



Experience Innovation Magazine

Serving Up *Innovation:*

**George Poll is constantly
on the lookout for bold new
directions for his group of
popular restaurants**



INSIDE

FALL 2025

SHA faculty on their
contributions to the field
of hospitality research

SHA introduces
Hospitality Real Estate
master's program

Living with Lyme disease
drove Hannah Olson to
help improve workplace
accessibility

Dean

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From the Dean

Dear SHA Family,

What does it mean to innovate an experience?

At SHA, we've always known that hospitality is about more than service—it's about people. It's about how we make others feel seen, heard, and valued. This year, we decided to put that belief into action by embracing a concept we're calling Experience Innovation.

In these pages, you'll meet innovators who are reimagining what's possible—from a new master's program that prepares students for the business of hospitality real estate to a service-learning trip in Kenya that explores the intersection of hospitality and healthcare. You'll read about alumni who continue to push boundaries and faculty who inspire students to tackle real-world challenges with curiosity, empathy, and strategy.

It's energizing to see our community turning bold ideas into action. It affirms something I've believed since the day I became dean: hospitality is a powerful force for good in the world. And SHA is uniquely positioned to shape its future.

As always, I invite you to share your own stories of innovation—big or small. What does Experience Innovation mean to you?

Warm regards,

Arun Upneja, PhD
Dean
School of Hospitality Administration
Boston University



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By donating to SHA, you're supporting a program of world-class teaching, research, public service, and student-driven initiatives. Help the next generation of hospitality industry leaders to reach new heights by visiting bu.edu/sha/give.

THIS PAGE COURTESY OF SHA; FACING PAGE: CHRIS SORENSEN (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT), JOSEPH PREZOSO, PATRICK STRATTNER, STEPHANIE ELEY, ISTOCK/REMLIN

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What Is experience innovation?

Introducing a New
Era of Hospitality



Experience Innovation is a business strategy, and so much more. It is a composite of disciplines that includes business, psychology, communications, operations, and experiential design,” says **Arun Upneja**, dean of the School of Hospitality Administration. “From attracting and retaining employees and customers, to increasing sustained profitability, to achieving brand loyalty, Experience Innovation is about building purposeful relationships and meaningful memories that drive behavior.”

At SHA, we are redefining hospitality.

We know that hospitality is all about human interactions and meaningful experiences that people value, which is why we’re empowering students to implement groundbreaking experiences and memorable interactions. We call it Experience Innovation.

While hospitality is rooted in the business of providing food, drink, and accommodation to guests at dining establishments and hotels, this represents only its beginning. From hotels and restaurants, to sports and entertainment venues, to healthcare systems and retail, businesses and organizations can benefit from applying hospitality and innovating experiences. It’s a deliberate business strategy designed to bolster bottom-line performance by making sure all internal and external constituents feel seen, heard, and appreciated. With this evolved definition, the scope of hospitality knows no bounds.

JACQUE RICCIARDI

TRAINING THE NEXT GENERATION

Experience Innovation harnesses hospitality to deepen, strengthen, and optimize human interaction in order to meet the needs of individuals, collectives, and society. Experience Innovators can attract customers, retain employees, and increase profits by understanding the behaviors that create relationships and give us meaning.

THE INNOVATOR’S TOOLKIT

The skills required to become an Experience Innovator are built from the core tenets of hospitality. Research and exploration, applied problem-solving, business acumen, data evaluation, and strong communication are powerful tools for the next generation of hospitality leaders. To abide by these tenets, SHA has made a commitment to offer students a spectrum of educational opportunities, including business, psychology, communications, operations, and experiential design.

SHAPING THE FUTURE

By innovating experiences—tapping into the heart of the world’s organizational and personal needs—our understanding of human interaction deepens, and we are able to gain momentum. SHA is uniquely suited to meet the needs of an ever-evolving industry and world, with faculty committed to coaching the next generation to success by providing up-to-the-minute resources and guidance.

By Steve Holt
Photos by Joseph Prezioso

The competitions have grown from 37 student teams in 2023 to 158 across three competitions in 2025. Students compete for prizes of \$25,000, \$15,000, and \$10,000, respectively, in the Hospitality Innovation track, with ideas for creative solutions to problems within the hospitality industry. These prizes are generously funded for five years by sponsors including entrepreneurs Donna and Roys Poyiadjis, parents of Elena Poyiadjis ('24). Joining the \$50k Hospitality Innovation Competition for the second year is a \$12.5k Student Wellbeing Competition—an event held in partnership with BU's Student Wellbeing program and Sargent College of Health & Rehabilitation Sciences—and an inaugural Real Estate Competition. Winners were announced at the Hospitality Leadership Summit on April 3, 2025. Upneja has tapped Barry Horwitz, president of strategy consulting group Horwitz & Co. LLC and a lecturer in entrepreneurship at SHA to oversee the competitions as director of innovation and entrepreneurship.

New for 2025 was the Hospitality Real Estate Competition, led by Kaushik Vardharajan, director of the real estate program at SHA (see page 16). Open to teams from hospitality schools across the country, this com-

A woman in a black blazer and red shirt is presenting at a podium. Behind her is a large screen displaying the MadhRasi logo, which consists of a stylized 'M' with geometric patterns and the word 'MADHRASI' in the center. Below the logo, the text reads 'LIFE'S TOO SHORT TO DRINK BLAND CHAI'. The podium has a microphone and a sign that says 'BOSTON MADHRASI'. The audience is seated in the foreground, with some people using laptops.

Nancy Daniel introduces Madhrasi, a chai tea concentrate she codeveloped.

“School is a great time to try things,” Horwitz says of the competitions. “There’s a lot of work involved in putting a venture like this together, but there’s no risk to putting your ideas out there, getting in front of an audience, and maybe winning some money. You’ll get help along the way, and it becomes another learning experience that people may remember more than what happens in each of their classrooms.” 



Third place and \$10,000 went to Nellore and Vogt for Arti, a platform that connects boutique hotels with local vendors to create partnerships between small businesses. The marketplace simplifies sourcing and payment between hotels and small businesses for items like toiletries, snacks, and decor.



LOOKING BACK

A YEAR OF INNOVATION AND CELEBRATION

Industry leaders, students, and community members convened for SHA's flagship events, the Hospitality Leadership Summit and the Real Estate Symposium, held at the Duan Family Center for Computing & Data Sciences.

ENGAGING SPEAKER EVENTS. A TREAT-FILLED OPEN HOUSE. A GALA THAT WAS A NIGHT TO REMEMBER. IT WAS A YEAR OF EXCITEMENT AND GROWTH AT YOUR SCHOOL OF HOSPITALITY ADMINISTRATION.



We celebrated the Class of 2025 as they crossed the stage at SHA's Convocation ceremony.

HOSPITALITY LEADERSHIP SUMMIT AND REAL ESTATE SYMPOSIUM: JOSEPH PREZIOSO; CONVOCATION: MELISSA OSTROW



BU President Melissa Gilliam tours SHA and meets with faculty and staff during her first week on campus in July 2024.



