TRAVEL WEEKLY

What's in a name?

CHECKING IN

Martha, Martha, Martha, you had me at Otis, and I don't mean the odd elevator setup.

Sure, the bustling Danny Meyer restaurant adjoining the entrance to New York's recently rebranded Martha Washington hotel was inviting. The vertical, fluted, white patterns in the lobby area are unfussy, and the unorthodox elevator system — one of the buttons calls for a lift in two banks, a second button calls for one in the third bank — is charming.

But piping Otis Redding's "I Can't Turn You Loose" and other soul nuggets into the lobby kind of sealed the deal for me.

With New York poised for what appears to be an influx of new hotels from developers looking to take advantage of the country's most lucrative hotel market, many Manhattan-area operators have gone all Shirley Ellis on us by playing "The Name Game." But instead of playing rhyming tricks with monikers like Lincoln, Tony, Bo and Arnold that peppered the '65 pop hit, hoteliers are going from the fairly common (Paul, William) to the slightly more esoteric (Hugo, Evelyn) to the intentionally off-key (Riff Chelsea).

The idea is to make the properties pop out from an expanding sea of brand-name competitors throughout Manhattan while offering more curious types the chance to learn about a backstory that in some cases might actually be true.

Many Manhattan-area hotel operators are playing 'The Name Game' to make the properties stand out.

For example, the 33-room William early last year opened as what its operators call New York's first "boutique brownstone," touting extended-stay capabilities from its relatively large (by Manhattan standards) rooms and its bifurcated design approach (some would say schizophrenic, though it's well done) that plays up the building's 90-year history with a 1920s-era parlor vibe in the lobby and modern splashes of color upstairs.

The building, located three blocks south of Grand Central Station, formerly housed the William & Mary Club, hence the name.

On a more personal note, the Paul, which opened in January in Manhattan's now-bonkers (by hotel-development standards) NoMad district, references the middle name of each of the three brothers who own the 122-room property.

The Paul is dressed up in increasingly common industrial-chic attire (faux-brick wallpaper in some areas) but stands out for offering a half-dozen "bunk rooms" that connect to standard queen-bed rooms (for families) and for affording in-your-face views of the Empire State Building from some rooms. In addition, the owners have interspersed spaces with inspiring quotes from notable Pauls (McCartney, Cezanne, Newman, et al.).

Then, there's the downright ethereal approach. Hotel Hugo's owners picked the name because it's the Latinized version of Hugh, whose original meaning was "bright in mind and spirit." The 122-room property opened in April 2014 in the the burgeoning Hudson Square neighborhood, west of SoHo, and with its extensive use of lacquered wood, blue hues and Hudson River views, it conveys an almost nautical vibe, while its two rooftop decks on a sunny June afternoon were populated with a power-millennial clientele straight out of a fashion shoot.

At the almost opposite end of the spectrum is the nearly scruffy Riff Chelsea, which opened in December. Its name references its music pedigree: The 43-room extremely limited-service property (only the towels and trash are changed/removed daily) was formerly the Chelsea Star, which served as a low-end single-room occupancy hotel (as well as a place for much shorter stays of the no-tell hotel variety), though it at one time included Madonna among its residents.

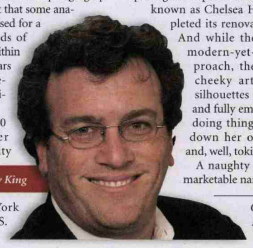
Like its predecessor, the Riff Chelsea still "features" a number of really small rooms with shared baths, but a center patio area complete with fake grow walls encourages the party vibe. A slightly higher-end sister property, Riff Downtown, will open next month a couple blocks south of One World Trade Center.

Of course, soft branding being all the rage, some of these properties aren't completely independent, and instead are aligned either with chainlets or larger distribution systems. For example, the Paul is part of Choice Hotels International's Ascend Collection of independent properties.

Then there's Tommie, the sister brand of Commune Hotels & Resorts' Thompson Hotels lifestyle badge. Picking up on the microsuite trend practiced in New York by Europe-based companies such as Yotel and CitizenM, Tommie is slated to make its worldwide debut this fall in Hudson Square with 325 rooms, a restaurant helmed by Southern cuisine chef Harold Moore and a massive roof deck with views of the Hudson.

Either way, these hotels are springing up in a New York market that some analysts say could be poised for a letdown as thousands of rooms come online within the next couple of years to accommodate record numbers of visitors to the city.

In all, about 13,000 rooms are under construction in a city whose 113,000 existing rooms make New York the third-largest U.S. hotel market (after Las Vegas and Orlando, according to STR).



Danny King

Still, the city commanded the country's highest hotel-room rates last year, though it recently has been showing early signs of a glut. In fact, New York's first-quarter room rates fell 4.1% from a year earlier.

"The supply of New York's hotel rooms has doubled in the last seven, eight years," Richard Born, principal at New York-based independent hotel operator BD Hotels (The Pod, The Marlton, The Greenwich), told the Boutique & Lifestyle Lodging Association's Hotel Investment Conference in New York last month. "A very small window of vacancy can create a very large drop in rates."

That means that independents looking to compete with that expanding group of brands as well as newer concepts using New York as a launching pad for potential expansion (e.g., Barry Sternlicht's SH Group's impossibly posh Baccarat Hotel & Residences on midtown Manhattan's West 53rd Street, which opened in March) are tasked with coming up with monikers that offer a sense of individuality and maybe a bit of intrigue.

For a dose of that, there's NoMad's Evelyn, which reopened late last year on the site of what had previously been the Gershwin. The namesake of the 160-room property, which is owned and operated by Triumph Hotels, is Evelyn Nesbit, an early-20th century "it girl" who gained notoriety in 1906 when her jealous husband murdered her lover, the architect Stanford White, spurring what was at the time referred to as "The Trial of the Century."

The hotel itself encourages a more harmonious feel, furnishing its tasteful rooms with Gershwin-inspired touches such as gramophone-shaped iPod players, minibars that look like old Victrola record players and ceiling lamps with mini-trombone-shaped light fixtures.

As for that arguably "it girl" of an earlier era, the Martha Washington marks a reincarnation of sorts, as the building started its 112-year-old life as an all-women's residence called the Martha Washington before eventually morphing into the Manhattan outpost of King & Grove.

The 261-room hotel had a soft reopening last September under what's now known as Chelsea Hotels and completed its renovations in March. And while the rooms take a modern-yet-restrained approach, they also include cheeky artwork showing silhouettes of a reimagined and fully empowered Martha doing things like chopping down her own cherry tree and, well, toking up.

A naughty girl with a still-marketable name.

Contact Danny King at dking@travelweekly.com.