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A taste of Tuscany

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A Taste of Tuscany

An Honors College Project Presented to
the Faculty of the Undergraduate

College of Business
Hart School of Hospitality

James Madison University

Prepared By Jackie Herrick, Taylor Palma, and Brigid Greaney

Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Hospitality Management, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

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PUBLIC PRESENTATION

This work is accepted for presentation, in part or in full, at James Madison University Festival Conference and Student Center on February 12, 2017.

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Grazie a Mille!

Abstract

The purpose of this Honor's Paper is to demonstrate the comprehensive scholastic work and practical experience that we—Taylor Palma, Jackie Herrick, and Brigid Greaney—have completed in the Hart School of Hospitality, Sport & Recreation Management at James Madison University. In this paper we will discuss our Themed Event project, *A Taste of Tuscany*, with its rationale rooted in Italian food and wine culture. Authenticity and faithfulness to the Italian ways were of chief importance throughout the planning and execution of our project. In outlining the details of our event, we have included the logistics, from menus to floor diagrams, as well as personal reflections. Moreover, our learning experience extended well beyond the formal classroom walls and into the realm of applied theory. In turn, our Honors College project synthesizes the educational experiences we have gathered throughout our experiential learning journey.

Introduction

In the Fall of 2015, our worldviews changed with the experience of studying abroad in James Madison University's Semester in Florence Program. These thirteen weeks were imbued with self-exploration, growth in worldly awareness, and a particular appreciation of Italian food and wine culture. We returned to the United States inspired by the history and culture of *La Cucina Povera* ("peasant cooking"), with its newly found meaning in our lives. Working towards our Bachelors of Science in Hospitality Management, we prepared our Themed Event Proposal, with the hope of being selected as one of the four out of fifteen teams to execute our event in the Spring of 2017. With our theme, *A Taste of Tuscany*, it was our desire to recreate our experience abroad in Florence, Italy for our family and friends back in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Our guests would experience authentic Tuscan cuisine, culture, and an undeniable ambiance while remaining on JMU's campus. Due to our passion and academic excellence, our team was selected to execute *A Taste of Tuscany* on February 12th, 2017 from 12:00pm to 2:00pm.

The Hart School's Themed Events are truly a test of professional acumen and ingenuity. Applying the very skills studied in the classroom, we put them directly into practice planning our own event of a considerable scope from start to finish for the first time. *A Taste of Tuscany* involved several elements, from food to entertainment, giving us a relatively comprehensive planning and execution experience. A total of 83 guests were transported to an Italian piazza (or "square") for the reception, the Ponte Vecchio ("Old Bridge") for a photo opportunity, a live street painter, a pasta making demonstration, beverage station, action station, and two passed hors d'oeuvres. At the sound of the church bell, our guests smoothly transitioned into the ristorante ("restaurant"), or the transformed Highlands Room. Upon being seated, they were welcomed with

aerial views of the city in a cinematic video, followed by personal photos from our own Tuscan excursions. A carefully selected four-course menu provided a typical Tuscan meal to those in attendance—with the salad after the entrée of course. Characteristic to Italy, our guests also sampled a beautiful selection of Italian opera in a live performance.

All for \$37.50, our guests found the value of the experience to be outstanding. In order to make the event possible, our budget was limited to ticket sales and some donations. With a significant portion dedicated to food (about two thirds of our total revenue), we carefully managed the remainder for organizational and staff materials, decorations, entertainment, and facilities expenses (in decreasing order of amount). Our theme *A Taste of Tuscany* involved incredible detail in order to authentically emulate our experience abroad in Florence, Italy. As in Tuscany, a meal is a time of gathering that not only offers delicious food, but also creates an atmosphere in which people can truly enjoy the time as an experience. Our vision for *A Taste of Tuscany* not only came into reality in physical appearances, but was also manifested in an intangible yet noticeable ambiance. Several guests remarked how our event “brought them back to Florence”, which expresses just how successful our efforts proved to be.

Pre-Event Materials

I. Production Schedule

The following is our detailed production schedule (detailed timeline) for the day of February 12, 2017. This schedule includes the important time-sensitive tasks for the front of house (visible service) as well as for the back of house (satellite kitchen).

A Taste of Tuscany: Production Schedule: February 12th, 2017

7:30 AM: Staff arrival (no later) and check-in at Festival (lower level).

7:40 AM: Breakfast provided and supervisor/manager introductions.

8:00 AM: Place personal belongings in Festival conference room and split into Back of House (BOH), Dining, or Reception.

8:05 AM: Facilities tour and initial training.

8:30 AM: Work in BOH, Reception, and Dining areas (snacks provided).

9:45 AM: Training session for Front of House staff (Reception and Dining).

10:30 AM: Lunch and change into attire for the event.

11:15 PM: Hor D'oeuvres and beverages for Reception ready.

12:00 PM: Guests arrive and hor d'oeuvres are passed in Reception.

12:20 PM: Ribollita (vegetable soup) ready in BOH; neat, clean bowls equipped with a saucer.

12:25 PM: Pappardelle (pasta with Wild Boar or Porcini Mushroom Sauce) ready.

12:30 PM: Guests transition into Highlands Room.

12:40 PM: Head servers greet guests, set Tuscan bread on the table, and confirm dietary restrictions with individual guests.

12:45 PM: Serving teams line up in the correct order to enter the dining room. Vocalist (Olivia) performs.

12:48 PM: Servers have one dish in each hand and are ready to enter the dining room.

12:50 PM: Serve 1st course: Ribollita (vegetable soup).

1:00 PM: Salad is plated and ready (dressing is the last to go on so arugula does not get soggy).

1:05 PM: Clear, then serve 2nd course: Pappardelle (pasta) with Wild Boar or Mushroom Sauce.

1:05 PM: Chilled Panna Cotta (sweet cream dessert) ready.

1:25 PM: Clear, then serve 3rd course: Salad.

1:40 PM: Clear, then serve 4th course: Panna Cotta (dessert) and Coffee Service.

1:55 PM: Thank you's from Taylor, Brigid and Jackie.

2:00 PM: Guests depart and receive Cantucci take-aways (biscotti cookies).

2:10 PM: Once guests depart the Highlands Room, clear the dining room and cleanup tasks will be delegated.

3:15 PM: Staff members check out with Supervisor and depart.

II. Diagrams

Included on the following page are the diagrams for our Reception (A) and Dining (B). After learning how to operate SocialTables in class, we used the application to professionally design our event floor plans with accurate square-footage and placement

A. To-Scale Reception Diagram

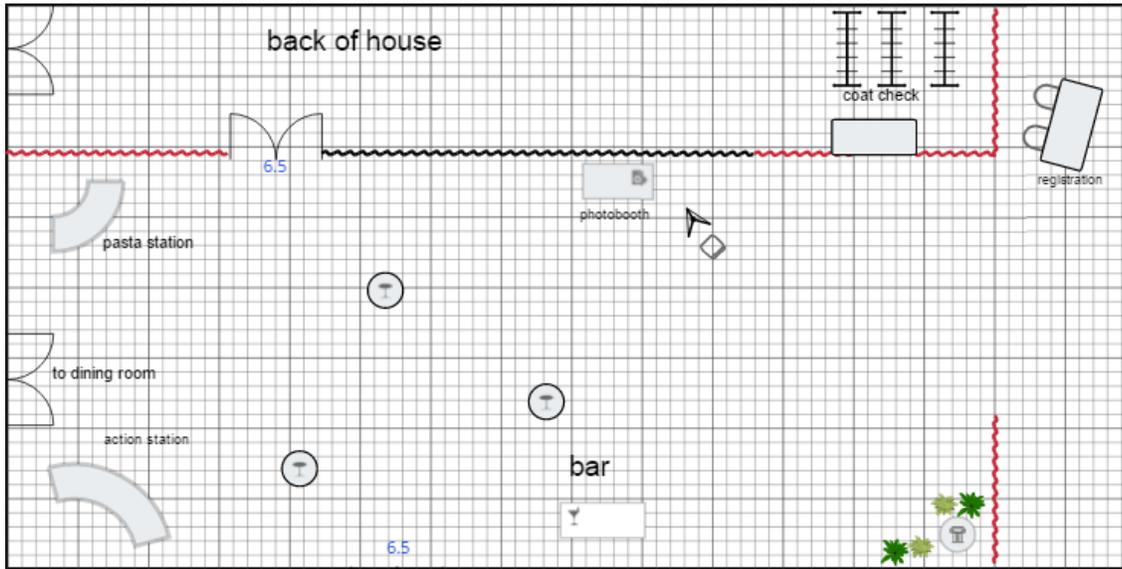


Figure 1(Herrick, Palma, Greaney, 2016)