Our Taste of Hospitality Fall 2024 Open House featured bites from Columbus Hospitality Group, MIDA, and Xenia Hospitality.



Jenny Holaday, president of Encore Boston Harbor, joined us for the Spring 2025 Dean's Distinguished Speakers Series.



SHAGov hosted its annual SHA Gala, where Sean Jung was honored as Professor of the Year.

Straight from the Source

SHA lecturers draw on their real-world experiences to inform their teaching

By Mara Sassoon

Many SHA lecturers work full time in Greater Boston’s dynamic hospital-ity industry—and they bring their professional insights into the class-room. We spoke with three part-time faculty who are executives at some of Boston’s top-rated restaurants about how they are giving students innovative experiences and practical advice.



SETH GERBER ('12, QUESTROM'21), PARTNER, MIDA HOSPITALITY GROUP
Courses: Food & Beverage Management and Future of the Restaurant Business

Seth Gerber, a managing partner at popular Italian restaurant MIDA, with locations in East Boston, Fenway, Newton, and the South End, has his Food & Beverage Management

students develop a restaurant concept. “The final is a practical of their restaurant, where they develop one food item and one nonalcoholic beverage, and they do a mock service with branded elements and steps of service in one of my restaurants to demonstrate their concept and what they’ve absorbed through the class,” he says. “Students also do a stage [internship] in various MIDA locations, and they spend some time in different roles there. I try to take it out of the classroom so that they’re more connected with running a restaurant and understanding what goes into it.”



DEMETRI TSOLAKIS, CEO, XENIA GREEK HOSPITALITY
Course: Intro to Hospitality
Demetri Tsolakakis, a former invest-ment banker, runs Xenia Greek Hospitality, whose portfolio includes the celebrated restaurants Greco, Krasi, Hecate, Bar Vlaha, and Kaia. “My students are getting firsthand information from someone who owns restaurants and businesses,” he says.

For his course’s final project, he hosts an innovation competition where students pitch a hospitality business idea. “I’ll bring some investors in, and I have some former students who have gone on to VCs and pitched their ideas.” Tsolakakis also shows his students how he has built his restaurants. “I share brand decks with them, from fonts, typography, icons, mood boards,” he says. “I give them real-life financials of my restaurants, including as part of an assignment based on my fast casual restaurant, Greco.”



From left: Tsolakakis, Flores, and Gerber joined Dean Arun Upneja at the Taste of Hospitality Fall 2024 Open House.

My students are getting firsthand information from someone who owns restaurants and businesses.”

Demetri Tsolakakis
CEO, Xenia Greek Hospitality



LISA FLORES (QUESTROM'02), DIRECTOR OF SALES AND MARKETING, COLUMBUS HOSPITALITY GROUP
Course: Food & Beverage Management

When Lisa Flores was a junior at BU, she joined the newly established Columbus Hospital-ity Group (CHG) as a hostess

at its restaurant Mistral. Flores has been instrumental in the growth of CHG, which includes Moo... , Sorellina, Mistral, Ostra, and other dining concepts. Her goal in her Food & Beverage Management class is to share authentic experiences that paint a picture of what it’s like to be a restaurant operator in an ever-changing hospitality industry. “I like to relate all of my real-life experiences,” she says. She presents case studies such as: There was a convention in town and a bus full of people pulled up without a reservation. What would you do if you were the restaurant manager? Flores says she likes to go beyond the textbook to offer valuable lessons that relate to the industry today.

Course Spotlight Experience Management

An inside look at the SHA class that encourages students to innovate ways to improve customer experiences

It’s a scenario familiar to many. You make an appointment at the DMV and end up waiting well past your scheduled time. Now, an Experience Management class at SHA is tasking students with coming up with ways to improve less-than-desirable customer experiences like this. In fact, Makarand Mody, an associate professor of hospitality marketing who teaches one section of the class, says that the DMV is a case study students have examined.

“Customer experience management (CEM) is at the confluence of behavioral psychology, analytics, behavioral economics, and marketing,” Mody says. “So the topics that we cover in the class draw from all of these fields.”

After establishing a framework for why CEM is important, Mody instructs his students to

focus on human-centered design, or as he puts it, “How do you design really great experiences for customers using principles from behavioral economics and psychology?”

Students work on team projects in which they examine any space or sec-tor of the economy—like the DMV—and consider pain points in customer ex-periences. “Students have looked at airports, univer-sity settings, and grocery stores,” Mody says. “They figure out, using human-centered design, how to improve the experience of that sector and incorporate more hospitality into it as well.” Part of the project involves market research: students go out into the field and research real-time customer behavior.

“Then comes the analytics component,” says Mody. “While you’re designing all of these won-derful experiences for cus-tomers, you need to know how to be able to measure those experiences as well, so that you can then keep including them. How do you leverage technology to measure the customer experience? How do you analyze the data, and how do you use it?”—M.S.



An Innovative Learning Experience—in Kenya

A summer service-learning trip to Kenya brought together SHA and Sargent students to explore the intersection of hospitality and healthcare

By Mara Sassoon

The vision that SHA embraces is that hospitality, at its core, is about human interaction and innovating meaningful experiences for people—and that applies to the healthcare industry as much as to hotels and restaurants. Anna Monahan, SHA's assistant dean of finance and administration, had been thinking about the intersection of healthcare and hospitality for some time before an idea began to take shape.

Her idea became a reality this summer, when students from both SHA and BU's Sargent College of Health & Rehabilitation Sciences traveled to Kenya on a service-learning trip to explore challenges in healthcare access and hospitality.

Before joining SHA in 2019, Monahan was a lecturer at Sargent, where she was codirector of international service learning and community engagement. While there, she planned many service-learning trips with her colleague Shelley Brown, director of Sargent's health science program and its service-learning program.

Monahan says she and Brown were eager to collaborate on this trip. "I'm thrilled to bridge our schools because exposing students to diverse perspectives is invaluable," she says. "At its core, hospitality in healthcare is about service, communication, and, ultimately, enhancing patient satisfaction and outcomes. This experience underscores just how interconnected these fields truly are."

From left: William White ('27), Olivia Lizza ('23, MET'26), Mason Sanford ('28), and Alessandra Granniss ('27) on a game drive in the Pardamat Conservancy Area in Maasai Mara.

Seven students embarked on the faculty-led trip, from May 20 through June 4. They were based part of the time at the Wildlife Tourism College in the Maasai Mara National Reserve and part of the time at the Brackenhurst Conference and Retreat Centre in Limuru, Kenya. In addition to studying the role of hospitality in various healthcare sectors, students immersed themselves in the local culture. They took Swahili lessons and cooking classes; took a wildlife viewing drive through the Maasai Mara; and visited the Limuru Marketplace, a sprawling collection of stalls selling produce and other goods. They also gave back to the community, spending time at the Limuru Children's Centre, which provides care, education, and programming for orphans and vulnerable children.

"Service learning is an experience everyone should have at least once in their lifetime," says Monahan. "It fosters deep connections among students, bringing them together in a meaningful way. More importantly, it offers them a unique opportunity to see how their academic disciplines intersect with other fields, broadening their perspectives and enhancing their real-world impact."

