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# ARTFUL HOSPITALITY

*AND SCHOLARSHIP*

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The Laurel Hotel & Spa at Auburn University

STORY BY CHRISTIANA ROUSSEL





Two men have had the enviable task of crisscrossing the globe for the past 15 years in search of the finest examples of hospitality, food, and beverage. Endeavoring to catalog the best in each field, Martin O'Neill, Head of the Horst Schulze School of Hospitality Management at Auburn University, and Hans van der Reijden, Founder & CEO of Ithaka Hospitality Partners, actively sought and developed ways to bring these skill sets home to their small college town in central Alabama. While the university has offered a degree in hospitality management since 1987, a sizable donation from Auburn alumnus Jimmy Rane brought the two men—and a team of credentialed higher-education leaders, professors, and instructors—closer to their vision and their charge of creating a world-class teaching institution.

Unveiled last August, the Tony & Libba Rane Culinary Science Center exemplifies the concept of “Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn.” The Laurel Hotel & Spa, situated on the fourth, fifth, and





*O'Neill and van der Reijden come together to represent a unique partnership, one in which private enterprise is coupled with the practicum of higher education. This union has served to create one of the finest hospitality laboratories in the world.*

sixth floors of the building, offers students coveted hands-on learning opportunities to cultivate skills it might otherwise take them years to refine. What makes this teaching hotel truly unique, though, is that it carries the same DNA as the hospitality program's namesake, Horst Schulze. An icon in the hospitality industry, Schulze has worked closely with the university for more than 30 years. Van der Reijden, whose firm, Ithaca Partners, operates the center's commercial operations, rose through the ranks of Schulze's Ritz-Carlton and Capella Hotel Groups, organizations famous for their "ladies and gentlemen, serving ladies and gentlemen" approach to hospitality.

**LODGING** The moment guests pull into The Laurel Hotel's porte cochere, they are met by such ladies and gentlemen. In lieu of the traditional front desk, guests are welcomed by two students in the Horst Schulze School of Hospitality Management who will shepherd them through the entire check-in and property orientation process. This method serves two purposes. First, every guest-facing employee on-site is a student earning course lab academic credit with each shift, providing maximum exposure in a variety of positions. Simultaneously, guests enjoy how this intimate process sets the stage for the luxury property they are about to experience. While bags are collected at the valet stand, guests are whisked upstairs to the inner sanctum of the Library where room keys are furnished. The Library serves as The Laurel's terminus of activity for guests, where they enjoy breakfast or pick up a mid-morning snack. Later, they might meet friends for preprandial cocktails or slip in for a late-evening dessert. On this same floor is The Laurel Spa, offering relaxing rituals in a subdued but streamlined and luxurious setting. In fact, the spa's serene perch affords a rare and memorable opportunity to revel in the heart of a bustling SEC college campus with a view of Auburn's historic Samford Hall and its iconic clock tower.

Arriving guests are next escorted to the rooftop of the Rane Center, which is a destination in and of itself. With stunning panoramic views of campus, all the way to Jordan-Hare Stadium and beyond, the rooftop features an expansive garden with items that are featured on menus throughout the



#### AN ESSENTIAL EDUCATION

Students learn the hospitality business in real time through programs managed by (above, left to right) Dr. Martin O'Neill, Dr. Susan Hubbard (Dean of the College of Human Sciences), and Hans van der Reijden.









property. Tiny radishes and edible flowers may show up on a chef-crafted butter board delivered to your suite. Fresh herbs may make their way into a shrub for this evening's cocktail at 1856 – Culinary Residence, the Rane Center's high-end teaching restaurant. The hotel's heated infinity pool and private cabanas are wholly unexpected from this vantage point but have been well received. Hans is quick to point out that cabana service is a popular feature in many high-end warm-climate resorts. It takes a skilled hospitality provider to understand the proper approach and execution of such a program. Exposure to and familiarity with providing this service puts the aspiring hospitality management graduates ahead of others when applying for positions around the globe.

After becoming familiar with all the hotel's amenities, guests are shown to one of the 26 luxurious rooms—10 of which are full suites. Student team members familiarize guests with all the room features, including the remote-

### AMENITIES AND ANOMALIES

Luxury is expected at a boutique hotel, but a rooftop community garden that also supplies the restaurant is an unexpected luxury.







controlled blackout curtains, in-room custom bar program where you can become your own mixologist, and marble-draped master bath. It is then that guests discover their bags have not only been delivered to the room but are now wearing personalized leather luggage tags bearing the hotel's insignia. It is this keen attention to detail that bears the imprint of thoughtful experience and intentional leadership that are hallmarks of the entire program—academic and practical.

At this point, an important question emerges. Why Auburn? If guests don't have ties to the university, as an alumni or parent of a student, why would they make the trip? The answer lies squarely in the confluence of higher education and private enterprise. Knowledge, for the Rane Center, is merely half the equation. Putting acquired skills into practical action—real world experience—is the linchpin in these students' ultimate career success. Once students have learned to perfect that *mille feuille* pastry or mastered the five French mother sauces, they need a place to showcase these talents.

**DINING** Conceived as an unparalleled culinary classroom, 1856 – Culinary Residence is quite simply the jewel in the gastronomic crown at the Rane Center. Again, each shift is staffed by students in pursuit of lab credits, this time under the tutelage of Chef-in-Residence Tyler Lyne. This is the first-ever tasting-menu-only teaching restaurant in the country, and it's a true showstopper. Using a trick learned from many





three-star Michelin restaurants, the kitchen employs the use of CCTV feed to monitor the progress of each course, at every table, ensuring that the pace of the meal is spot on. They fire the next dish, only when the timing is pitch-perfect. And with Alabama's only Master Sommelier Thomas Price in residence, diners may become well-educated oenophiles by the end of their meal.

Speaking of spirits, let's not stop with wine. With the arrival of bespoke Vendome distilling equipment from Louisville, Kentucky, this spring marks the unveiling of the university's new micro-distillery, which will be housed within the Distilled Spirits Lab and enclosed in glass for all to see in full operation. In addition to educating students in beverage appreciation and mixology, programming will include spirits-centric dinners in 1856 – Culinary Residence and special tasting events in the rooftop garden. (It should be noted that there are no plans to bottle and sell what is produced on campus, as the focus is immediately on the educational process of the distilling program.)

Lest we forget, there is beer. As the only commercially operated brewery with an educational angle, Auburn University offers two distinct graduate degrees in Brewing Science and Operations. While this program has been operational for almost a decade, the commercial brewery and diagnostic lab will add a new and unique dimension to the educational experience. In addition to producing beer, the program serves

## AN EPICUREAN EXPERIENCE

Beyond Auburn's hospitality program, The Laurel hosts themed Epicurean weekends that include instruction in meal preparation, wine pairing, and spirits distilling, concluding with multi-course demonstration dinners.

as a true laboratory, offering data and prized analytics to those in the brewing industry, showcasing the very best in educational and commercial integration.

**LEARNING** Perhaps the greatest way to experience all of these components—a luxury boutique-sized hotel, gastronomic wonders, educational opportunities, a world-class spa—is in the Epicurean Experience weekends offered at the Rane Center. Upon arrival, guests enjoy an intimate rooftop reception with visiting chefs, winemakers, and sommeliers. Their second night features a stunning seven- or nine-course tasting menu complete with Master Sommelier-selected wine pairings. Guest itineraries are rounded out with free time to indulge at the spa or take in a few educational opportunities on-site. A farewell brunch takes place in the Library on the final morning—yet, after such a weekend, you may never want to leave what can only be described as the idyllic corner of education and luxury. 🍷