B. To-Scale Dining Diagram

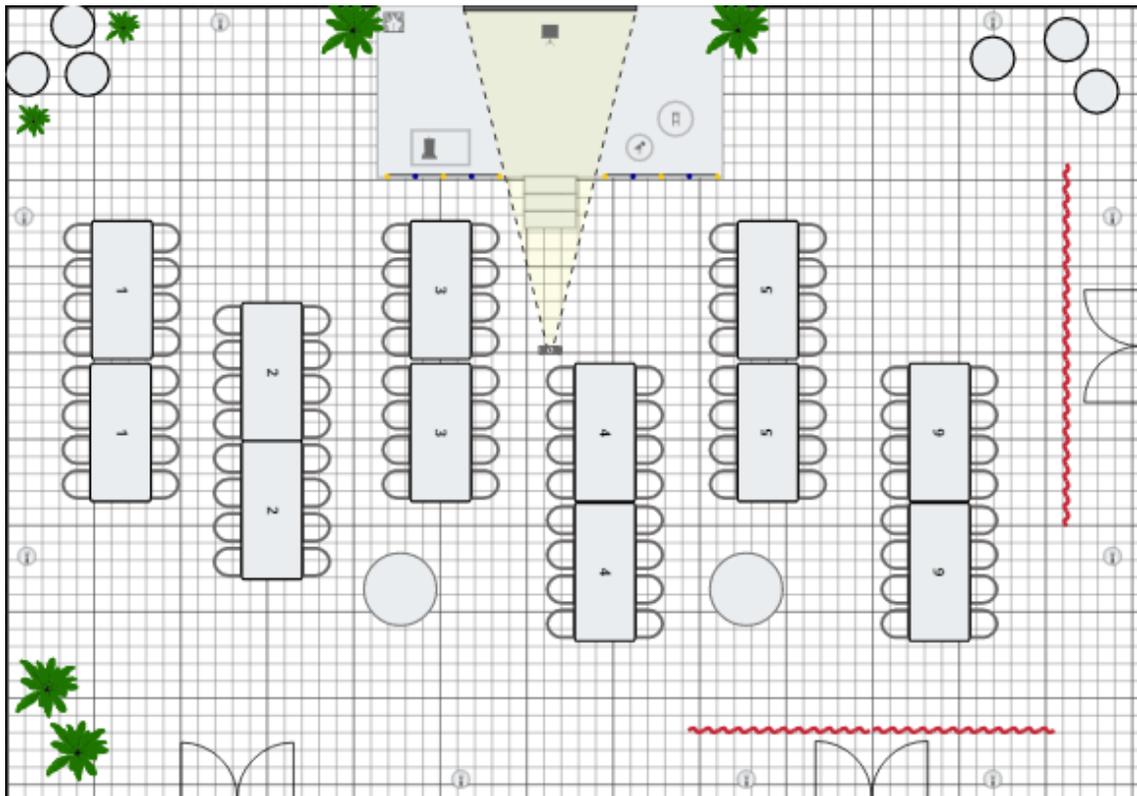


Figure 2(Herrick, Palma, Greaney, 2016)

III. Decor

In order to paint the picture of our decor, the highlights are depicted as follows.

Reception Decor:



*3 Tuscan Tan Stucco
Wallpaper*

Lining the walls of our reception area will be stucco wallpaper, reminiscent of the stucco buildings and churches passed each day in Italy



4 Bicycle on Tuscan Street

A stroll through the streets of Florence was incomplete without passing a parked bicycle, often adorned with fresh flowers. An antiqued bicycle will be parked in our reception area to remind the guests of the everyday “decor” seen on Tuscan streets.

Wine is an integral aspect of the Tuscan culture, and wine barrels are often used as decoration, functional furniture, and a reminder of the history of Tuscany, rich with wine culture. Similar barrels will be used to decorate our reception and dining areas.

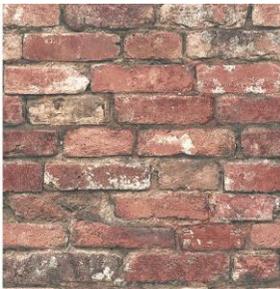
The Ponte Vecchio is not simply a landmark of Florence, but it is a symbol for tourists of the history and age of the city. Thus, we have chosen a tapestry of the Ponte Vecchio to be our backdrop for the reception photo booth.



Upon arrival, each guest will receive a boarding pass with their name and table number on it, symbolizing the transition from a college town to an old Italian city.

5 Boarding Pass

Dining Decor:



Just as we want our guests to truly feel as though they are in an Italian Piazza during reception, when they enter the dining room, we want them to feel as though they are in an Italian Ristorante. This weathered brick wallpaper will cover the walls and create the desired atmosphere.

Figure 6 Loft Brick Wallpaper



Our tables will be set with crisp white linen, a nod to the simplicity of Italian restaurant design. They will also have ivy garnished on the table to add a pop of color and harmonize with the natural style of the dining room.

7 Ivy TableScape



Placed with the ivy will be jars with unscented simple candles and fillers so that the dining space is illuminated in a soft and natural glow.

8 Candles in Mason Jars



Wine is an extremely important aspect of Tuscany's history, including the use of the fiasco bottle. Though we are not able to serve wine at our event, we wanted to incorporate the tradition of having wine at the table by placing three fiasco bottles at each table.

9 Chianti Fiasco

Our guests will find their table numbers by looking for a framed printed number on their respective table.



Once finding their table, our guests will be welcomed to take their seats by locating their name tucked in a wine cork. This is another way we thought to incorporate the importance of wine in the Tuscan culture.

10 Cork Name Card

Just as we wrote postcards to our family and friends, our guests will have the opportunity to provide immediate feedback about their Tuscan experience.

IV. Food and Beverage Summary

Our mid-day event offered a lunch focused on Italian cuisine, with a carefully chosen menu to be reflective and respectful of the Italian culture. Additionally, the menu items were positioned in the order in which they would be experienced in an Italian ristorante. For example, in the United States we are accustomed to eating our salad as our first course and transitioning into meats or pastas for the main course. However, in Italy, salads are eaten at the end of the meal to help cleanse the palate and assist in digestion. Below is the comprehensive list of menu items with their unique descriptions.

Rosemary Citrus Spritzer

Enjoy the perfect Italian aperitif, a bubbling combination of soda water, honey, fresh citrus, and a hint of rosemary.

Fried Zucchini Flowers

Zucchini Flowers lightly fried. Allergens include gluten.

Pappa al Pomodoro

Tuscan tomato and bread soup. Allergens include gluten.

Charcuterie and Cheese

An array of cold cuts including prosciutto crudo, salami, and capicola matched with pecorino, caprino, and parmesan cheese. These are paired with green pear slices, honey, green olives, thinly sliced unsalted bread, allergens include dairy and gluten.