It also embodies SHA's emphasis on Experience Innovation, Monahan says. "This is Experience Innovation in action. At SHA, we continuously push boundaries, fostering collaboration that transcends traditional limits. It's about reaching beyond familiar frameworks, embracing new perspectives, and working alongside students and faculty from across the campus to create something truly transformative." 

SHIXIONG YU

COURTESY OF SHA

Dean's Podcast Celebrates Two Years of Inspiration and Innovation

Listen to *Distinguished* for deep-dive conversations between Dean Arun Upneja and hospitality leaders from all over the industry

By Sophie Yarin

Since 2023, *Distinguished*, an original podcast from the School of Hospitality Administration, has tackled the hot topics, trends, and issues in the industry. Hosted by Dean Arun Upneja and recorded in the school's dedicated studio, *Distinguished* features in-depth discussions on topics from hospitality worker tipping practices to C-suite leadership practices, all in the form of half-hour episodes.

A "take-away" version of SHA's marquee Dean's Distinguished Speakers series—a lecture program with in-person talks during the fall and spring semesters—*Distinguished* is now in its fourth season. The podcast seeks expert perspectives on recruiting and retaining talent, guest and employee well-being, climate action, and technological innovation in hospitality from a team of executives, founders, and investors representing hotels, restaurants, entertainment and sporting venues, travel and tourism businesses, and retailers of all stripes.

In a December 2024 episode, Upneja sat down with Luigi Romaniello, managing director of New York's legendary Waldorf Astoria Hotel, to discuss the site's renovation on the eve of its grand reopening. In his half-hour conversation with Upneja, Romaniello delivered a combination of experiential insight, best practices, personal career history, and trend forecasts. He said the billion-dollar, seven-year project was a balance of radical changes—like condensing the formerly 1,400-room building into

750 ultraluxury units—and painstaking renovation of classic architecture and landmark spaces, such as the hotel's ballroom.

"It has been an incredible journey and an incredible commitment," Romaniello told Upneja. "There has been an incredible, meticulous attention to [this] restoration project."

The luxury hospitality space is booming, and is projected to be worth nearly \$370 billion within the next 10 years. Romaniello said the Waldorf Astoria project speaks to the hotel's reputation for blending old-world luxury and ultramodern offerings. While things are changing in the ultraluxury sector, the core of the experience is for guests to have their expectations exceeded through top-of-the-line services and amenities.

"In the end, consumers...are looking for personalization into their experience," Romaniello said. "Without talking, we understand a little bit about you and we're pushing the right buttons.... The future of ultraluxury is going to be all in personalization and customization and really making the guest feel individual."

To find a more detailed breakdown of all of the podcast's topics, listeners can check out *Distinguished* Touchpoints online for the core discussions in each episode. Meanwhile, season 4 takes the *Distinguished* experience to new dimensions with the introduction of full-length episodes on YouTube, allowing listeners a peek inside the studio as Upneja and guests record the show.

"*Distinguished* has been an amazing opportunity to connect with exemplary leaders in our industry, and to discuss what it takes to flourish in this business by learning not only from successes, but also from challenges," says Upneja. "The podcast is intended to help rising and seasoned professionals spark ideas and to help navigate this complex and dynamic industry." 

Stream *Distinguished* at bu.edu/hospitality/distinguished-podcast, or find the full episode library on Spotify.



Dean Arun Upneja speaks with Amanda Hyndman, COO of Mandarin Oriental, in SHA's podcast studio for an episode of *Distinguished*.

HOSPITALITY INNOVATION BEGINS WITH

Research

**SHA FACULTY MEMBERS ON HOW THEIR
AREAS OF INQUIRY ARE CHANGING THE
FIELD, DISRUPTING THE STATUS QUO, AND
TRANSFORMING EXPERIENCES**

AT the School of Hospitality Administration, Experience Innovation “is our call to reimagine hospitality, not just as an industry, but as a transformative force that shapes how people connect, care, and create meaning across all areas of life,” says

Makarand Mody, SHA director of research and associate professor of hospitality marketing. Mody, who also is chair of undergraduate programs, says faculty explore how the principles of hospitality—empathy, anticipation, and personalization—can enhance customer and employee experiences in sectors as diverse as healthcare, technology, real estate, and entertainment. “We study how people derive identity and well-being through their encounters with spaces, services, and each other—and how innovation can be harnessed to make those experiences richer, smarter, and more inclusive. I examine how individuals derive meaning and well-being from their consumption of hospitality and other hospitality-enhanced experiences, like in hospitals, allowing organizations of different types to innovate the human experience,” Mody says. “At its core, our work affirms that hospitality is no longer confined to hotels or restaurants; it is a human-centered mindset with the power to transform any experience, anywhere.” Here, five SHA faculty each explain their area of research and its impact.

SHASHAN BAO (’19), ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY



What motivates hospitality employees to go the extra mile?

My research centers on understanding what motivates hospitality employees and how organizations can create supportive environments that drive both employee well-being and exceptional service. In an industry where guest satisfaction is paramount, there is often an unspoken trade-off: employees are expected to “go the extra mile,” even when facing emotional strain

or resource limitations. I examine how leaders can build workplaces where employees want to go above and beyond—not because they’re pressured to, but because they feel valued, supported, and connected to their work. My research aims to help leaders understand how to strike the right balance between customer satisfaction and employee care, ensuring that service excellence is sustainable in the long term.

SEAN JUNG, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF HOSPITALITY ANALYTICS



How does location drive economic performance for hospitality enterprises?

My research focuses on how various strategies employed by hospitality firms influence consumer perceptions and financial performance. Specifically, I examine when it is beneficial for firms to locate near competitors to foster cooperative advantages, and how factors such as environmental, social, and governance initiatives and recession strategies affect firm outcomes. One of my empirical studies reveals that consumers place a higher value on search costs for upscale

restaurants, leading to stronger clustering among high-end establishments. This suggests that consumers prioritize quality experience more when dining at higher price points, incentivizing premium restaurants to co-locate and signal reassurance of quality. Building on this idea, my current research under review explores how consumer perceptions of ethnic restaurants influence their spatial patterns. Results indicate that ethnic restaurants perceived as lower in quality tend to cluster more tightly to collectively signal a positive dining experience in the area.

RICHARD CURRIE, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ORGANIZATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY



How do workplace social stressors impact service industry employees?

My research focuses on how organizational conditions impact hospitality and service employees’ well-being, motivation, and performance. I explore topics such as coworker and supervisor nosiness, customer incivility, qualitative job insecurity, and illegitimate tasks—often overlooked yet powerful dynamics that can undermine employee engagement, organizational citizenship behaviors, and career growth. Drawing from theories of social exchange, conservation of resources, privacy

management, and other frameworks, I examine how leadership styles and organizational climates can either buffer or exacerbate these stressors in practice. A central focus of my work is knowledge management, specifically, understanding when and why employees choose to share, hide, or withhold knowledge. My research is grounded in rigorous methodology, including daily-diary studies, multi-level study designs and analytical methods, experimental approaches, and qualitative research methods. Ultimately, my goal is to inform evidence-based organizational practices that promote employee retention, inclusive culture, and high-quality service delivery.

