlton, she finagled a last-minute dinner reservation at a high-end Buckhead steakhouse for a guest and his ladyfriend. On Valentine’s Day, which fell on a Saturday this year.

“I established a rapport,” Wright said sweetly.

Walker came here from South America last year and has been working at Trader Joe’s, but she holds a master’s degree in hospitality from a university in her native Brazil.

“I came to the United States with the goal of working at a prestigious hotel,” she said. “This just seems to be the epitome of hospitality.”

A proud tradition

Eventually there will be six butlers at the Atlanta St. Regis, one for each floor. Given the economy, management isn’t expecting all 151 rooms to be occupied immediately, so the hotel will staff up as things improve.

“We’re all butlers in the service industry,” said Tom Hazay, director of room operations. He started his career in 2001 at the New York St. Regis and trained under DeAngelis. The Atlanta property is his fifth St. Regis, and the third he has opened.

“I can’t wait,” he said. “I told my staff, it’s like having a baby. We’re getting closer and closer.”

A London native who served in the Israeli military and police force, he first worked hotel jobs to earn extra money. After moving to the United States, he earned a degree in hospitality management from Johnson & Wales University. Finishing school right after Sept. 11, 2001, he was drawn to a career that revolved around guest comfort.

“I think it prepared me better for the years to come,” he said.

He was also drawn to the mystique of the St. Regis, a brand with 17 properties worldwide. The original hotel was founded in New York 1904 by Col. John Jacob Astor IV, who died when the Titanic sank in 1912.

Lore holds that his butler was with him until the end.



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