Pane Toscano

Unsalted Bread accompanied with fresh extra virgin olive oil. Allergens include gluten.

Ribollita

Traditional vegetable and bean soup containing onions, carrots, garlic, salt, pepper, tomato paste, diced tomatoes, spinach, cannelloni beans, vegetable stock, and olive oil. Garnished with a bay leaf.

Pappardelle with Wild Boar Ragu

Thick pappardelle pasta topped with a wild boar and red wine ragu. Allergens include boar and gluten.

Pappardelle with Porcini Mushroom Ragu

Thick pappardelle pasta topped with a white wine and porcini mushroom sauce. Allergens include gluten.

Arugula and Radicchio

Arugula leaves and radicchio paired with a lemon dressing and topped with shaved parmesan cheese. Allergens include dairy.

Panna Cotta

Sweetened cream molded and topped with fresh raspberries and chocolate sauce. Allergens include dairy.

Fresh Fruit Cup

A variety of mixed fresh fruit

Post - Event Materials

I. Analysis of Service Style

We sought to give deliver authentic and memorable experiences to our guests, from the food itself to the style in which it was presented and served. To start, the two passed hors d'oeuvres of Pappa al Pomodoro and Fried Zucchini Flowers worked well from a service standpoint. Since there were enough servers, the food was effectively offered to all guests in the crowded reception. The passed style of serving worked for our location and our amount of guests. The guests were able to see the hors d'oeuvres moving around the room, and were able to choose what they would like. However, there were a few issues with the hors d'oeuvres from a culinary standpoint. Two days before the event, we were told that we would not be able to get the zucchini flowers that we had ordered. The substitute of fried zucchinis cut into flower shapes did not require a change in the menu and did not disturb our guests. However, it was not the “wow” factor that we were looking for. If we were able to do it again, we would confirm with the chefs and purchasing department well in advance to make sure that the food we planned to serve was truly possible to execute. Through this, we learned the importance of checking and double checking all contracts and information given. With our second passed hors d'oeuvre, Pappa al Pomodoro, the recipe was correct and we heard great reviews. Unfortunately, the small spoons that we requested were not provided, and so our guests had some trouble enjoying it in full. Again, proper planning and enhanced communication with Aramark could have prevented this situation. Next, the charcuterie action station and the beverage station also worked well in style of service, as they filled gaps in the reception area decoratively and spatially. Guests smoothly walked from one to the next, creating motion in the room.

For dining, bread and olive oil were served when the guests first sat down. One thing that we could have done was to preset the bread, with more than enough bread for each person at the table. It seemed as though guests would have liked to have bread as they ate the rest of the courses. If we were able to do it again, we would have asked the servers who were in the dining room to preset at least three baskets of bread on the table so that the guests could best be served. For the rest of the courses, we used a Modified Hand Service Style. Fortunately, this worked well for all courses, as each server knew which specific meals to bring. Although we tried to make the time that the food left the hot box to when it went on the plate as short as possible, we did get some complaints that the food was a little cold and so, we could have made it an even quicker process. Overall, we were pleased with the style of service chosen, and believe that it best reflected our Tuscan experiences abroad. The servers could interact with the guests, allowing guests to feel almost as though they were in their family home. This was reflective in the service style of the beverages as well, which was casual and familial. Glass bottles of water were placed on the tables and coffee was a self-serve station. We were thrilled with the flexibility the coffee station allowed however, its location impacted our flow of service. The best move would have been to move the station opposite of the door to mitigate confusion. In retrospect, some aspects could have been more thoroughly thought out, but overall the style of service that we chose was effective and efficient. Each aspect that did or did not work will be taken as a learning tool for future events we will run.

II. Analysis of Production Schedule

Following our production schedule was something we took into careful consideration as we spent a great deal of time creating it. It would be our steady guide through our two hour event. Our production schedule proved to be accurate, as we adhered to it relatively closely. There were even times where our dining service was slightly ahead of schedule which was a breath of fresh air. Nonetheless, we were constantly checking our watches to the exact minute and getting so wrapped up in “is it going according to plan?”

Next time we would do something quite peculiarly different: we would not stick so closely to the schedule. Through both the execution of our own event and the supervision of the *Dine Between the Vines* event (the day prior), we learned that life happens and unexpected issues arise. Some discrepancies may be small and others large, but the production schedule should be used as a guide and not be a trigger of stress. If an event is behind schedule, it is okay, if not every second goes according to plan. Instead, it is critical to adapt to the changes and live in the moment. It is vital for a production schedule to be made prior to an event and be used as a guide, but it can be changed and altered as the event unravels, especially if the event has a duration longer than two hours.

III. Analysis of Reception Training

After critically examining the reception training session, we found that most aspects were effective and went smoothly. For example, the staff training entailed a wealth of information regarding the menu, so that servers would be well versed on what exactly they were serving, especially regarding allergens that each contained. Additionally, our expectations were clarified to

all the staff with an emphasis on having a positive attitude and serving our attendees with an approachable smile. Lastly, but not least, the staff task cards worked well as they answered many questions about duties and responsibilities leaving minimal ambiguity.

In order to improve training, we could have provided more information to staff and supervisors regarding the photo booth in reception which was not so typical. There was a selfie stick area in front of an image of “Ponte Vecchio” to encompass the streets of Florence, Italy. Tourists and native Florentines alike are often surrounded by individuals selling selfie-sticks in front of sights like the Ponte Vecchio and a Piazza della Repubblica,. In this effort, we attempted to humorously combine the old and the new of the streets of Florence. Unfortunately we did not include any information regarding this photo station to staff during reception training. Moreover, we would have definitely approached that differently so they could have encouraged guests to use the selfie stick station more. Ultimately as managers, we could have taken a few more steps back by utilizing our staff and supervisors more, who could have been more involved in training.

IV. Analysis of Dining Training

Dining training seemed simple upon first glance, but in reality, proved to be more complex than many of the other tasks assigned for the Themed Event project. It was difficult to translate our serving knowledge, of which we had our own broad experiences, to the perspective of a staff member who had never served before. We attempted to make every instruction as clear as possible, through the use of PowerPoints, demonstrations, and hands-on serving practice. However, we found that even between our own experiences, there were discrepancies that created confusion. Therefore, we made sure that each of our instructions, both written and verbal, were clear and concise.

In the Dining Training Documentation prior to the event, we established a Modified Hand Service style. This decision worked well with the informal way we wanted our servers to interact with guests. Additionally this style of service allowed us to cater the training to each staff member individually. Staff needed to focus simply on the seats and tables they were serving and on making sure the appropriate dishes got to those seats. We also decided to compile our servers into three teams of eight servers each, with two head servers per team. In labeling the sides of the table “A Side” and “B Side,” we were easily able to identify who was meant to serve where, and answer any questions as to who the head server was per team, and per side. Though we went through a training PowerPoint and had each server practice serving each of the seats that they would serve, the most vital part of training were the task cards.

Listed on each task card were the staff member’s responsibilities for set up, their serving team, the seats they were to serve, and any additional responsibilities (i.e. bringing the bread basket to the table). On the back of the task cards, there were two diagrams of tables, with the seats each individual server was to serve along with the entree. Our guests had a choice of entree, so the amount of vegetarian entrees was proportionately higher than expected. Thus, most servers had at least one table in which they had both a vegetarian and a meat entree to serve. It was very helpful to have the seats labeled and color-coded so that at a quick glance, the servers could find what they needed to serve.