MAKARAND MODY, DIRECTOR OF RESEARCH, CHAIR OF UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMS, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF HOSPITALITY MARKETING



What does hospitality mean to the consumer, in both a practical and ethical way? What does it mean to society at large?

My research focuses on two key areas: the first is the realm of customer experience management, whereby I leverage consumer behavior and psychology to understand how people derive meaning and well-being from hospitality and hospitality-adjacent experiences. This work is manifested in my focus on the sharing economy and the patient experience in healthcare settings. In my second, related, stream of research, I examine what comprises the philosophy and ethic of

hospitality and how these can extend far beyond the hospitality “industry” to allow individuals and organizations to create value for society at large. Both these streams of research are firmly in line with SHA’s strategic pillar of Experience Innovation, which emphasizes hospitality as an approach to business that can be used to enhance the human experience in the wider service economy.

APOSTOLOS AMPOUNTOLAS, CHAIR OF GRADUATE PROGRAMS AND ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF HOSPITALITY FINANCE



How can hospitality industry performance be optimized through data and finance analytics?

My research significantly contributes to theoretical advancements and practical innovations in hospitality finance, forecasting methodologies, volatility modeling of investment markets, and machine learning techniques, benefiting academia and industry practitioners. My interests lie at the intersection of forecasting methodologies, financial econometrics, revenue and pricing optimization, and big data analysis within services

and finance. Leveraging my extensive background in advanced machine learning and econometric models, my work aims to improve decision-making processes, enhance the accuracy of demand forecasting, and analyze investment risk and volatility across diverse markets. One of my primary research streams involves developing sophisticated forecasting models to accurately predict hotel demand, booking cancellations, and asset valuations, incorporating innovative hybrid approaches, neural

networks, and traditional econometric techniques. By applying advanced econometric frameworks and event-study methods, my research provides insights into volatility spillovers, market resilience, and the impacts of macroeconomic events and political uncertainty on asset returns. Recently, my work has expanded into emerging technological domains, specifically, examining blockchain and metaverse applications. This research explores how decentralized technologies can disrupt traditional business models, enhance customer experiences, and drive operational efficiencies.



HEADSHOTS: JO SMITH; ISTOCK/MIROSTOCKHUB

YUNMEI (MABEL) BAI, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF REVENUE MANAGEMENT



How can consumer pricing strategies be improved across sectors of the hospitality industry?

My research focuses on pricing strategies in the hospitality industry, with an emphasis on how consumers, intermediaries, and service providers interact to cocreate effective and adaptive pricing across diverse contexts. One stream of my work investigates how service attributes, when offered as add-on charges, influence consumer purchase intentions, and how these pricing tactics can be strategically leveraged to mitigate price

competition across online distribution channels, including hotel brand websites and third-party platforms, such as Expedia. Building on this foundation, my current projects explore neuro-pricing: utilizing biometric tools such as eye-tracking and facial expression analysis to evaluate consumers’ emotional and attentional responses in service scenarios, particularly in special event-driven experiences. Another emerging line of research examines how gamification elements, such as challenges and

“friend-help” mechanics, can be integrated into pricing strategies to boost consumer engagement, perceived value, and booking conversion rates. As the hospitality industry continues to evolve through personalization, digital transformation, and experiential innovation, these insights aim to inform the design of data-driven, consumer-centric pricing models that enhance both guest satisfaction and business performance. [61](#)



HEADSHOTS: JO SMITH; ISTOCK/THAPANA ONPHALAI

Building Hospitality

**NEW MASTER'S DEGREE
TEACHES THE REAL ESTATE
SIDE OF THE HOSPITALITY
INDUSTRY**

BY STEVE HOLT

Kaushik Vardharajan, an associate professor of the practice, leads SHA's Master of Science in hospitality real estate program, the first US program of its kind to be housed in a school of hospitality.

MICHAEL D. SPENCER

When Dean Arun Upneja arrived at SHA in 2013, he made an observation: many students were interested in areas of the hospitality industry beyond hotel or restaurant operations.

They wanted careers creating financial projections and property valuations or evaluating and funding new hospitality developments. But if those students planned to pursue a master's in real estate, they had to go elsewhere, Upneja says.

Something had to change.

Since 2013, Upneja has expanded SHA's scope beyond the customer-facing aspects of hospitality, adding an undergraduate concentration in real estate development as well as a real estate development and finance concentration in its Master of Management in Hospitality program. In fall 2024 SHA began offering, for the first time, a Master of Science in hospitality real estate. The new degree program—the first such program in the United States that is housed in a hospitality school—will meet the needs of both undergraduates seeking a career in hospitality real estate and industry leaders looking to hire, according to Kaushik Vardharajan, an associate professor of the practice and program director.

“It's not just about bringing students into the program; it's about helping them learn and then helping them find great jobs at the end of the day,” Vardharajan says. “What does the industry need? How's the industry evolving and changing in the future? And instead of playing catch-up, can we speed up so that we're there before the change arrives?”

WHAT IS HOSPITALITY REAL ESTATE?

Real estate is central to the hospitality industry, whether it's planning, managing, or investing in a hotel, senior living center, golf course, or any number of categories of developments. The global hospitality market grew from \$4.4 trillion in 2022 to \$4.7 trillion in 2023 at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 7 percent, and is expected to grow to \$5.8 trillion in 2027 at a CAGR of 5.5 percent, according to the World Travel and Tourism Council. Still, the uncertainty of the pandemic era—when hotel occupancy dipped as low as 25 percent and business travel dropped 85 percent between 2019 and 2020—looms large. Plus, rising interest rates increase the cost of construction, dampening new development.

One of the ways operators are maximizing revenues and planning for a future shrouded in uncertainty is by diversifying their real estate holdings—a mixed-use development featuring a hotel, apartments, and retail, for instance—or outsourcing property management to outside firms, Vardharajan says.

In developing SHA's MS in hospitality real estate, Vardharajan leaned heavily on the advice of industry leaders like Rachel Roginsky. For more than 30 years, Roginsky has been a go-to for hospitality companies seeking counsel on a development, expansion, or critical decision. The firm she founded in 1991, Pinnacle Advisory Group, has become one of the nation's leading hospitality consultancies. Roginsky, a SHA adjunct professor, has observed that hotel operators need to be considerably more knowledgeable on a variety of topics that extend beyond operations—like real estate and valuation—than they were in the past. At the same time, many hospitality companies are looking to hire real estate specialists.

Students come in, and whatever they want to do, we are able to provide them with those classes and the network so that they can be successful in their careers.”

Dean Arun Upneja

“My clients and other employers are requiring employees in this industry to understand everything from feasibility through return on investment through asset management to disposition—the entire cycle of real estate, for hotels,” says Roginsky, who also is chair of the SHA Real Estate Advisory Council (see sidebar on page 19), which provided feedback during the development of the MS program. “Students who graduate from this new program at SHA will get more involved in hotel real estate, as opposed to just hotel operations.”



Vardharajan oversees a graduate-level curriculum that incorporates internship opportunities and courses in data analytics and asset management.

