

Food for Thought

A Hotelier rite of passage for decades, a required course puts students on the front lines of running a restaurant

By Beth Saulnier
PHOTOS BY ROBERT BARKER

DINING OUT: Ian Burke '20 (standing) serves as host during Truffle Trio night at Establishment in late October.



TEACHABLE MOMENTS (from top): Samantha Fioto '20, a front of house TA, pitches in by filling water glasses; chef instructor Beth Wilcox '96 (right) works with kitchen TA David Barge '20 (left) and Truffle Trio manager Josh Gully '20 (left) and Truffle Trio manager Brandon Salvatore '20 (left), another Truffle Trio manager, checks in with course instructor Douglass Miller before the restaurant opens. Opposite page (from top): Robert Dandliker '22 (left), a TA serving as an expeditor in the kitchen, hands off mac and cheese appetizers to server Sarah Baturka '20; assistant expeditor Yunting Gu '21 keeps track of the dishes that have been ordered.



One of Ithaca's most intriguing dining experiences is hiding in plain sight: an East Hill eatery that offers new menu items every night, has commanding campus views, and features some of the most attentive service that money can't buy. At this upscale establishment—called, in fact, Establishment—guests pay for their food and drink but aren't allowed to tip the wait staff, because they're not technically working; they're learning. The restaurant is the latest iteration of a longtime tradition for Hotelies: a required course in which small teams of upperclassmen design a custom menu and manage a student-run restaurant for a single evening.

Located for the past six years in a purpose-built space on the second floor of Statler Hall, Establishment (whose minimalist logo dubs it “estb.”) is open Monday through Friday most weeks of fall and spring semester. As Douglass Miller, one of its four current instructors, notes, given that each night's three-person management team has a built-in customer base, tables can be tough to come by. “We generally sell out weeks in advance, because all their friends come,” he says. “If they're on a sports team or in a sorority, fraternity, or club, it's like, ‘It's my management night; who's coming?’ It's hard for locals, because they think about making a reservation four or five days out.”

Once a week, the roughly 150 students who take the class (HADM 3350) all attend a lecture; they're divided into five

sections of thirty for the “lab” portion—prepping and running the restaurant from about 3 to 10 p.m. on their assigned night of the week. For the first part of the semester, half the students have “front of house” roles like wait staff, food runner, bartender, barista, and host or hostess, while the other half work in the kitchen preparing meals; midway through, they switch. One night each semester, three students—generally comprising representatives from the front and back of house—serve as the management team, designing a special three-course themed menu, plus a featured beverage. Establishment also offers a full menu developed by the Hotel school's professional chefs; last fall, entrées included lamb chops with parsnip purée and baby green beans, shrimp over squid ink fettuccini with arrabbiata sauce, salmon with *beurre blanc* and smashed purple potatoes, and tenderloin of beef with poblano and potato gratin. “What makes the class so great is that the guests are paying real money,” says Miller, who previously taught a similar course at the famed Culinary Institute of America in the Hudson Valley. “If everything was complimentary, expectations would be different—but our guests might spend \$30 or \$40 per person, and we want to provide them with a great experience.”

Longtime Hotel instructor Giuseppe Pezzotti '84, MMH '96, has been teaching various iterations of HADM 3350 for decades. He notes that in past years it had more of a luxe, fine-dining bent—so much so that in the mid-Eighties, he and colleagues were dispatched to tour top restaurants in France to garner menu ideas. “I enjoy teaching it, because it's a real-world experience,” he says. “It's very interactive with the guests. Sometimes the students are petrified to go and take an order, to go into the kitchen to cook. It's a capstone course—they have to apply what they've learned in their other courses.”