There were two aspects of dining training that did not go as well as expected. The first is flexibility. Because the staff had received was very structured training, it seemed difficult for servers to adapt to meal changes, seat changes, or one additional person (for which we had two tables). Although we made sure to address these changes with servers as we became aware of

them, it seemed as though we did not allow enough room in their training for autonomous thinking. This could be due to a lack of serving knowledge, and an inability to understand that things can and will change. But ultimately, as managers, we take the responsibility. In dining training we should have brought up scenarios that could occur causing the serving order to be off, and best practices on how to deal with them. The second aspect was communication with the back of house. As managers, we went over in detail how we desired the flow of service, and how the back of house would prep the food for the servers. When things did not go as to plan, we did not do a great job of communicating this to our servers. In our own stress, we were unable to communicate effectively. Fortunately, our prior planning saved us. We were able to make up any time that was wasted in the confusion by expediting the serving process: we asked each server to look at their task cards, know which dishes they needed to serve, and pick them up immediately after they were placed on the back of house tables. Fortunately, this extra step of preparation helped us in a moment of need.

In summary, we are pleased with how our dining training was reflected in the staff's service. We were pleasantly surprised at how quickly they were able to find their place in line, how there was no question as to which tables they needed to address first, and how there seemed to be a great understanding of the service flow, including the serving and clearing processes. No training can be foolproof, and there is no way to prevent changes or on the spot directions that are different than before. However, by presenting the information in multiple ways, we found that we were able to give our servers the training tools to be effective, efficient, and excellent servers.

V. *Analysis of Entertainment*

Throughout the two-hour duration of *A Taste of Tuscany*, we had a wide variety of entertainment. During the reception, Chef Bo from Aramark, who demonstrated the art of homemade pasta-making from about 12:05 pm to 12:25 pm. This demonstration went very well. Placed to the right of the entrance into the Tuscan ristorante dining room, Bo attracted many of our guests who attentively watched him create fresh pasta and fill fresh cheese raviolis.

Also in the reception area from 12:00 pm to 12:30 pm there was a talented JMU student, Sarah, who was observing the “Ponte Vecchio” from a distance and painting it directly onto a canvas for guests to pass by and take a look. In front of the Ponte Vecchio tapestry, we hoped guests would take part in the selfie stick station, but it did not seem to catch on and most guests simply walked by.

Once inside the dining room, guests were captured by a breathtaking video of the sights and views of Tuscany, Italy which welcomed guests into a Tuscan world. Once the video concluded, a PowerPoint presented pictures we took while abroad. This part of dining connected our guests to our own experience. A talented singer, Olivia Mullins, a student in JMU’s School of Music, performed Italian opera live, accompanied by a pianist, for guests to receive a first-hand experience of authentic Italian music. Olivia’s performance was authentic and truly amazing. She said she did not need a microphone because she has a strong voice and the pieces involved big sound. However, she happened to be in the dead zone of the Highlands Room that does allow sound to horizontally project, making it difficult for others to hear amidst the many conversations. While that was a minor hiccup in the entertainment, we quickly got a microphone for her to

perform again. Olivia was heard throughout the room this time and impressed all. Overall, most aspects of entertainment went according to our vision and were very successful.

VI. Summary of Guest Feedback

After receiving and reviewing all of the guest feedback we could not be more proud, as most of the reviews and comments were really kind and meant a lot to us. In regards to the reception area, we had received numerous comments on how wonderful the flow and ambiance were. The guests seemed to notice and enjoy all the small details, as well as the more pronounced details such as the pasta making station. A common complaint from guests was that the temperature of the food was not hot enough. Since the food is made in the kitchen upstairs then plated, put in the hot box, brought downstairs, and then served, the complaint is understandable. When guests were asked what their favorite part of the meal was, we received a multitude of responses: some said the dessert, some said the mushroom sauce, while others said the cheese at the action station. We were pleased that it was so varied because there was not one aspect of the meal that overpowered the others. Additionally, a few guests mentioned how they wished the three of us were more present amongst them. It was harder for us to alternate out during the dining service, being just a team of three, but we were happy to have the chance to spend more time in reception with our guests. In this case, we could have relied more on our supervisors to lead in the interim while we spoke with our guests. Overall the guest feedback made our hearts happy and was a pleasure to read.

VII. Summary of Staff Feedback

Overall, the staff feedback surveys was positive. In the first glance of numbers, we had over 85% in agreement that managers were ready for staff, name tags were available, the ambiance was good, orientation was organized, and all were introduced to the supervisors and managers they would be working with. In most cases, the survey results for such questions hovered around 92%-100%. However, there were some who answered that these actions did not occur. For instance, we did not have posters detailing all job responsibilities, but each staff member had their individual task card which detailed all that they needed from set up to during the event, to which tables they would be serving. In addition, the managers and supervisors were introduced in the beginning introductions. Potentially further introductions should be made regarding the roles of each supervisor and manager, rather than the quick one made at the beginning. This could lessen the amount of confusion for the staff, as often the introductions seem very quick.

As for reception specific training, we had 95% of staff agree that reception training was *good* or above. Although this is very positive news, there are some concerns when it comes to the questions asked in remainder of the survey. Although well over 50% agreed positively on the questions asked, it seems that there were some discrepancy in managers and supervisors getting to know staff by name, and for staff knowing what they needed 10 minutes prior to guest arrival. Confidently, one can assume that managers and supervisors made the effort to get to know staff members by name, but that was not always at the forefront of where their responsibilities were. This is unfortunate, as I am sure that it would have made a greater impact on the staff members. Additionally, some of the job duties and expectations could not be extremely clear farther than 10 minutes to guest arrival, or even upon guest arrival.

In the question that address what aspects worked well for *A Taste of Tuscany* reception, it was rewarding to hear such positive feedback. Those serving hors d'oeuvres were very pleased with the flow of food service, their expectations, and the layout of the reception area. Additionally, with coat check, the two working felt that it was easy to have a partner so that one could focus on giving the guest their number while the other focused on handling the garment. Furthermore, the two staff members working the check-in table were happy to be able to organize the boarding passes in a way that would make their jobs easier and more efficient. From their feedback, it seems to have been a very positive system. Finally, there were a lot of comments on the survey about the atmosphere of the staff and of the guests in the reception area; including the leadership of management and the hard work of the staff members.

On the opposite side of spectrum, there were aspects of reception that did not work or were poorly executed. A few staff members mentioned issues with their task cards, and the issue of there not being enough entrees for the amount of guests available. Additionally, some were concerned with the table layout being a little tight for the room space and the column. We did address one server's issue with the column and it would have been prudent to address it with whichever server was near the second column in the room. Additionally, a staff member brought up that a guest came to table 5 without knowing ahead of time. During the event, we addressed the additional guest with the specific server, letting them know that they would now be serving two guests instead of the one they planned on. This did not make sense to throw off the entire table, as this seat was at the end of the row. So, we looked into the problem. Evidently, two guests had switched seats, and one guest was under the impression that they had gotten the wrong meal, when in fact they did not. So, this miscommunication is what seemed to cause all the confusion.

In the Back of House, over 75% of the staff members found that the written communication detailing production schedules, job responsibilities, and emphasis on sanitation were helpful and occurred. Additionally, about 80% of staff members recorded that managers and supervisors were able to get to know them by name. Only about 55% (five students) reported completely confident in their job responsibilities, with 44% (four students) somewhat confident. However, it is important to note that only five students worked in Back of House from start to finish, and two students from reception joined for the time of service only. In total, seven students worked with back of house, yet responses ranged from nine to 11, and three students who completed the survey reported that they did not work in Back of House.

In the free response section of the Back of House, staff members remarked on how helpful, organized, and informed the managers were. In the negative section, some staff members felt as though they were not given enough direction especially when things did not go exactly according to plan. In the future, it would be beneficial to have any staff from other departments who would help out in back of house to meet with the Back of House manager to reiterate duties and responsibilities. Asking the staff members directly if they feel confident in their tasks is another way we could mitigate confusion.