TRAINING HOSPITALITY PROFESSIONALS FOR A NEW LANDSCAPE

To build a credible MS program in hospitality real estate, SHA needed someone credible to lead it, Upneja says. So, in 2019, he hired Vardharajan, who had worked with clients in 66 countries while at the global hospitality consulting firm HVS and who led Hilton’s growth in South Asia after that.

“For us, it had to be more of a practitioner-oriented program, where we wanted to send students into the world of real estate,” Upneja says. “That’s why we hired someone as highly qualified and networked as Kaushik. He was a perfect fit for us and has been a key asset.”

Vardharajan oversees the new 36-unit program, which will take a full-time student 12 months to complete. Courses cover the hospitality real estate life cycle, facility design, finance and feasibility, financial management, asset management, financial reporting, and transactions and deal-making. Capping the program off is a course in which students work in teams to simulate a real estate transaction to better understand the goals and motivations of developers, bankers, investors, and other stakeholders. Finally, each full-time student will get practical experience by completing a 300-hour internship in the real estate sector.

Graduates of the program will possess the tools to help guide real estate decisions for international hotel brands, ownership groups, or management companies, and to conduct feasibility and valuation

studies for proposed developments or fund new developments with an investment bank, Vardharajan says.

“You’ll learn the basic concepts of real estate, and we will teach you how to apply the laws of finance to all types of real estate,” Vardharajan says. “I want you to leave this program not just knowing about hotels, but if someone asks you to lead a project that is a hotel and a resort and a golf course and a residential project and has office space on it—you know exactly how to make it happen.”

SHA’s location in a vibrant, growing city like Boston gives this master’s program a leg up, Upneja adds. “We are able to attract and engage extensively with the industry, and the education that students are getting is not only theoretically sound, but practical as well,” he says. “Students come in, and whatever they want to do, we are able to provide them with those classes and the network so that they can be successful in their careers.”

What’s more, he adds, it’s in the periods of flux in the hospitality and real estate markets when the value of a master’s degree can truly shine.

“There is always uncertainty, so you’ve got to choose a school very carefully that is keeping a close eye and a close engagement with the industry, so that those models that the industry is relying on are being conveyed to students,” Upneja says. “There’s lots of uncertainty, but the future of anyone graduating from SHA is going to be strong. I have zero doubt on that.”

LAUREN OWENS LAMBERT

SHA’s Real Estate Advisory Council

Putting SHA innovation on the map

While building a Master of Science in hospitality real estate, SHA sought feedback from its Real Estate Advisory Council. The council provides SHA leadership with strategic advice and guidance on the school’s course offerings and curriculum and insight into emerging real estate issues in the hospitality industry. Whether their expertise lies in data analysis, investment, consulting, or appraisal, members of the Advisory Council are committed to bridging the real estate and hospitality innovation industries. Below, discover three Advisory Council members whose hospitality education has taken them to new heights in the real estate sector.



Spencer Davidson (CGS’10, SHA’13)
Senior Vice President, Hunter Hotels

After graduating from BU, Davidson gained operational and financial experience by working for LW Hospitality Advisors, C-III Capital, and CBRE Hotels before joining New York-based Hunter Hotel Advisors. As the firm’s senior vice

president, Davidson maintains a holistic focus on investment sales that includes financial underwriting and analysis, client interaction, and transnational services. Throughout his career, he has represented hotels on behalf of institutional, corporate, and private investment clients, such as The Blackstone Group, Peachtree Hotel Group, Summit Hotel Properties, Park Hotels & Resorts, and countless others, facilitating more than \$6 billion of capital markets transactions across the United States.



Jonathan Jaeger (’08) | Senior Managing Director,
LW Hospitality Advisors

Jaeger, senior managing director with LW Hospitality Advisors, oversees the strategic management of 1,500 consulting and valuation assignments in the lodging/gaming sector, in the United States,

Mexico, Canada, and the Caribbean. His career expertise spans real estate appraisals, asset management, investment counseling, economic feasibility evaluations, and transactional services of hotels, resorts, casinos, and other hospitality businesses. Jaeger has also frequently provided litigation support and expert testimony, having served as an expert witness in federal and state court proceedings. Previously, Jaeger worked with Starwood Hotels & Resorts and Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants in hospitality accounting/finance and operational positions. In 2011, he joined SHA as an adjunct faculty member.



David Ruger (’08) | Vice President, Investments,
HEI Hotels & Resorts

Ruger focuses on full-service hotel and resort acquisitions throughout the United States. In his current role, his oversight of the investment process includes sourcing capital partners, underwriting, negotiations, and the due diligence process. His

previous experience includes a senior directorship with Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants, where he worked on their development and acquisitions team to expand their regional portfolio. Ruger has also worked in advisory positions at Marriott International, Starwood Hotels & Resorts, Aimbridge Hospitality, Crimson Rock Capital, Capital Hotel Management, and Hospitality Valuation Services. In 2020, he founded Grassroots Hospitality Group.

The other members of SHA’s Real Estate Advisory Council are:

Josh Bowman, Partner & Chair of Hospitality Practice, Sherin & Lodgen, LLP

Zach Demuth (’11), Global Head of Hotels Research, JLL

Habib Enayetullah, Senior Vice President of Real Estate & Asset Management, Hilton

Cecilia Gordon, Attorney & Cochair of the Hospitality & Recreation Industry Group, Goulston & Storrs

John Lancaster, Senior Vice President, Franchise Development of Strategic Programs, Choice Hotels International

Diem Larsen, Senior Vice President of Corporate Finance & Analytics, Park Hotels & Resorts Inc.

Jim Luchars, Senior Adviser, Stonebridge Companies

Caroline Mahl Patel, Managing Director & Head of Portfolio Management & Underwriting for Specialty Real Estate Finance, Wells Fargo

Rachel Roginsky, Principal & Owner, Pinnacle Advisory Group

Ama Romaine, Executive Vice President & General Counsel at Progress Residential

Chad Sorensen, Managing Director & Chief Operating Officer, CHMWarnick

Restaurant Roots That Run Deep

GEORGE POLL CARRIES THE HOSPITALITY LEGACIES OF HIS FATHER AND GRANDFATHER INTO HIS LONG ISLAND RESTAURANT EMPIRE

BY STEVE HOLT
PHOTOS BY CHRIS SORENSEN

At

the beginning of season 2 of FX's series *The Bear*, which follows a Chicago chef and his staff as they attempt to open a fine-dining restaurant, viewers see the walls and ceilings of the under-

construction building crumble from hidden water damage. FX categorizes *The Bear* as a comedy, but George Poll didn't find these scenes particularly funny.

"I'm there, shaking, and my wife says to me, 'Are you sure you're having a good time watching this?'" says Poll (CGS'82, SHA'84), who owns a portfolio of restaurants with his older brother Gillis. "They got it right. I've lived through that. Trying to open a restaurant and having delays due to unforeseen problems—it's a nightmare."

Like every restaurateur, Poll has seen his share of setbacks. But his track record of wins is evident in his seven popular restaurants, most located on the North Shore of Long Island, N.Y. He credits quality, hospitality, attention to detail, and a great team for Poll Restaurants' achievements in a notoriously tough business.

