

5 QUESTIONS WITH JOE WEST

FIU hospitality dean discusses program in China

The outgoing dean of FIU's School of Hospitality & Tourism Management talks about the school's program in China.

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BY DOUGLAS HANKS

When he sat down with Business Monday, Joe West was getting ready for a triumphant return to China.

The outgoing dean of Florida International University's School of Hospitality & Tourism Management would leave the next day for Tianjin, home of FIU's new hospitality school. Built by the Chinese government but staffed by the North Miami school, it graduates its first class of 29 students this year.

It's the first foreign hotel school in a nation experiencing a hotel boom and expected to be the world's No. 1 tourist destination by 2020. Students at the Tianjin campus are working in Beijing this summer for the Olympics, an event China is counting on to promote the country as a vacation spot.

Marriott has emerged as the school's biggest fan, hiring members of the Class of '08 and giving the school a \$1.7 million gift. The company operates more than two dozen hotels in China.

West sees it as a future profit center, in the same way the South Beach Wine & Food Festival sends cash back to FIU, which launched the event in 2001.

The festival subsidizes the school's beverage program and helped West amass about \$2 million for his next campus project: a restaurant with a full-service bar.

He's looking forward to pointing out the difference between top-shelf and rail liquors and "how to pour tap beer, because that's a certain technique you have to do." Such instructional concerns will be even more important for West in the upcoming months as he plans to step down as dean and resume full-time teaching. During his Five Questions interview, West focused mainly on FIU's China experience.



JOSEPH J. WEST

- **Title:** Dean and professor, FIU School of Hospitality and Tourism Management. Hired in 1999.
- **Age:** 63.
- **Last job:** Chairman of the hospitality program at Florida State's business school, a post he took in 1991. Also served 20 years in the U.S. Navy and ran restaurants and bars in the Carolinas.
- **Affiliations:** Joined the corporate board of the Benihana Japanese restaurant chain in 2005.

Q: Tell me the difference between the hotel business there and here.

A: Over there, the emphasis has been on the physical plant. So they spend \$100 million on the plant, and the employees are semi-skilled. They all dress very well. And they're all very polite. But they don't understand service. . . .

You'd go into this beautiful building, but the way you were treated by the front desk, you would go, "Wow, what are they doing?" Just impersonal, and they're very official. They don't understand the smiling and that idea of service.

You'll walk into a dining room, and there will be more servers standing around than guests. They just don't understand how to staff.

What's really funny now is they're having a labor crunch in China, in the hotel industry. You would think: The world's most populous country, having a labor crunch? But the problem is, they'll spend \$150 million on a hotel, but they won't want to pay the employees a living wage.

So Wal-Mart opens up, and they go to work for Wal-Mart. Or they go to work for Kentucky Fried Chicken. Or they go to work for McDonald's.

Q: Was there any conflict in *terms of the government not wanting you to teach certain things?*

A: The Chinese have to take Marxist theory, and they have to learn about Chairman Mao. So we just decided those could be their humanities electives. We don't teach that.

We only teach the second two years. We teach the hospitality portion. The first two years are all in Chinese.

We are the only authorized foreign hotel degree recognized by the Chinese ministry that is done in China. They have held us up now to the Chinese universities as the model of hospitality education that these Chinese universities should be emulating.

Q: What are you doing differently?

A: One, we have very interactive classes between the professor and the student. Two, we require the students to work in the industry in the summers and part-time.

Before you can graduate from here, you have to have worked 1,000 hours during your four years, and then you have to do a 300-hour internship. In China, you just come in, you do your four years. You sit there and listen to the professor -- who probably has not worked in the industry, who's just teaching from a book. Then you go out, and you go to work in the industry.

And the industry won't hire you because the Chinese hoteliers say: These kids who are coming out of these hotel schools don't know anything!

The other issue we've had to solve is part-time work, because the Chinese don't do part-time work and summer work. [But] there's such a demand for our students. They speak English. They've got a Western education. They're from a world-famous school. [Chinese hotels are] willing now to have our kids work for them because then they all hire them.

That's another thing we had not anticipated. I have 1,000 students who are all only children. They do not know how to get along. We try to teach them teamwork. It is really difficult. One of the hardest things we have to do.

Q: A non-China question. Why do you think customer service is a challenge for hotels in Miami?

A: There are a couple of reasons. One, we're an immigrant city. So a lot of the people who would work in the hotels are just coming in. They're unskilled. You've got to train them and get them ready to work.

Then the second generation says: I'm not going to work in hotels like my parents did.

If you say "service" in the hospitality industry, it starts equating to servitude. It starts equating to low-paying jobs. And part of that we bring on ourselves.

Our industry fights the minimum wage every time it comes up. Now I understand why we do it -- it makes good economic sense. Because if you raise everybody's wages, prices just go up.

I understand why you fight the minimum wage, but [the Florida lodging industry] doesn't make a good argument as to why you fight the minimum wage. You look as though you're keeping the lower class down so the high-priced hotel owners and managers can make a lot of money. So that bothers me.

It's the image that if you work in McDonald's, you're only going to flip burgers.

Q: What is the proper way to pour draft beer?

A: It's on and off [West makes a swift push-pull movement with his right hand]. You're supposed to put the glass under and go BOOM to open it, and BOOM to close it. When you don't see bartenders doing that, they're not doing it right. That's why they have those big [tap] handles on them. It's supposed to be slapped by the bartender. If not, you get a lot of foam.

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