On a Wednesday in late October, the night's theme is “Truffle Trio,” with each course featuring the rarified fungus. There's a truffle mac and cheese appetizer; the entrée is an eight-ounce burger blended with truffle shavings, topped with fontina cheese, and served with truffle fries. For dessert, there's a warm waffle served with vanilla ice cream and



‘What makes the class so great,’ says instructor Douglass Miller, ‘is that the guests are paying real money.’



drizzled with truffle honey. The featured cocktail: a truffle-infused vodka sour in a coupe glass. The theme—and a fair amount of the products incorporated that night including truffle salt, black truffle zest, white truffle oil, winter and summer truffle peelings, and a ten-pound wheel of truffle cheese—came courtesy of Dean Pappas '20, a Long Islander whose family owns a high-end food importing business. Pappas and classmate Josh Gully '20 are running things in the kitchen, under the watchful eye of chef instructor Beth Wilcox '96; Brandon Salvatore '20, the third member of the Truffle Trio team, is in charge of the front of house.

Given that everyone has just returned from fall break, Salvatore tries hard to psych up his staff—stressing that with ninety-two “covers” (industry jargon for customers) expected, they need to be a well-oiled machine. “We're pretty far along in the semester and this is going to be our last week of rotations [before switching to the kitchen], so everyone should be ready to kill it tonight,” he says, after screening part of a “60 Minutes” segment on the truffle trade. “We have >



a ton of covers, so we need to focus on getting the orders in right the first time, and for the hosts, seating guests strategically. We have to work together and apply all the things we've learned this semester. I think we're set for a really good night, but we have to focus on coming back from break and performing strongly."

Meanwhile, in the kitchen, Pappas is heating up the cheese sauce he and Gully made the previous night, the intoxicating aroma of truffles wafting from the industrial-sized pan. The kitchen is a hive of activity: students are slicing a block of fontina to top the burgers, meticulously filling tiny cups of ketchup, chopping basil for garnishes, pre-baking the dessert waffles, checking the *mise en place* for their assigned dishes, and much more. In a far corner, another team is already thinking about tomorrow: they're prepping their own themed menu, "Elements: A Pan-Asian Culinary Journey," which will feature flank steak salad, catfish filet with green curry, and lemon cake with yuzu curd. "The students rotate through each task," explains Wilcox, as she orients a new crop of grill cooks. "I encourage them to plan ahead and see how the next station is set up, because we want to make sure there's not a sudden drop in quality of service."

A Hotelier Tradition

A four-decade Statler veteran, Wilcox earned her BS through the employee degree program while working full time. She has vivid memories of her own management night; back then, the course occupied the dining room of the old Statler Inn, one of a few locations where it has been held over the decades. (Others include the Statler Hotel's Taverna Banfi and Mac's Café, as well as sites off campus; the restaurant has operated under various names, including two with the acronym TCAB, the Terrace Café and Bistro and Themes, Cuisines, and Beyond.) Wilcox's theme: "A Night at the Oscars," a fine dining experience that featured white glove service and prime rib carved tableside. "I think as an alumna you have a different buy-in to the course and how it is taught, because you've lived it," Wilcox observes. "You can see what benefit it brings to the rest of your life."

Those benefits, faculty and alumni say, are many. Bettina Walder Landt '94, who now runs a luxury hotel on Nantucket called the White Elephant, recalls doing about 100 covers for her team's Italian-themed night, which included veal saltimbocca and tiramisu. "I remember that some of our food didn't come in

'Anytime you're put in charge—you have to create something and pull it off—that's a challenge,' says star restaurateur and course alum Drew Nieporent '77. 'It's a very important part of the whole education.'

when it should have, so that was a little terrifying, but at the last minute we got it together," she says. "We needed to tweak the menu a bit, but that's just real life. The more hands-on experience you have under your belt, the more successful you're going to be. You can't teach that, you have to live it." Drew Nieporent '77, the star restaurateur behind Nobu and Tribeca Grill, calls the version of HADM 3350 he took "a very formative, very useful class, definitely." His team did a fine French menu featuring dishes like duck à l'orange, serving their prix fixe meal to about sixty guests. "It was terrific—I really did enjoy it," he says of the course. "Anytime you're put in charge—you have to create something and pull it off—that's a challenge. It's a very important part of the whole education."