He likes to say it took him 40 years to be an overnight success.



Poll and two employees at the Bryant & Cooper Butcher Shop and Retail Market in Roslyn, N.Y., which is known for its dry-aged USDA Prime steaks and chops.

THE FAMILY BUSINESS

As a teenager on school breaks, Poll worked as a cashier at his father's restaurant in Rockefeller Center in New York. He would put in long hours before commuting back to Long Island. When he was a senior in high school, Poll and his brothers, including middle brother Dean, opened the first restaurant of their own, Pappas Restaurant, in Williston Park, Long Island. After school, Poll would head to the restaurant to work the register until close.

Poll came to BU on a football scholarship, majoring in hospitality because of his extensive background in restaurants—which he shared in classroom discussions. In his first course at SHA, the professor, Joe Kirley, asked the students if they thought quality was a necessary ingredient for success. Poll raised his hand and answered, “Yes, absolutely.” The professor shook his head and said quality, on its own, was not enough. “Consistently fulfill the expectations you’ve created,” he said, giving Poll a mantra he has brought to each of his projects.

The day after he graduated from BU, Poll was back working with his brothers at their Long Island restaurant, renamed Riverbay Seafood Bar and Grill. The brothers went on to open Bryant & Cooper Steakhouse in Roslyn, one of Long Island's top steakhouses. They then opened two casual steakhouses: Majors Steakhouse in East Meadow and Woodbury in 1993 and 1994, respectively.

Poll's brother Dean branched out on his own, taking over Riverbay Seafood Bar and Grill and opening two restaurants in New York City. Gillis and Poll stayed together and continued to focus on fulfilling high expectations in their restaurants. They expanded with new concepts in Long Island, including Cipollini Italian Trattoria in 2005; Toku Modern Asian in 2007, located at the prestigious Americana Manhasset; Bar Frites Bistro in 2010; Hendrick's Tavern in 2012; and The Bryant American Bistro in 2018. In 2022, they opened a second Toku Modern Asian in South Florida.

When the Poll brothers come up with a new idea or find an interesting venue, they consider many important factors. Will the space resonate with them? What will the new concept entail? What will the overall project cost? They also consider a property's history. Was it a restaurant before? Elements such as location and parking availability are crucial, as well as whether the property is for sale or lease. They meticulously evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of each project before finalizing any design. As they prepared to launch Toku, Poll recalls how people questioned their expertise in Asian cuisine. “We did our homework,” he says. “We traveled extensively, sampling and recreating unique culinary dishes that we now offer in our restaurants.”

Recently, however, Poll includes a newer consideration when weighing a potential project: “At this point, it should be fun.”

IT'S STILL ABOUT HOSPITALITY

Point-of-sale technologies and online reviews have transformed the restaurant industry Poll grew up in. But he contends that the



Everyone going out to a restaurant deserves that handshake, that eye contact, great food, great service, great atmosphere. No matter who they are, they're a customer.”

BOSTON UNIVERSITY PHOTOGRAPHY



At SHA in the 1980s, Poll (right, hand raised) was inspired by a professor to aim beyond quality and “consistently fulfill the expectations you've created.”

building blocks of a successful restaurant haven't changed: “quality, consistency, shaking a hand, looking someone in the eye, giving hospitality from here,” he says, pointing to the center of his chest, near his heart.

Poll will still rotate a plate that's not placed with the name of the restaurant legible across the top and will notice what other restaurateurs are doing well, from special cocktails to salt and pepper shakers on the table. If he's on vacation, he's taking notes on things he can do better. He learned this emphasis on quality and relentless work ethic from his older brothers and his late father, who was in his 80s when he told Poll, “Retired people die.”

The Polls' restaurants have staying power, he says, because their staff embodies their vision of hospitality—consistently fulfilling the expectations they've created—and makes every customer feel special.

“There are some people who can afford to go out literally seven days a week, and some people who wait to come to our restaurants for a special occasion,” Poll says. “Everyone going out to a restaurant deserves that handshake, that eye contact, great food, great service, great atmosphere. No matter who they are, they're a customer.”

for Employees with Disabilities

HANNAH OLSON'S STRUGGLE WITH LYME DISEASE INSPIRED HER TO HELP MAKE WORKPLACES MORE ACCOMMODATING AND INCLUSIVE
BY MARA SASSOON

When Hannah Olson was in her sophomore year at SHA, she felt exhausted—constantly. “I struggled deeply with fitting in and being able to keep up with folks around me, because I was just so tired,” says Olson (’17). When she tested positive for mono, she thought doctors had pinpointed the cause of the fatigue, but in a matter of months she felt worse. More tests revealed the culprit: Lyme disease.

After Olson graduated and landed her first job, she had difficulty coping with the myriad chronic symptoms that came with the tick-borne illness. At the same time, she saw a way to help others in her situation. In 2021 she cofounded Disclo, an HR software start-up that streamlines workplace accommodations processes for companies and their employees. The software has enabled hundreds

of thousands of employees at companies around the country to secure the workplace accommodations they need. Olson’s work on Disclo was recognized in 2024, when she landed a spot on the *Forbes* 30 Under 30 list for enterprise technology.

“There was not a world in which accommodation software existed prior to this,” she says. “I think one thing that we’ve really excelled in is leaning in on my personal narrative and sharing a human nature to this.”

The road to Disclo started in 2018, when Olson worked as a digital marketer for a start-up and had to find a balance between her career, routine medical appointments, and the need for flexible scheduling.

“I saw firsthand that the workplace really wasn’t designed for people like me,” she says. “I struggled deeply with navigating those tricky conversations and feeling comfortable enough to share what I was going through and ask for help.”

STEPHANIE ELEY

Fortunately, her boss, Kai Keane, was caring and supportive and made appropriate accommodations for Olson, like allowing flexible scheduling so that she could go to medical appointments. The two developed a digital recruitment platform, Chronically Capable, which helps those with chronic illnesses find remote and flexible work opportunities. To date, Chronically Capable has forged partnerships with employers like Meta, Warby Parker, and Postmates.

Olson and Keane’s work on Chronically Capable inspired them to create Disclo. Olson found that employees were looking for safer, more discreet ways to disclose illnesses and disabilities and to request accommodations. Companies, on the other hand, needed help managing the compliance side, and all of the work involved in the accommodations process. “Through listening to our clients and understanding their pain points—that’s how we discovered the need for Disclo,” she says.

CHANGING THE WORKPLACE

Typically, an employee who needs accommodation must make a request through their HR department—that is, if they even feel comfortable enough to share that with their employer.

“What will usually happen is the employer will give you a stack of paperwork and say, ‘Great, go to your provider and get this filled out,’ and then you go into this back-and-forth process that’s usually happening via in-person conversations and emails,” Olson says. “It’s super disorganized, and it’s very uncomfortable for the employee.”

It’s Disclo’s mission to streamline that process. The platform helps employees through every stage of the process of asking for accommodations and works to verify the requests with their healthcare providers.