The biggest negative complaint we received was in regards to us, as managers leaving after the event. I believe that this could be alleviated prior to the event by providing the staff with the knowledge that this will happen. It is a custom that the managers leave, to meet with Professor Lind for a debriefing of the event. With this knowledge ahead of time, I believe there will be less anger or disappointment towards this situation.

The overall positive reviews from the staff members were rewarding to read. They remarked on how beautiful everything looked, with a few staff members remarking that the event looked like Florence and that it helped them become excited for studying abroad or visiting Florence. We also were thrilled to have so many comments regarding our performance. We were able to provide direction, not add more stress to the staff members, create a great ambiance, and remind the staff members of their importance and how much we appreciated them. In the end, our event was a positive experience for not only the guest, but also the staff members, the supervisors, and managers. We were proud to have that effect on so many.

VIII. Detailed Financial Analysis

Our financial analysis serves as an overall summary of the master budget for *A Taste of Tuscany* Event. All of our revenue for this event came from ticket sales; we sold *A Taste of Tuscany* tickets for 37.50 each. Our goal was to have about 100 guests in attendance, so our total revenue would be \$3,750.00, which is equal to 100 guests multiplied by \$37.50 a ticket. However, with our actual guest count, the total food and beverage cost was \$1,855.88, which was subtracted from the total revenue of \$2,955.50. The price of a meal for each guest came out to \$21.18 with additional, as shown on the Aramark Contract. The Aramark contract not only provided the food and beverages for the event, but also provided all the dishware, cutlery, linens, tables, chairs and kitchen facilities. The food and beverage cost of \$1,855.88 (62.79%) was subtracted from our total revenue of \$2,955.50 to yield a gross profit of \$1099.62(37.21%). This gross profit of \$1099.62 was used to cover the operating expenses of the facility fee, employee meals, reception and dining decor, as well contingency. Out of this remaining amount of money \$50 was paid in order to rent the event venue at Festival Conference and Student Center.. Also we reserved in our budget

\$100.00 of contingency. Our entertainment was shown in our budget as a \$0.00 expense due to the generous donation of our performers. Our expenses also included the organizational and staffing expenses for the event, as well as the reception and dining expenses that are detailed in the following pages.

XI. Reception Budget: Forecasted vs. Actual

The budget for *A Taste of Tuscany* was a fluid document that we paid constant, close attention to and adjusted accordingly. As a team of three, we worked very hard to best utilize our limited revenue. This document outlines the changes between our forecasted and actual reception budgets, how we used our money, and why we made the decisions we did. Starting with the walls, we budgeted \$63.94 for stucco wallpaper, but ended up spending \$179.95 instead. Unfortunately, we were unable to buy the intended, less expensive, wallpaper and decided to completely cover one wall. By adding more stucco, the wall was more united and compelling for our guests. However, we could have still ordered slightly less, as there were a couple rolls unused. Additionally, because of how the wallpaper was hung, much of it was salvaged after the event and stored in the HM Closet for future use. As it is such a simple pattern, this wallpaper is versatile and an investment well worthwhile.

The focal point centered on the stucco wall was a set of Tuscan doors. We decided to use decal stickers to cover the Highland Room's doors with an image of rustic-looking doors. Fortunately, we found beautiful door adhesives totaling \$79.90, which resembled the blue door we saw in Florence's Boboli Gardens. Though an investment, they made a noteworthy impression on our guests.

Several items were also donated or purchased at a discount, which helped to create an even greater experience for minimal cost. From the HM Closet, we borrowed lattice, ivy, and brick corrugated paper. Then from family and friends, we displayed the bicycle, patio set, and “Ponte Vecchio” image. For our beverage station, the wine barrels were included in our contract with Aramark, and Brigid’s brother donated a wooden board to create a table. To decorate these spaces further, the fake flowers and the spray paint for the fountain were less than expected. Planning to spend nearly \$50, we spent only \$34. Furthermore, we saved money on our coat check tickets by making them with paper on hand. In addition, we found clothespins and twine for only \$1.00 each, saving about \$7.00. With conjunction of generous family and friend donations and conscious spending adjustments on our part, all decorations were well spent and no area of reception was bare or forgotten.

Other significant reception decorations were gossamer draped from the ceiling, pipe and drape for backdrops, and linens covering the walls. Originally budgeted at \$120.00 for pipe & drape and gossamer, we used some from the HM Closet for no additional cost instead. We also split the cost of four rolls of gossamer with the *Dine Between the Vines* group. Our final cost was \$55.98, saving us a total of \$64.02, which allowed us to allocate more funds to other decorations. Originally budgeted at \$275.00 for reception cost, the total spending was \$353.00 (including some items used both in dining and reception). A significant donation was offered for the employee breakfast, lunch, and snacks, which was budgeted for over \$150.00. In this case, we made up for extra costs incurred for reception decorations. Any discrepancies in items listed on the original budget, such as flowerpots, fleur de lis stamps, and burlap bags were items that were not crucial to the success of our event.

In conclusion, we did not have large funds to work with for our reception budget, yet we created an experience for our guests and staff members in which the Festival Highlands Foyer was unrecognizable. We completely transformed the space into a Tuscan piazza, while avoiding stereotypical decor. Ultimately, the decorations were just as we had imagined them. We were willing to make investments as necessary and worked with other groups to share decorations, ideas, and assist with any set-up or breakdown. Though some items were disposable, most of our decorations were donated for future use as well. Any anxiety about finding the right pieces or staying within the budget was worth it to achieving the desired result.

X. Dining Budget: Forecasted vs. Actual

For the dining costs, we budgeted \$517 for our 100% occupancy total costs (100 guests). In assessing a 20% reduction in attendance, we budgeted for \$328 (80 guests). With our final guest count of 83 people, we ultimately paid \$432.33 for all of the dining decorations. Saving \$78.00 with the employee breakfast donation, we went only \$20.00 over the forecasted amount of \$348.00. Our total amount due to Aramark was \$1,888.85, including the \$63.63 for biscotti takeaways. In our original 100% occupancy budget, taxes due to Aramark were \$207.00. In our actual payment, we were only \$77.00 shy of the total forecasted amount with taxes included. Moreover, we were not at the amount we were expecting to pay. However, we received donations of \$100 and \$75, allowing us more flexibility in spending. Our biggest expense for the dining decorations was our brick wallpaper at \$289.46. Similar to the stucco wallpaper, we had about two and a half rolls left over since we decided not to cover the wall behind the projectors. This was an expensive purchase that was made closer to the event, since other options were exhausted. While

some money may have been wasted here, we were willing to pay a more in order to have enough wallpaper in time.

For our forecasted organizational and staff materials expenses, we ended up spending less than expected. Budgeted at \$392.46, we spent only \$202.97 for costs including staff and back of house needs, printing costs, and a \$25 gift card for entertainment compensation. In turn, we could allocate those savings accordingly. Our total expenses for 83 guests were \$2,920.32, which was not only within the budget, but even less than the expected expenses for 80 guests at \$3,000. Remaining within our limited budget, we were pleased to create the event we envisioned.

