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Interview

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Interview

Stewart L. Burger, M.S.
Coordinator of Special Events - The Knoll
Lecturer, HRI 383: Introduction to Beverages

What has been your favorite job at Iowa State so far?

Well, you know, it's funny. I've enjoyed every job I've had here, really truly have. And I know it's an easy thing to say, but I enjoyed being an assistant manager at a dining center because it was great experience for somebody fresh out of school. Then my third year I managed a dining center—it was such a nice dining center—I really enjoyed that also. Friley was great, great experiences, and I thoroughly enjoyed being a director, I also enjoy what I do now. I can't say I enjoy any one of them more. I've always been involved in the college of hotel, restaurant, and institution management. Currently I teach a class, as you know, HRI 383.

How do you get into the Introduction to Beverages class?

There is a one-page form with basic information, including your age, because we do check. You have to write a little paragraph about your experience in the beverage industry and another paragraph about why you want to take the class. The class is really designed for people who are majoring in HRIM. We talk about pricing the menus, setting up and preparing for foods and things like that. It's more than just a survey of wine, beers and spirits. It has that edge of it because that's the department that teaches it.

Does the class generally fill up quickly?

Very quickly—there is generally a waiting list. We get anywhere from 75 to 100 students a semester applying for the class. When I first started there were about half HRIM and half non-majors. But our department has been growing, and it has grown, so right now we are probably about 80 to 90 percent HRIM majors. My only disappointment is that I can't let more non-majors in.

Do you ever have students who try and drink too much?

Not really. There is only a limited amount of certain servings and there is limited amount of time, so no, it's not really a problem. Most students are pretty responsible. If the students are just trying to have something to drink, there are probably easier ways than taking a class.

White or red wine?

I enjoy them both, but generally if I had a choice I would drink a dry red wine. But if someone were to offer me a very nice white wine I would never turn it down.

It's hard to say because really it's an issue of dining, because wine is made to have with food many times. If it's in the summer, and you're on a deck grilling out, you might want one kind of thing, but if you're eating a light salad you might want something else. So, it kind of varies, it just tends to be how you feel. But for me, it tends to be dry and it tends to be red.

Where would you recommend students who are unable to get into HRI 383 to go for more beverage education?

A number of liquor stores and wine stores have courses both in Ames and in Des Moines. Hy-Vee, Cyclone Liquor, and Wine and Spirits all do. A number of these places have public tastings. That's one way to do it. Certainly taking tours of wineries is another option.

We have wineries here in Iowa now. We even have one near Ames, in Gilbert. So I think any student that is 21 should go up there and visit and sample. There are also wineries in Winterset, Indianola and two in Newton. So, there are a lot of them close-by. Some of them are becoming pretty sophisticated.

Traveling overseas is another option. As luck would have it, many places have wine producing areas and the ability to sample wine. Eighteen is the drinking age generally in those cultures, so a lot of students come back, and I don't want to say their appetite has been wet for wine, but certainly their interest has both literally and figuratively.

The last thing that I would recommend, is that there are a lot of good, easy-to-read books on the market.

Is it fun to work at the Knoll?

Yes, if you are an Iowa Stater, and I am. It's always fun because of the guests. We have lots and lots of people come, and for most of the people that come, it's pretty special. Most people don't get to come here very often, so when they get to come it's important for us who work here to make that event as memorable for them as we can.

Was there any one event that you have coordinated that stands out in your mind?

Well, the largest event we have had here was the first year that we had "Order of the Knoll." We had about 500 people here for that, the biggest event we've had. We moved all of the furniture out of the house, and we had a full structural tent with the glass sides outside and a full band.

Do you do a lot of the cooking for special events at The Knoll?

We do a lot of preparation. About 80 percent of it is prepared on site by me or by my staff. I have twelve students that work for me. Some are in HRIM, some are not. Most of my students start as underclassmen and work through graduation.

Is there a special meal that President Geoffroy prefers?

He likes a wide variety of foods, so anything that's prepared well in a nice variety he enjoys. He likes salads, he likes red meat, and he likes fish and poultry. It's fun for me because I get to do a wide variety of things. If I had to fix the same meal that would get old. He is always appreciative of having new things, so that's always fun. It makes my job a lot more interesting.

Story: Jocelyn Elfstrom
Photo: Aaron Thomas