

Meet Alex Kuk '04.



Alex Kuk '04 and chef Michael Moran '86 MS '03, an instructor in the School of Hospitality and Tourism Management and SoBe culinary coordinator, flank Giada De Laurentiis at the 3rd Annual Tiger Woods' Benefit in Los Angeles.

This 25-year-old graduate of the School of Hospitality and Tourism Management is one in the small army of FIU students working as associates of the 2008 Food Network South Beach Wine & Food Festival, one of the nation's premier wine and food events.

Kuk currently is pursuing a master's degree in hospitality and tourism management and wants to be a master chef. He began working with the festival as a sophomore, an opportunity he calls "*the* opportunity for any hospitality student. The festival is the best class – you get experience in every aspect."

He is the culinary demonstration coordinator for the Feb. 21-24 extravaganza, co-produced by the school. Thinking we knew what it took to organize the festival and actually knowing are two very different things, so we recently asked Kuk to tell us just what happens behind the scenes at SoBe.

"Prepping for SoBe is no easy task," he said. "There's an office at Southern Wine & Spirits of Florida [which co-produces the festival with FIU] with at least a dozen dedicated people working all year long on the festival. Once crunch-time comes, we have committee meetings every month just so we can touch base on the tasks at hand.

"What is interesting about the festival is that we are not in a building with walls, water, electricity, etc. We have sun, sand, and ocean – and that is it. We have to get permits from the city and build the entire infrastructure from the ground up. Electricity, fencing, flatware, silverware, stemware, tents – they all have to be rented."

Kuk says no detail is spared in the organization of the festival, which is presented at various venues throughout the Magic City and South Beach. In his role as the culinary demonstration coordinator, his input is critical in many different areas.

“Every chef that performs a demonstration on one of the five stages we have on the beach over the weekend is coordinated by [SoBe consulting director] Devin Padgett from Food & Wine magazine and me,” he said. “We have to plan for each chef that is coming, who is prepping their food, where they’re prepping it, how their prepping it, etc.”

An opportunity of a lifetime

Kuk likens the behind-the-scenes action at SoBe to “a huge restaurant.”

“In the front of the house we have VIPs – we need to entertain them and make this an unforgettable experience,” he said. “And in the back we have a crew prepping food, making drinks and running around getting ready to go out there and serve this amazing food and these amazing drinks. It’s controlled chaos.”

In order to manage this chaos, Kuk oversees the work of about 40-50 FIU students – from a pool of hundreds – who, as associates of the festival, reap the benefits of working the event by gaining experience and receiving scholarships toward their education.

School Hospitality and Tourism Management Dean Joseph West has set aside \$300,000 from money raised at the festival to be distributed in the form of scholarships to those spring semester 2008-registered students who are participating as associates of the festival this year.

For Kuk, SoBe has been an opportunity of a lifetime.

“I have met, shook hands and worked with some of the greatest chefs of our time, like Ferran Adrià and Thomas Keller,” he said. “As a result of working with the festival I have had the amazing opportunity to work with all the celebrity chefs from The Food Network.”

After last year’s SoBe Festival, Kuk went off to work with Giada De Laurentiis in Los Angeles at the 3rd Annual Tiger Woods’ Benefit and in New York City at a dinner for *Bon Appétit* magazine.

“The greatest opportunity I and the other FIU students have received from this festival is we’re able to apply all that we learned in the classroom to real life,” he said. “We’re able to be really hands-on and work and learn with and from the best. We’re there when the planning starts, helping put the pieces of the puzzles in place and we’re there to break it all down. It really is a fun challenge.”

The experience he has gained working behind the scenes has put Kuk on a path to realize his dream of one day working in the front and in the back of his own restaurant.

“I love meeting my guests and interacting with them, but I also have that passion for creating and mixing textures, flavors, colors in the kitchen,” he said. “And I hope I’ll be able to teach and give back to the industry, too.”