Rooted in Italian Culture

As mentioned previously, the inspiration for this project was the rich culture of food and wine in Tuscany. In spending a semester studying the nuances and traditions of Italian culture, we found ourselves infatuated with every aspect. As we carefully chose our decor, menu, and entertainment, we reflected on our very own “taste” of Tuscany. Through this reflection, we recalled the sensational food and wine pairings experienced at local establishments, taking a simple meal and transforming it into something spectacular. The following is an excerpt from an essay by Jackie Herrick that reflects the change in our own perception of food, from that of sustenance to one of exploratory value and harmony:

Before arriving to Italy, my sensitivity to the pairing of food and wine was incredibly limited, let alone my understanding of what “food culture” meant. I have always enjoyed food, but on a day-to-day basis I often thought of it simply as a means to nourish my body. Culture on the other hand, seemed to be a collection of customs, which happened to include food. Throughout the semester, I discovered more deeply that food is an experience and an important force that shapes culture. The Italian identity is based in a large part on food. Italian staples each have backstories and are like windows into Italian culture and history. The locality of food, dining customs, and independent spirits are a reflection of the country’s history of fragmentation and division due to shifts in power and war. Not only does the food convey a sense of the country’s history, but the high quality of the food is also representative of care for each step in food production process that is so valued and protected in Italian culture. I now am more reflective on the history

behind the very food in front of me. For example, the reason Mozzarella di Buffala is so delicious is dependent on a series of factors: the milk it is made of; the health of the cow that produced the milk; the freshness of the grass that fed the cow; and the quality of the weather that allowed the grass to grow. All of the official designations for food, including IGP and DOP, each give witness to the very best quality of products. I not only gained a better understanding of food culture from the angle of pride in production, but also in the way in which it is enjoyed. In Italy, people take their time with meals, and waiters never rush guests in a restaurant. I always thought of food as a symbol of hospitality and a way of bringing people together. Sitting down for dinner with family has shown to result in improved grades and overall well-being for kids, to name a few. However, I learned that there is even more to food. When you take your time and enjoy a meal with others, it is actually physically beneficial for your health. With this outlook, food can uplift a culture like the U.S.'s that focuses so much on efficiency in time and production. Not only must food be sufficient, but it must be good for the person and taste good too. As our host at Piazza di Vino expressed, "Life is too short to not eat well". Food should not be rushed, but enjoyed. Food becomes not simply a means to satisfy hunger, but an experience. I never thought that I would feel like crying over how amazing a dish was (Herrick, 2015).

Thus, food became a transformative experience; We no longer felt as though we were tourists, but as though we were living in a country that constantly opened itself up to our imagination and taste buds. Since this experience of food is absent in the United States, we would have to strive to maintain it as we transitioned back into American Culture. In proposing our

Honors Project, we had no other option but to incorporate our love for the Italian food culture into our themed event. Knowing that many of our guests would have never visited Italy, we recreated the taste experience to the best of our recollection for them. This is demonstrated in our careful choice of menu items as well as the service order of such menu items. The following is an excerpt from a journal written by Brigid Greaney on the enlightenment of food culture as experienced in Italy:

My idea of food culture has increased while living in Florence. I am now completely aware that food is meant to be shared, that it tastes better if it is split among friends and family. I also was not aware of how deep the roots of food culture were in Italy, especially Tuscany. I was aware that Florence and Italy, in general, had good food but I did not know how important it was to have fresh, simple ingredients. Thus, my view on food has changed from a delicious way to get energy to a means of enjoying the company of others, the fruits of the earth, and the blessings that we have in this life. I am very excited to return back to the United States with the mindset of “eat and drink less, but eat and drink better.” I have found that it is not snobbish to desire good, wholesome ingredients, rather it is a way of being more aware of one's self and the food that they are consuming. Furthermore, the foods that I have tasted while on visits or in restaurants around Florence have opened my eyes to new flavors, combinations, and styles of cooking. I am excited to take everything I have learned and adjust my methods of buying and cooking food to respect nature, my surroundings, and the tastes that I deserve to enjoy. This class has been a delightful experience in taste, and I am so grateful to have been able to learn so much about

food, while enjoying my time, and deepening my love for the city of Florence
(Greaney, 2015).

Proudly, the three of us can state that our love for the city of Florence was shown through the execution of our themed event. We carefully chose each aspect of the event, leaving nothing to be taken for granted or passed by. It was the simplest of details that made us fall in love with the beauty of Italy, thus it was the simple details that we focused on to create our event, including postcards for our guests to leave us comments, olive oil on the table, and long tables that reflected the communal meals that Italians partake in. As we reflect on our event, it is with great joy that our connection to Italian Food and Wine Culture was emulated through our event.

Reflections

I. Brigid Greaney

This experience has been one that I am extremely fortunate to have had. Not only was I with two extraordinarily capable young women, but I was supported by my professor and advisor to do something that has never been done before, create a themed event with three group members. Though I knew that there would be a lot of time and effort involved in this endeavor, I was not prepared for the amount that I would learn through this process. I gained not only a deeper understanding for Italian Culture, but I understand some of the intricacies and frustrations that come with creating an event. For instance, a large portion of my responsibilities revolved around the budget and the financial aspect of the event. Thus, I needed to make sure that I was closely monitoring all deposits and expenses. Furthermore, I knew that we would have to submit all receipts and a detailed list of expenses at the end of the project. So, the understanding of a complex budget was something that I needed, not only to receive a good grade on the project, but to make an event successful, without worrying if we would have enough money or supplies. Though stressful, I believe that the skills I gained by managing the budget are invaluable. As stated earlier, we did not have an expansive budget to work with. In order to create *A Taste of Tuscany*, we needed to be creative. This is where I was extraordinarily thankful to have the group members that I did. Taylor and Jackie were both willing to search for hours for the perfect affordable piece, and to compromise when needed so that we could create an event that was meaningful, authentic, and memorable.

This project quickly took on a life of its own. I found myself spending days, hours, and nights working with Taylor and Jackie. We would run through every detail to its finest core, and

make sure that we had everything in order. Though time consuming, I found that this project was well worth all the work put in. To be able to see the event executed on February 12th was truly a remarkable thing. After months of preparation, February 12th came and went in a blink of an eye. The little details that we were so focused on took care of themselves, and any big issues were resolved because of our prior preparation.

I am a person of passion. I want to throw my heart and soul into something, or I will not want to do it at all. So, I was extremely fortunate to have a theme that I was so passionate about, and a team that I would never dream of letting down. It is these two factors that made the effort of this project completely painless. Never once did I begrudge having a meeting with Taylor and Jackie. I knew that after a meeting I would feel accomplished, rejuvenated, and in high spirits. It is truly remarkable to have been a member of a team with such passion.

Unfortunately, to be so devoted to something does not come without a price. There were moments of frustration, moments where things did not go according to plan, and moments where it felt as though we were the only three students at the University doing work on a Friday evening. However, we learned to not let our frustrations consume us. We learned to laugh at the constant turn of events, and to be joyful when things did go as we planned. At the onset of this project, we received a lot of criticism because we were a group of three students. We were told that the workload would be impossible, that we would each be on an island at our own event, and that there was a good reason as to why a themed event has never been executed by three students in the past. These criticisms only pushed us forward to our end goal; a successful event. Though passion can cause heartache and disappointment, I believe that it causes something much greater to occur; motivation. With pride, we did our very best, we took each task on as a group, and made sure that

no one felt alone in their responsibilities. We made a point to each learn the different aspects of the event, which created a fantastic dynamic on the day of execution.

I believe that I learned an immeasurable amount throughout this project, not only about event management, but about myself. I learned that I have a patience for some things, and a short fuse for others. I learned that I need a moment to think through a situation that I do not know the outcomes and circumstances very well, but can make a snap judgement on something that I had a purpose in creating and formatting. This entire project has been a learning experience that I am truly grateful for. I know that it is through *A Taste of Tuscany* that I was truly able to recognize where my strengths and weaknesses lie. It was near to impossible to hide any stress or emotions as they came, and it was a miracle that working in such close quarters, the stress felt upon my team was not taken out on each other. Fortunate is an understatement. I think of it as a great gift and opportunity to be chosen to execute this project, and from it I will take more than a grade, but a plethora of life lessons that will continue with me for a long time.