A quarter century later, Jeff Wielgopolan '01 also managed a night of French cuisine, with a menu that included a lamb entrée and licorice mousse for dessert. "All of my background is in food and beverage, so I really liked it—it was almost like you were the executive chef," says Wielgopolan, now a senior vice president at Forbes Travel Guide. "One thing I loved is that it's probably the only time you put together a plan and execute it with real people and real guests, and you buy real food and real flowers and you have a budget. Everything else you do in school is theoretical. This was the one opportunity where you put everything into place and now you have a guest in front of you. Does your concept work? Did you fill the dining room?"

Karim Abouelnaga '13 has taken a different path from most Hoteliers—earning a master's in education policy from Columbia, founding a company that focuses on aiding low-income schools, and landing on *Forbes's* "30 Under 30" list for education. But he still calls restaurant management one of his most memorable classes on the Hill. "I'm sure there were a lot of things we did wrong, but the big takeaway is that we survived and we pulled it off—I remember we booked all our seats and had a great event," says Abouelnaga, whose menu included fish and chips. "There's something special about having the experience of being responsible for a restaurant. I don't know that many schools let you do something like that." >



PREP WORK (from top): Gu portions out ketchup; April Song '20 juices lemons for her team's Asian themed meal the following night; Jay Gryska '22, a student in a lower level course doing a required practicum, slices fontina to top the burgers. Opposite page: Gully (center) and fellow Truffle Trio manager Dean Pappas '20 (right) work on the mac and cheese with Tara Abrams '21.





GOOD EATS (this page, counterclockwise from top): Burgers on the grill; a duck wing appetizer served with kimchi aioli; and mac and cheese in the oven and on the plate. Opposite page, from top: Jake Stokes '20, the bartender on Truffle Trio night, serves up the signature cocktail, a truffle infused vodka sour; Ally D Agostino '20 pours wine for Hotel professor Alex Susskind.

Broad Applications

At the Hotel school, students have the option (but not the requirement) to choose among three concentrations: finance, accounting, and real estate; hospitality leadership; or services marketing and operations management. The latter covers food and beverage operations—but as Miller and others stress, HADM 3350 offers valuable lessons that are applicable to any sector of the hospitality industry and beyond. “It teaches you teamwork, because you’re working with a team the entire semester,” says Salvatore. “Also leadership, because when it’s time for your night, you have to lead—in my case, the entire front-of-house staff. It works on a lot of things that you can use in whatever industry you go into.”

Samantha Fioto '20 took the class her junior spring—her team did a vegan menu comprising cauliflower “poppers,” asparagus and lemon risotto, and a brownie skillet with coconut ice cream—and went on to become a front-of-house TA her senior year. “You form close bonds with everybody in your section, because you’re cooking behind the line, you’re serving, you’re making sure that when things go up in flames you’re all working together to fix it,” she says. “I thought it was going to be challenging to manage them; these are my friends, I don’t want to boss them around. I learned how to properly delegate tasks to my peers. Even though it can be intimidating and scary, it’s a good skill to learn. Being in the class really helped me become more confident in myself.”

A New Jersey native who aims for a career in marketing, Fioto notes that cultivating such skills can be essential for young Hotelies coming out of college and transitioning into management roles, potentially supervising workers who are decades their senior. The class also forces students to think on their feet; during the Truffle Trio night, for instance, Gully and Pappas had to cope with a hiccup regarding the mac and cheese. During their weeks of testing and planning, they’d contemplated various ways to present it, such as forming it into balls that would be deep fried, or layering it atop bowls of French onion soup in place of the traditional bread and cheese. They finally landed on portioning it into individual Bundt-type molds, baking it, then topping



‘We learned that you can never be too prepared,’ says Dean Pappas '20.



it with bread crumbs and a drizzle of truffle oil. “We understood how we wanted to plate it, but since we changed it the night before we really didn’t master the cook temperature,” Gully says, reflecting on the night a week later. “The first wave of service, it was falling apart sixty seconds after you took it out of the oven. We figured out it was better to do a much longer bake time and add more bread crumbs, and that held the dish together.”

