

CONRAD N. HILTON COLLEGE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

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35th ANNUAL GOURMET NIGHT CAPTIVATES WITH ARTISTRY AND CULINARY DELIGHTS

Students transport guests to the magical world of ‘Cirque du Gourmet’

HOUSTON, April 10, 2009— The guests came in from a cool April night and entered a place that “must be seen to be believed, must be tasted to truly experience.” This was the world of *Cirque du Gourmet*, and what a world it was, as students of the Conrad N. Hilton College of Hotel and Restaurant Management at the University of Houston dazzled guests with an unforgettable Gourmet Night fit for the center ring.

On April 4, a sold-out ballroom of nearly 400 alumni, faculty and staff, industry leaders and friends of the Hilton College experienced an evening that combined gourmet cuisine, fine wines, first-rate service, stunning décor and live entertainment into a carefully orchestrated tour-de-force run entirely by students with guidance from faculty mentors. The theme was inspired by Cirque du Soleil, the world famous performance group behind such smash hits as *Mystere*, *Allegria*, *O* and *Quidam*. Proceeds from ticket sales and from a silent auction held in concert with the dinner go toward scholarships for Hilton College students.

“This year’s Gourmet Night was truly spectacular,” said Dr. John T. Bowen, dean of the Hilton College. “The creativity and execution shown by the students was absolutely amazing, and of course the food was delicious as always. I could not be more proud, and the College couldn’t be more grateful to the people who came out and supported us even in these difficult economic times. Gourmet Night is something special.”

As the seven courses – smoked scallops, roasted garlic veloute, braised lamb with mint gnocchi and a trio of chocolate delights, among them – were presented with military precision and a dancer’s grace, the ballroom became a true circus of sight and sound.

The American Acrobats, an elite circus performance team from Redlands, Calif., contorted, juggled and balanced to a soundtrack of *Cirque* music and a chorus of “oohs” and “ahhs” from the assembled guests. Missy Ali, a professional singer from Nashville, whetted the audience’s entertainment appetite with a rich performance of “Let Me Fall” from *Quidam*. The event was hosted by guest emcee Barrett Goldsmith, a writer and editor with the College’s Communications department and a professional standup comic who adopted the stylized French clown character typical of Cirque shows. Jorge Araujo, executive sous chef at the George R. Brown Convention Center, served as the guest chef to the students.

Since the first annual Gourmet Night in 1974, the event has showcased some of the brightest lights among the Hilton College's talented students, and many Gourmet Night veterans have gone onto major success in the hospitality industry. The maestro behind this year's symphonic sensual suite was Jenny Durham, who served as general manager. Durham, who after her graduation in May will serve as Catering coordinator at The Fairmont Dallas luxury hotel, supervised a team of 17 directors and hundreds of volunteers who executed a near-flawless performance.

"You put so much planning and hard work into the event, that once you're in the moment it almost runs itself," Durham said with the usual humility that belies her Herculean accomplishments. "If you have a great team in place and you give them the tools they need, you can't help but succeed. Gourmet Night has been the highlight of each of my four years here, and I've learned lessons you could never learn inside a classroom."

As the event drew to a close, the students, finally able to exhale after a grueling and demanding performance, laughed and embraced on stage and soaked in the thunderous standing ovation, but as they did so, they also heaped gratitude and praise on their faculty mentors, including Shelley Clark (service), Dr. Karl Titz (kitchen) and Chef Abbas Jaffari of the Hilton University of Houston Hotel, a longtime fixture of Gourmet Night who works tirelessly with the students each year. And Durham, a four-year veteran of the event, teared up as she addressed executive event director Erin Oeser, whom she called "the mother hen and my good friend and mentor."

"The students just continue to amaze me," Oeser said. "I help them out, but they make this event their own. Their leadership ability and their poise are absolutely astounding. You put in a lot of hours and there are challenges along the way, but it's all worth it when you see their faces at the end of the night."

But the day after the event, those same faces were once again set to the task at hand – planning for next year's Gourmet Night, which will take place on April 10, 2010. Oeser is already taking applications for student directors and for the next maestro who will continue the beautiful music.

For more information on the UH Conrad N. Hilton College of Hotel and Restaurant Management and the Hospitality Hall of Honor, visit our website at: www.hrm.uh.edu

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