For lack of a better word, I must say that I could not have been more fortunate with the two group members that I had. Taylor and Jackie both challenged me to be the best I could possibly be. They were forgiving at times of my weakness, and celebratory in times of the team's strengths. It is because of them that I was able to put my all into this event. In hindsight, I am not sure that I could have put more effort into this event. I do believe, however, that I could have directed my efforts in a better way. I know I could have relied on my supervisors more. They were completely capable, but it was my own need to control that held me back from asking for help. I also believe that there were aspects of the event that I focused on too heavily, that caused me to lose sight of the bigger picture. However, I was blessed with teammates that would draw me back to the purpose

of our event. Our focus was to create an authentic Tuscan experience, to honor the history of Italian food and wine culture, and to bring such an experience to life in Harrisonburg. With that focus in mind, it is with extreme pride, fond memories, and a joyful tone that I end my themed event and honors thesis experience. I could not have asked for a better learning process, a better group, or a better time with such a consuming and important project.

II. Taylor Palma

After seemingly endless months, weeks, and days of planning, *A Taste of Tuscany* is all over. If someone would have asked me several months ago how I would be feeling at the end of this entire process, I probably would have said “relieved.” Now that it’s over, I am surprised to find myself with mixed emotions. I am feeling proud of my accomplishments, but this feeling is tinged with a strong sense of the bittersweet. Bitter because I am incredibly sad that it is over. I can’t help but think about all the work that was done for this event that was over in two short hours. At the same time, I recall the sweetness of just how wonderful the process was and how successful the event turned out. These classic words ring true for me, “Don’t cry because it is over, smile because it happened.”

Of course, I am feeling quite proud. I am proud of the effort I put into *A Taste of Tuscany*. I am proud of the process of designing and carrying out our plans. I am proud of the outcome. I am proud of my teammates, Jackie Herrick and Brigid Greaney. And I can honestly say that I am really proud of myself. Although I am a person who is usually very self-critical, often feeling that I could have done better, in this case, I do not think I could have done any more for this event. I realized that there comes a point when certain things are simply out of my control.

Leading up to the day of February 12th, I, together with Brigid and Jackie, spent countless months, weeks and hours planning and perfecting this event. We truly put our hearts and souls into *A Taste of Tuscany*, going above and beyond what was required, because we genuinely cared.

At the start of this event-planning process, I hoped that all of our guests would enjoy themselves and the three of us would prove that a Hart School Themed Event could be successfully completed with just three individuals, as opposed to five or six. I think that my hopes were met as well as most of my expectations. The head count for *A Taste of Tuscany* was probably the only expectation that was not met. I imagined that at least a hundred guests would attend, but we ended up having only eighty-three. I did not expect it to be so difficult to get people to attend and to pay the \$37.50 per ticket. I worked very hard on increasing these numbers. In fact, I think I worked harder on this themed event than on any exam I have ever studied for, any presentation I have ever given or any assignment I have ever completed. I really dislike saying that I worked hard because *we* worked hard. Brigid and Jackie and I each played an equal role in the planning and execution of *A Taste of Tuscany*.

Since this is a self- reflection, I will say that I worked very hard. I don't think that I ever fell short of my duties, going to sleep every night of this journey knowing I tried my best and worked my hardest.

In my opinion, the most difficult and frustrating factors were the things that I had very little control over. Here, I am referring to vendors and outsourcing. Our caterer Aramark, our encounters with the Staples copy center and our purchases at Walmart were the most difficult things in planning and executing this event. On the other hand, I thought the easiest part of this themed event involved the creative aspect. I found it easy to come up with a vision of what I wanted and

then make that vision come to life. It was the creative aspect that was the easiest and most fun for me.

Although the themed event is an out of classroom occasion, we did have readings and lectures to support our work. The lecture and reading that left the strongest impression on me was a reading from 317 on Event Coordination. I understood clearly that every event is held for a reason based on a desired benefit and event coordinators are the ones who bring individuals together at a particular place, at a particular time and for a particular purpose. They not only deal with the production/execution of an event, but also the planning and post event follow up as well. I was struck by this idea because I realized that the actual event is really only one third of the whole process. Once an event ends, the event coordinator's job is still not complete.

Thinking back on some important moments from my planning and execution phases of learning, my best memories involve physically creating event artifacts and putting them together in the latter phases of the process. I remember sitting in my living room with Brigid and Jackie taking the labels off wine bottles, realizing that this tedious task was bringing me joy because I was actually creating the decorations for our event. I think my worst moments were those when I was near exhaustion. I remember one Friday morning at 8 am, measuring all the dimensions of the Highlands Room and reception area and being so tired that I was physically but not mentally present. That was a self-realization, reminding me that sleep is essential for me to function at my best. I think another one of my worst moments was a Friday night when Brigid and I were running errands. Nothing was going according to plan with every store posing some kind of problem for us. We made one last stop at Walmart and they did not have the Hanes shirts we needed or the puffy paint. In that moment, I must admit I really felt defeated, a very rare feeling for me. Initially

I felt like crying, but instead, I began to laugh, reminding myself that in certain situations if you don't laugh you will cry.

I learned a lot throughout this process. I learned that events don't just come together and work out because of fate. They come together because you put in the effort to make it happen. I learned a lot of skills too. I learned to value the importance of flexibility, patience and most importantly I learned how to delegate. This was the hardest skill for me to really "get". I am most definitely a Type A person who has never really delegated in the past. Over the course of my high school and college careers, I have participated in numerous group projects, but I always wound up doing the majority of the work, never delegating anything to my peers. I first learned delegation alongside my teammates who I really trusted and we easily delegated tasks to one another. We still found it more difficult to delegate to our supervisors and staff. It was more difficult to ask these people to support our work because unlike my teammates, I thought that they did not know this event like the back of their hands. It took a lot for me not to prepare every detail of this event the night before and leave tasks for my staff. In the end, the staff and supervisors did wonderfully well and this event taught me that it is okay, and even beneficial, to delegate!

A Taste of Tuscany has not been a final journey for me as I realize that my travels are just beginning. This beginning trip is part of a much longer one, one that may take my entire professional life to complete. I am the type of individual who will keep striving for more. I never want to be comfortable or satisfied. No, I want to keep on learning more. This experience has solidified my dream of a career in event coordination; it is just the beginning of a life long journey!

Ferris Bueller was right. "If you don't slow down, you might miss it" (Hughes, 1986). This thought is very applicable to my experience with a themed event. It lasted just two hours, two hours which flew by like no other. I learned that sometimes you have to stop looking at the watch,

stop getting so wrapped up in process and simply slow down and look around. We need to take it all in because events have a way of going by really fast.

In retrospect, I could have improved in several ways as I planned and produced our Taste of Tuscany Event. First, I could have made better use of my supervisors. Each and every one of those five individuals has phenomenal abilities, but I did not utilize them as well as I should have. In fact, they executed their own themed event, Dine between the Vines, only twenty four hours prior and did a fantastic job. I should have tapped into their expertise more, realizing that they knew the ins and outs of themed events quite well.

Secondly, if I had utilized them more, I could have left the back of the house for longer blocks of time and been more visible on the floor during the dining portion. Lastly, I think that the night before the event, I should have done a better job at putting my mind to ease and my worries to rest. Instead, I was thinking of all the possible things that go wrong. Coupled with all the adrenaline flowing through my veins, I prevented myself from getting the rest I needed. That being said, I could have probably done a better job at relaxing my mind not just that night, but throughout the whole process.

At the young age of twenty-two with one month left of college, I realize that a lot is going to change in the five years ahead. I will begin a new chapter of my life, one filled with career, independence and adulthood. With these changes, I am going to need a wide range of knowledge and skills. These skills include patience, empathy and motivation. I am going to need to possess patience because not everything is going to happen at the drop of a hat. In my career, I am most likely going to start at the bottom and hopefully and eventually work my way up to the top. In order accomplish this; I am going to have to be patient.

I will also need to be self-motivated because at the end of the day, no one can motivate you better than yourself. Yes, people can inspire you but I strongly believe no one can be as strong a motivator as you, yourself. You have to be totally committed to accomplish your goals. In other words, you have to be self-motivated.