Another minor snafu: Gully and Pappas thought they’d run out of the truffle burger, so they “eighty-sixed” it—took it off the menu and had waiters tell customers that the featured entrée was no longer available—only to realize twenty minutes later that ten more patties had been stored in another refrigerator. “We learned that you can never be too prepared,” says Pappas, who has a management trainee position with Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts lined up after graduation. “We worked in the Establishment kitchen eight hours the day of, and during service we were still prepping

patties and making mac and cheese. Even though we had prepared a ton, there’s still a lot more that happens when you get that rush of reservations.”

In addition to their management duties, each team has to design a pre-dinner training exercise for their fellow students; on the Truffle Trio night, the kitchen staff was quizzed on the correct storage locations of food in a cooler, while the students working the front of house had to open a bottle of wine tableside and present it to Miller. “I think what makes a good management night is the team being passionate about their idea, whatever it is,” he says, as one student after another opens a bottle (actually, an empty that has been filled with water and recorked) and pours him a glass. “People say it’s a class where you learn how to wait tables; no, not really. I look at each table as a piece of real estate. How do you maximize revenue per square foot? All of our students go into the business of selling, be it food, beverage, a hotel, land, whatever.” >

‘I think there’s something to be said about the shared experience,’ Karim Abouelnaga ’13 says of the course. ‘It’s a tradition that keeps us all connected.’

Indeed, another of Salvatore’s pre-service motivational tools is screening a scene from the movie *The Wolf of Wall Street*: Leonardo DiCaprio, as a canny stockbroker, demonstrates the importance of a good sales pitch by having some colleagues try to convince him to buy an ordinary pen. “Overall, what you can get out of that video is that you have to demonstrate why the customer needs to get that dish—why it’s worth spending money, because that’s really what it comes down to at the end of the day,” says Salvatore, who has landed a job in hospitality real estate. “Maybe you’ll say, ‘I had a great experience having the beef tenderloin and highly suggest that you get it as well.’” He gives the wait staff a scenario: a customer asks for advice in choosing between the salmon and the tenderloin. How should they respond? “Say both are really good options, because in the end the customer may choose the one that you did not suggest,” he says. “Ask, ‘What are you in the mood for, a heavier or lighter meal?’ ”

Reflecting Establishment’s pedagogical purpose, each table is given a tablet-based survey at the end of the meal so guests

can rate their experience; after the dining room has cleared out, faculty and TAs also provide feedback on how the evening went. But, as Miller explains, grades are based on performance throughout the semester, not just on a student’s management night. “We don’t assess on revenue, because the price points are different for each night,” he adds. “What we’re looking for is engagement, teamwork, their willingness to jump in.” As many students and alumni see it, completing the restaurant management course doesn’t just earn them a grade: it’s a rite of passage that confers a certain *esprit de corps*. “I think there’s something to be said about the shared experience,” says Abouelnaga. “It’s like the hotel operations class where you follow a housekeeper around the Statler for a day—it’s a tradition that keeps us all connected.” Fioto, who aims to continue as a TA this spring, wholeheartedly agrees. “It marks, ‘I am now a Hotelie,’” she says. “I had my Establishment night; *I am a Hotelie*. When alumni come back, they even like to talk about it. They’ll ask, ‘Do you still have that class where you run a restaurant?’ ” ■



ROOM WITH A VIEW: Cara Huang ’20 serves the special entrée, a cheeseburger with truffle fries. In the dining room, guests have a window into the kitchen and can watch the sun set over Sage Hall and the Engineering Quad.