“And on the company side, we’re helping them to manage these requests at scale, because a lot of companies were previously doing this manually, using spreadsheets and sticky notes,” she says. “We built a fully baked system that helps manage that whole process.” Disclo’s mission resonated, Olson says, and the company was able to secure the backing of large investors early in its journey.

“We’re finding a lot of interest from companies with employees who are on their feet more or who don’t have the option to work from home and be flexible,” she says. That includes university and public school systems, hospitals and healthcare organizations—and the hospitality industry.

“I’m really looking forward to going back to my roots on the hospitality front and getting in touch with these larger hospitality

DOUG LEVY



Olson was SHA's Convocation speaker in 2023.

brands from this HR perspective, to go back to the Hiltons of the world and push them on how they are managing this process,” she says. “Because in a lot of the hospitality industry, you’re on your feet all day. It’s why I couldn’t really pursue a career in it.”

Olson’s SHA education has played a big role in how she has shaped Disclo, and how she has approached her entrepreneurial work.

“What has been so interesting is I’ve married two very important experiences in my life to be able to do this. One of them is being sick and having to be resilient and communicative of my needs,” she says. “The other piece is my hospitality background. At SHA, we learned about a lot of topics that touch this space, from HR, to marketing, to business and finance. But more importantly, we learned there’s that human component, and it allowed me to really bring that experience into how we build a product that’s accessible, inclusive, and that really speaks to the end user.” 📸



Dean Arun Upneja presents Martha Sheridan with the ICON Award at SHA's 2025 Hospitality Leadership Summit.

Selling the City of Champions

Martha Sheridan, Meet Boston CEO, touts Boston's winning sports and entertainment reputations

By Marc Chalufour

The Red Sox playing their home opener. The Celtics defending their NBA championship. And 30,000 runners racing from Hopkinton to Boston. April is the busiest sports month in a sports-crazed city, and for Meet Boston, the nonprofit organization responsible for marketing Greater Boston, that reputation is gold.

"It's the buzz. The sports teams give us a lot of exposure," says Martha J. Sheridan, Meet Boston's president and CEO and SHA's 2025 Hospitality ICON recipient. One of the organization's major responsibilities is attracting

new events, and Boston's long history of successfully hosting major competitions—not to mention championship parades—helps advertise the city as an exciting destination.

Meet Boston (formerly the Greater Boston Convention & Visitors Bureau) helps event organizers put together bids, line up accommodations, and assess an event's economic impact. Establishing the Wasabi Fenway Bowl, a college football game in December, and attracting the 2025 ISU World Figure Skating Championships to TD Garden were two recent wins for the nonprofit. Meet Boston also assisted with the bid to become a FIFA World Cup host—seven matches in the world's biggest soccer tournament will be played in Gillette Stadium in June and July 2026.

In April 2025, Sheridan moderated "Winning Experiences: Hospitality's Game-Changing Impact on the Fan Journey at Sports & Enter-

tainment Events," a panel discussion at SHA's Hospitality Leadership Summit. She spoke with *Experience Innovation* magazine about why Boston remains a leading city for sports and entertainment.

ei: ARTS, CULTURE, HISTORY — BOSTON HAS A LOT OF ATTRACTIONS. WHAT MAKES SPORTS UNIQUE AMONG THEM?

We have some very iconic events that are unique to Boston. A lot of US cities have a major marathon, but nothing matches the Boston Marathon. Our venues are world-class. Fenway Park is a destination in and of itself, whether or not the Red Sox are doing well. Boston [TD] Garden has an incredible legacy, as does Gillette Stadium. And our three venues are all privately owned. That means that the ownership groups invest heavily in keeping them authentic, but keeping them refreshed.

JOSEPH PREZIOSO

ISTOCK/TEBORIS



Our moniker right now is that Boston never gets old. And I will tell you, the marathon *never* gets old. It's extraordinary every year. Rain, snow, cold, hot—it doesn't matter."

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE LOCAL HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY TO KNOW THERE ARE MAJOR SPORTS AND ENTERTAINMENT EVENTS ON THE CALENDAR EVERY YEAR?

It means our hotel partners can count on business, whether it's in the form of traveling teams coming to stay in their properties or a large fan base coming in. That's super important, particularly during winter and other need periods. Boston is broadcast across the globe as a great destination.

WHAT HAPPENS BEHIND THE SCENES TO PREPARE THE CITY FOR A MAJOR EVENT?

Boston has a very well-oiled machine when it comes to hosting events. A committee of internal stakeholders meets regularly, including representatives from Meet Boston and City Hall. We look at our plans and make sure that we are in the right place when it comes to safety and security. We want to make sure that every guest who comes to this city has the best possible experience.

THE BOSTON MARATHON IS ONE OF THE AREA'S BIGGEST EVENTS. HOW DO YOU WORK WITH THE EVENT ORGANIZERS?

A member of my team serves on their steering committee, and we work very closely with them on economic impact. We just sponsored a study with UMass [showing a \$509.1 million

economic impact in 2024]. Our moniker right now is that Boston never gets old. And I will tell you, the marathon *never* gets old. It's extraordinary every year. Rain, snow, cold, hot—it doesn't matter.

THE MARATHON HAS BEEN A LOCAL FIXTURE FOR MORE THAN A CENTURY. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE NEW EVENTS AND EXPERIENCES YOU'RE EXCITED ABOUT?

A burgeoning sport for us is e-sports. They're very popular. We hosted a couple of large events this winter [including a tournament at Fenway's MGM Music Hall]. You've got e-gamers and spectators, but you've also got worldwide broadcasts. We're hoping that those become annual events.

WHAT DID YOU DISCUSS WITH THE PANELISTS AT SHA'S SUMMIT?

We [talked] a lot about sports, but also...about entertainment. It's worth noting how our venues play double duty as incredible entertainment venues and how important that is to Boston. Fenway has concerts every year when the Red Sox aren't playing. The Garden is an extraordinary venue that hosts major concerts throughout the year, and same thing with Gillette. These facilities are important to us in so many ways, even beyond the great sports teams they play host to. 

First run in 1897, the Boston Marathon is the oldest annual race in the world—and one of the most prestigious.



SUPPORT FOR SHA —and for the industry

By Louise Kennedy



When his daughter decided to attend SHA, **Chris Simms** knew he wanted to get involved with the school. “I have had a lot of great mentors over the years, and so now I try to give back as much as I possibly can,” says Simms, founder and CEO of the casual restaurant chain Lazy Dog.

For Simms, part of giving back is serving on the SHA Dean’s Advisory Board: “What I really like about being part of the advisory board is that I’m able to learn about upcoming trends and the direction things are headed—universities operate so far ahead of today because they’re preparing the leaders for the future.

“So it’s a great relationship,” he says, “because I get to see what’s coming way down the road. At the same time, I’m in it today. And I’m able to share insight from today.”

It’s also good for his relationship with his daughter, Mollie Simms (’26), he says. “I love to show my daughter that I’m supportive of her, and I think she really enjoys it. I embarrass her sometimes—I participated in a class, and I think I

Chris Simms, Dean’s Advisory Board member and CEO of the restaurant chain Lazy Dog, is excited to watch his daughter, Mollie Simms (’26), thrive at SHA.