In addition, I know that empathy is a trait I am going to need. The real world is not a homogenous environment, but rather is made up of diverse people with different tastes, needs and interests. I am going to have to understand these differences and incorporate them into successful events.

Then too, I am going to need budgeting skills in order to be financially responsible. Within the next five years, I hope to be financially independent and move to Manhattan. In order to acquire a sufficient bank account, I will have to take personal budgeting very seriously. I did learn a lot about budgeting through *A Taste of Tuscany* even though it was only one themed event. It made me pay attention to the cost of the littlest things. This lesson will serve me well as I strive to accomplish my financial goals.

If some friends in the program were giving me advice and speaking with 100% honesty, they would tell me to relax, breathe and maybe sleep a little more than I did over the course of the process. As to my own advice, I would likewise tell myself to sleep a little more. If I were giving advice to my peers, I would tell them to enjoy the process, because they will miss it once it is over. I would also tell them to really enjoy the moment. I might suggest they take three steps back, look around and appreciate the small accomplishments along the way.

I would also advise my peers to work with people who bring out the best in you, but who are also different from you. I say this because I worked with two extraordinary young women on my themed event, but these young women were nothing like me. This brought a diversity of

thoughts to our themed event. There was never group think amongst us, but our differences of opinion allowed creativity to flow. I would advise my peers to choose people who are willing to challenge one another's ideas and at the same time are dedicated, hardworking and trustworthy. My team members met all these qualifications and were able to keep me sane and level-headed throughout the process.

III. Jackie Herrick

Four years ago, I would never have imagined all that I would accomplish here at JMU. From studying abroad in Florence, Italy, to executing a Themed Event, to completing a collaborative Honors Project, my experiences have become interwoven together, as with a tapestry of interacting scenes. Initially the joys and struggles along the way simply appeared as a gradually growing collection of knots. It was unclear to me how they would all work together to create a united work of art. I was still only seeing the back of the tapestry. As I approach the milestone of graduation, I am beginning to tie some closing knots, finishing off a few destined colors of thread. I now look from the vantage point where the tapestry's image is slowly being revealed; in perspective this is only a mere corner of my life. In the following reflection, I will expound upon how my experiences in my time at JMU have shaped my Honors Project, and how my Honors Project has shaped me.

Imagine a Tuscan Piazza. The cobblestone underfoot and the scents and sounds of craftsmanship fill the air: the shoemaker slicing new leather, the chef putting pizza to the oven's fire, the flutist performing Vivaldi outside the Uffizi, and the painter capturing a new scene in ink. Florence encapsulates the beauty of the Renaissance in all forms of art, and the Italian culture is one that is best understood when lived. Setting foot in James Madison University's Palazzo Capponi in Florence, my life was enriched in the deepest sense. With studies in Food and Wine Culture of Italy, my appreciation grew further when experiencing these elements first hand. The

world around me was my classroom. Little did I know the profound ripple effects that this would create in my life.

Upon returning to the United States, I found myself falling short in describing the beauty and richness of the Italian way in full. Consider a backstitch: the needle moves backwards at first, only to move forward again with a more secure bond. I had a noticeable connection with those who studied abroad in Florence; we had a unique understanding of each other and our experiences. With my mind continually wandering back to Tuscany, my desire to share this experience—now a part of myself—was insatiable. When it came to academics, I longed for experience over the limitations of theory. It came time to consider my Honors Project, to be simultaneously attempted with the Themed Event planning and execution in the Hart School. An overwhelming proposition, it was indeed. However, by combining the two, it would be a truly integrated experience of theory and application. Coincidentally, or rather not, the other two of the first Honors Hospitality Management students, Brigid Greaney and Taylor Palma, also studied abroad with me in JMU's Semester in Florence Program. Joining together as three, we collaboratively envisioned a weaving of our time in Florence, the Hart School, and the Honors College. This triad of experiences would become the fabric of our Themed Event and Honors Project: "A Taste of Tuscany".

While we could not bring our family and friends back to Florence with us, we could share a replica of the scene by bringing "A Taste of Tuscany" to them on James Madison University's campus. With a chief importance on authenticity of cuisine, entertainment, and atmosphere, my worry was that our vision would not manifest itself appropriately. With hours upon hours of work from September through February, every aspect of our event was thoughtfully designed. When the time came, it was the collective preparation of the minutest details that brought our vision to fruition, tangibly and intangibly. Seeing the entrance to the doors of what was the Highlands Room

transform into an Italian piazza made my heart full of that familiar joy last experienced abroad. With my family and friends partaking in the undeniable ambiance, what was a distant dream became something real. They not only received “A Taste of Tuscany”, but also a part of myself, in a way that could only be given through an experience—something lived. As Taylor Palma would say, “We learned, we lived, and we loved.” Her words inaudibly echoed in the interiority of those in attendance when delivering the countless moments of truth. Our guests understood what Tuscany truly meant; guiding their tapestries’ designs even if just for a few hours, as I know it did mine. The internal shift within myself was equally as transformative as the visual space itself.

The event execution not only engaged my passion for Florence, but also my motivation for professional mastery. Recreating our experiences in an event involved notable personal growth as well as poignant learning curves. In acquiring the practical skills and knowledge of event planning in class, I was then able to comprehensively apply the theory in real life circumstances. It was not solely event management put into practice, but also the interplay of management, leadership, communication, critical thinking, cost control and budgeting, and culinary application—all previous coursework at JMU. Our themed event proved to be the ideal Honors Project: the culmination of our academics, experiential learning, and personal development.

The lessons that I learned in the event planning process can be captured through the metaphors of a couple sewing stitches. First, envision a running stitch: a simple up and down weave through the cloth to move forward quickly and directly, often to outline a shape and allow for further design. With the framework established, sometimes that is enough to operate more freely within blank space. In contrast, as the Back of House Manager, I planned to the smallest minutiae of service. These embroidered details were not practical however in the flurry of plating the dishes. It was time to simply improvise with a pixelated, yet efficient image. It seemed I was not only

embroidering, but also even crocheting my way off of the framework, creating my own fabric. When my plans conflicted with that of Dining, confusion ensued. I learned at that point that it was time to put down the binder of notes and guidelines, and trust our grasp and handle of the event. While there were a few disappointments in the quality of food delivered from catering, our guests enjoyed the meal with few complaints.

Moreover, I understood how interdependent event managers must be with each person involved. Not only the caterer, but the supervisors and students working were pivotal to the success of the event. I learned to rely on others more and more throughout the planning process as well. Without Brigid and Taylor, this project would be impossible. The shared vision, determined effort, and intellectual ingenuity made for an effective and efficient team. Each member contributed with her gifts and talents, and was always there when needed most. Working with these colleagues of such high caliber, I realized that my own strengths (i.e. organization, time management, etc.) could only be improved. In the planning and execution behind the scenes, I learned as much about myself as I did event management.

Embarking into the professional world, I will take with me all the stitches and knots of experience formed in the process of developing and executing “A Taste of Tuscany”. From the Semester in Florence to the Honors College and Hart School, a common thread unites them all and continues to weave through the tapestry of my life. The joys and struggles in my time at JMU inspire and remind me of what I am capable of – and that I will do even greater things than these. Many lessons from these experiences will not come to light today, or tomorrow, but will surface at the right moment. As I begin my profession in Conference Center Management, I will remember even more than the Tuscan hospitality with physical and interior nourishment, or the interdependency of successful and complementary teams. I will come away from the Honors

Project with profound sense of the integration of life experiences into the person I am becoming. The next stitches in my life both proceed into new territory, while continuing to embroider on the past. Savoring the moments in which even just a corner the tapestry's image is revealed is enough to know that life is worth the adventure and awe to see it completed at the end.

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