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THE TOP BUSINESS SCHOOLS: RECRUITERS' M.B.A. PICKS

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Schools cook up business classes for chefs and restaurant owners

By RHEA WESSEL
September 20, 2006

Dori Berlin is just as good with spreadsheets as she is with pastry sheets.

The executive chef and food and beverage manager for Wood Ranch restaurants in southern California is one of the few chefs who has earned an M.B.A degree. In 1998, Ms. Berlin became one of the first students to earn dual degrees at Cornell University -- a Master of Management in Hospitality from the School of Hotel Administration and an M.B.A. from the Johnson Graduate School of Management.



Dori Berlin

Ms. Berlin decided that she wanted the best that each school had to offer. She went to the Johnson school for hard-core business topics, such as strategy, finance and negotiations, and at the hotel school she focused on specialty electives such as wine and meat classes.

Uses skills all the time

She says she relies on her M.B.A. skills all the time. "It's never really enough to be just a chef," she says, adding, "We negotiate contracts with all our vendors and employees.... You need to get the guys to do what you want them to do."

Ms. Berlin also has used her business skills to increase sales by revamping the menu to make it more appealing to women. "One of my specialties in business school was trends," she says. "I realized we needed more entrée salads."

Many of the world's big hospitality companies increasingly seek top-caliber managers who have the right combination of personality traits and analytical rigor. At the same time, hotel schools in the U.S., Europe and Asia are adapting their programs to focus more on business education in response to the hospitality industry's hiring demands.

But even as large chains supplant smaller enterprises in many places, chefs with M.B.A. degrees still find plenty of

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opportunity working on their own.



Silvia Bianco

Silvia Bianco earned an M.B.A in marketing from Pace University in New York and worked for a large telecommunications company before donning a chef's hat as owner of a restaurant in Ridgefield, Connecticut. In 2002, her restaurant's lease was running out, and she wanted to expand. Ms. Bianco used her b-school skills to examine her restaurant's strengths and weaknesses. She performed a traffic analysis and quantified the amount of business she was turning away because


she lacked a large space for hosting weddings and parties. When she presented her business case and three separate income forecasts to the bank, she was offered a loan of about \$2 million (€1.6 million).

"You don't necessarily need an M.B.A. to come up with creative ideas, but it helped me look at the situation objectively," says Ms. Bianco. "I analyzed my restaurant like any other case study...I could have written those business plans in my sleep." In the end, she decided not to pursue the expansion of the restaurant and closed it in 2003.

Although M.B.A. chefs are a rare breed, the hospitality industry values well-trained managers. The Culinary Institute of America has recognized the need for management education and has linked up with Cornell's hotel school, which even earned accreditation in 2002 as a business school from AACSB, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business.

Sherri Kimes, the associate dean of academic affairs at Cornell's hotel school, estimates that the school's one-year, three-semester curriculum at the master's level consists of 75% required courses with a heavy business focus.

"We look at accounting within a hospitality context; the first case study is on Papa John's Pizza," she says. "We think it's better than a traditional business education because you're forced to apply it right away."



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In Europe, the hospitality-focused case study is also a favorite at Ecole hôtelière de Lausanne in Switzerland, which offers a 14-month, business-laden program leading to an M.H.A., a Master in Hospitality Administration.

Program Director Christina Norton says most students who enter the school, whether they are trained chefs or those switching from other careers, such as lawyers, dentists or architects, seek to broaden their skills as general managers. To help develop well-rounded managers, the school focuses on quantitative skills, with finance as a cornerstone.

"When you're talking about chefs, they have no lack of creativity and skill," Ms. Norton says. "The issue is how to make your business profitable."

Urs Grimm is a student at EHL who quit his job as director of sales and marketing at a five-star hotel in Switzerland. He says he's glad he went back to school because he now has the quantitative skills to analyze business issues and back up his decisions. In the past, he made choices based on his broad operational experience and his gut feeling.

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"I have more confidence to take decisions and implement the strategy," says Mr. Grimm, whose long-term goal is to work as the general manager or regional director of a small hotel chain in the luxury sector.

Joining Swiss hotel

The 30-year-old is enrolled in classes on real estate, change management, strategy and revenue management, and he already has secured a post-graduation job as deputy general manager at one of the top hotels in Switzerland.

In Asia, students also seek business skills to round out their hospitality résumés. In response, Cornell has linked up with Singapore's Nanyang Technological University to offer a combined degree and share faculty.

This year, the first group of students from Singapore arrived at the Ithaca, New York, campus. Cornell sought the partnership because it needed a better international strategy and it saw Asia as a hotbed of new opportunity with its growing middle class and a shortage of qualified hospitality-industry managers.

"We wanted a partner that was centrally located, and Singapore is trying to position itself as the educational hub of Asia," says Ms. Kimes. Cornell also envisions a similar link with a European school or university.

"We'd like to have the option to educate students on two or three different continents," she says. "Given the way the world is going, it's very appealing for potential students and employers."

--Ms. Wessel is a writer in Frankfurt. She can be reached at reports@wsj.com.

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