There’s still so much great opportunity in the restaurant business. The restaurant industry needs good, strong leaders coming out of school and innovating.”

PATRICK STRATNER



Simms, whose Lazy Dog restaurants serve inventive, casual fare, says he enjoys sharing his insights with SHA and learning about upcoming trends.

embarrassed her a little bit.” He laughs. “But at the end of the day, she appreciated it.”

Simms has also generously supported SHA’s Innovation Competition, which awards cash prizes to student teams that have come up with novel solutions to real issues the hospitality industry faces (see page 4).

“It’s an added benefit; not only am I helping a hospitality school, but I’m also helping the innovative side of hospitality,” he says. “There’s still so much great opportunity in the restaurant business. The restaurant industry needs good, strong leaders coming out of school and innovating.” **21**

Celebrating Alumni Achievements

In October 2024, SHA recognized three exceptional alumni with awards at the Dean’s Distinguished Speakers Series. The winners represented achievements across sectors such as technology, business, data analytics, and innovation in the ever-evolving hospitality field. At the event, Anthony Valletta (’05) was honored as the Distinguished Alumni of the Year, while Melanie Isola (’14) and Roy Madhok (’13) were the year’s Young Alumni awardees. “My experience at SHA not only opened doors but also laid the foundation for my approach to leadership and innovation in hospitality,” says Valletta, also the event’s keynote speaker. “I’m excited to continue supporting the school’s mission and to inspire the next generation of leaders who will shape the future of our industry with creativity, passion, and a commitment to excellence.”

Anthony Valletta (’05) | President and CEO, bartaco
Prior to helming bartaco’s chain of upscale street-food restaurants, Valletta held executive positions at notable restaurant groups such as Del Frisco’s and MINA Group, and at Birdcall, a fast-casual chain in the

Southwest. Valletta was appointed to the Dean’s Advisory Board in 2024, bringing with him a strong reputation for company growth, operational strategy, and leadership.

Melanie Isola (’14) | Associate Director of Customer Success, Opus Training
Inspired by the intersection of people and technology in the hospitality space, Isola pivoted from work in restaurant operations to hospital-ity technology after receiving her master’s in instructional design and technology. Since the shift, she has held roles in industry start-ups that support hospitality leaders and employees alike by designing operations initiatives that promote sustainable, adaptive, and innovative business.

Roy Madhok (’13) | Senior Vice President, Revenue & Distribution, Highgate
At Highgate, Madhok oversees the digital marketing, revenue management, and distribution of nearly 300 US hotels. In 2015, he helped create BU RevPASH, an app that helps restaurants calculate their revenue per seat per hour. Madhok is also dedicated to hospitality education, as a former SHA adjunct faculty member and former guest speaker at Gustave Eiffel University in Paris and New York University’s Center of Hospitality.



Dean Arun Upneja (from left) with Anthony Valletta, Melanie Isola, and Roy Madhok.

DAVID FOX PHOTOGRAPHY

TOP: COURTESY OF SOPHIE PRIMIANO; BOTTOM: COURTESY OF PETER KARGBO

Josh Ahrens (BS’11) received his MBA from the University of Michigan’s Ross School of Business in 2021 and spent three years in M&A investment banking at Wells Fargo in Charlotte, N.C. In 2024, he transitioned to a private equity-backed search fund role with NextGen Growth Partners in Chicago. “As an entrepreneur-in-residence at NGP, I primarily source a small/medium business for acquisition. Post-acquisition, I will take over as the CEO of the company,” he writes.

Alex Fish (BS’11) ran his sixth and final marathon in Tokyo on March 2, 2025. He writes, “My goal was to do all of the six major marathons. I started my journey in 2019 and will complete it in 2025. I have run for five different charities, including Back on My Feet (helping homeless veterans get back on their feet with jobs and the prep behind it), Pedro Martinez Foundation, St. Jude’s, Japan Marrow Donor Registry, and JDRF (type 1 diabetes), and have raised more than \$30,000. On top of all of my marathons, I am also getting married in July! It has been an amazing journey.”

Philip S. Jaworskyj (BS’11) was promoted to partner in the transactions department and tax group at Morrison Foerster in New York. He specializes in advising clients on US federal income tax matters related to complex domestic and cross-border transactions across diverse industries.

Melissa Gallo (BS’14) writes, “Being in hospitality as a restaurant manager helped me discover that I truly enjoy helping others. I completed my physician assistant training program last year and am now an emergency medicine clinician. Being at the bedside, incorporating customer service skills that I’ve gained, and applying evidence-based medicine is a dream come true for me. With the prevalence of medical tourism and online reviews, patients are now searching for their next medical experiences—similar to finding their next restaurant or hotel.”

Cindy Lee (BS’16) was married on October 12, 2024.

Amin Adjmi (CGS’16, BS’18) has been working on his lifestyle apparel brand STAYCOOLNYC, based in New York City, since graduating from SHA. “It’s been an amazing journey thus far, and I still utilize things I’ve learned from SHA to this very day,” he says.

Sophie Primiano (MMH’21) writes, “My career journey began in the wedding industry in Newport, R.I., after which I gained valuable operational experience with Marriott at The W Boston. Upon moving to New York City, I transitioned into a sales role at a prestigious private members club, where I collaborated closely with our esteemed members to envision and sell exceptional events. In August 2023, I joined Convene as a sales specialist, where I discovered my true passion



Sophie Primiano (MMH’21)

for corporate event sales, providing personalized service to clients in the NYC market and embodying the essence of hospitality in every interaction.”

Peter Kargbo (CGS’19, COM’21, BS’22) was inducted into BU’s chapter of the Tri-Alpha honor society on November 7, 2024. “The Tri-Alpha honor society is for first-generation college students and recognizes academic achievements, helps with scholarship opportunities, encourages leadership, and is an overall support network for first-gen students,” he writes. “I am very thankful to share a space in

Tri-Alpha with such talented and inspirational students.”

Pierre Moglen (MMH’22) became director of global sales, North America, for Groupe Barrière in summer 2024. In his new role, Pierre leads the sales strategy, partnerships, and brand representation across the US, Canada, and Mexico for the family-owned, authentically French luxury hotel group. Barrière has 19 hotels globally, including Fouquet’s Paris & New York, Le Carl Gustaf in Saint-Barthe, Le Majestic in Cannes (French Riviera), Les Neiges in Courchevel (French Alps), Le Normandy in Deauville (Normandy), and Le Naoura Marrakech (Morocco).



Peter Kargbo (CGS’19, COM’21, BS’22) with Maria Dykema Erb, executive director of the BU Newbury Center.

Thanks to alumni, parents, and friends, our students can Experience Innovation every day at Boston University School of Hospitality Administration. Their gifts support teaching, research, student organizations, and public service initiatives. No matter the size or designation, all gifts have an impact, make a difference, and invest in the next generation of hospitality Experience Innovators. The list below recognizes donors who made gifts between July 1, 2024, and June 30, 2025. On behalf of our students and faculty, thank you!

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