

## Growing one hotel at a time

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Eric Paquette and Jean-Francois Caron could be seen as a pair of aspiring Donald Trumps -- Quebec-style.

The mid-30s business partners have launched their own independent chain of hotels, with the first of five planned for the next five years inaugurated in their hometown of St-Eustache, Que., last fall.

Imperial Hotel & Suites was founded two years ago to provide rapidly growing regions such as St-Eustache with quality hotels that meet the needs of businesses while offering social activities for workers and their families, the pair explain.

Paquette noted there are as many as 1,000 businesses in the St-Eustache vicinity and Imperial aims to specialize in attracting small conferences and business meetings.

The only other competitors in St-Eustache are the 42-room Motel Auberge St-Eustache down the street and 22-room L'Oasis de l'île auberge/spa.

Imperial's goal is to build a new hotel a year into 2011, with the \$10-million flagship St-Eustache establishment officially opened Nov. 15 and a current occupancy rate of about 30 per cent.

That four-storey hotel will serve as the model in design and image for the next four facilities.

It features 63 rooms, nine suites and conference rooms that can accommodate up to 300 people.

"We modelled it after boutique hotels, but with mid-level pricing of \$109 to \$189 a night," Paquette said.

He and Caron are doing market research in such target locations as the Laurentians (where both live), the north, south and west shores of Montreal as well as the Gatineau, Que., region for their expansion.

"It would have been easier to join an existing (hotel chain), but we wanted our own banner and full control," Paquette, 35, said.

"There are big barriers to financing a hotel development, but we did it with 90 per cent of our own money, a bank loan and some risk capital," he said.

Most of that money came from selling their shares almost two years ago in Reseau Selection, a network of nursing and personal-care facilities across the province. They were among six people who in 1998 became promoters, developers and managers of that company.

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