

Interview with Sean Murray, Marquette, MI. April 7, 2007  
(On the Sweet Water Café, 517 N. Third St. Marquette MI)

Melinda Stock: Sean, when were you born?

Sean Murray: I was born in 1959, April 8<sup>th</sup>.

MS: Where did you go to high school?

SM: I went to high school at Cuperli Senior High School, in Palo Alto, California. I also went to Gunt High School, also in Palo Alto.

MS: Where did you go to college?

SM: I went to Foothill Community College. In Los Altos, California, and I went to UC (University of California) Santa Cruz.

MS: And where did you go to grad school?

SM: I went to the hotel school at Cornell. Studied hotel administration.

MS: Why did you decide to come to Marquette?

SM: Bit of luck, actually, just because it was a university town, close to the lake, close to Ontario, where my grandfather lived. Close to the place where Ursula's family has an annual canoe trip, in Canada. And for no other reason other than that. Thought it might be a nice place to grow up, and become an adult.

MS: What experience did you have with business before the Sweet Water?

SM: Well, I'd been a cook and a baker all my life. I'd worked for some small businesses. And then I visited Santa Cruz after I graduated, I started a catering business, in an apartment. And I spent a few years catering there. We catered to mostly to clubs and swap optimist clubs and business clubs. And retirement communities, mobile home retirement communities where senior citizens would have a multi purpose room, in each of these communities, where some would eat dinner, some of them would have entertainment for the evening and whatnot, and we always catered family styled meals to them. And they brought there own silverware, and we brought dishes to pass around. And we had about fifteen accounts. And that's just about it.

MS: Why did you decide to start the Sweet Water Café?

SM: Well I think I first got the idea to start a café when I was in high school. I wanted a place; I just enjoyed the hanging out in coffee shops and talking to people and the social atmosphere of the coffee shop. It's not what the café became but it's what started the idea.

MS: How did you decide to start it with Ursula?

SM: I don't know we both seemed to have a notion to do that. We talked about service culture once and thought that it would be interesting to try to create a better service culture, where you would have a meaningful relationship with someone who is serving you. More of like the idea of the French maitre d' knowing everything a bout the food and having some class and being able to accommodate you with and provide you with service for the evening. We though hat kind of service was important.

MS: What do you know about the history of the building before you owned it?

SM: Well I know that it was Ten O'clock Charlie's. And it had been built as a result of two fires. The foundation was, at one time it was North Wind Appliances warehouse. And another time, earlier than that it was, I think it was a one room school house. Because one time an old lady came to the café and said I went to school here, and she described it as a one room school house. All that's left of that is three walls of the basement. But Ten O'clock Charlie's was a sort of a dance bar. There were lots of bands. They served food, lunch and dinners. They had picnic tables in there. Stir fries mostly. And then they had these bands. I had been there a couple of times. And it struck me that the interesting thing about Ten O'clock Charlie's is that everybody went, and of all ages. So you had the college crowd in there and fifty year olds in there, and everyone in between. And they all seemed to gather at this place around local bands mostly. I don't know much about North wind appliance and what it was like there. Except that the building was bigger and connected, it covered most of the property. The schoolhouse was sort of interesting. Nobody else had ever spoken of that before. But I mentioned it to a couple people, what they'd known about it. That would go way, way back. There was one guy who came in he said, "You know about a hundred yards back behind the Sweet Water there was a shop, a little garage shop, where a guy made the first out board motor, for boats." So there's a lot of innovation in Marquette, the same motor innovation that Michigan is known for.

MS: What were some of the problems you had when it (the Sweet Water) first started?

SM: Well, one big problem, I think I'll always remember is there is a notion that you decide about the function before you go for form. And I went into that building and I had a function all mapped out. What the restaurant would be and how versatile it would be, and how I would make breads. Yet the building was already there and it had a small kitchen so I crammed the function that I had in mind into the form of that building. And made it work. By just sheer determination and muscle. And yet that's probably not the best thing. Because then I had to live with that. It's not the most beautifully designed eatery place in the world. Actually there's quite a few inefficiencies about it and certainly needs a bit more of the other half and the promise that we had to provide food and service. So that problem we were with, and it was one of the first problems.

MS: Can you describe what some of the inefficiencies are?

SM: Well, the kitchen's really small, very small, and there's very little space to even clean things up. Like pots and pans and the dishes. Our system is sort of, it's adequate, but far from streamlined, and for all the food that we produce in there and for the plates that we put out on a daily basis, it's just cramped. People will bump into each other a little bit and you have to be organized in a certain way to be prepared for the crowds on time. We spread the baking out, there's a convection oven in the kitchen and then out in the service area where we have all the beverage service we have put a lot of the baking functions, so there's a table, a mixer, and a beater we mix the bread doughs and let it rise there and form the loaves and let it rise there and then put in on pans and carry it into the kitchen and take it off and then pull it out and put in on the rack. That creates a kind of space inefficiency. And then, the servers, when they get drinks for people, they go from one corner of the building to the other corner of the building, just to get a drink, and along the way they can pick up food or drop off orders but it's a lot of steps. A gal who used to work there measured it one time and she walked about five miles in a typical shift. So just the layout of the space and trying to do so many things in a small space.

MS: How did you decide what to put on your menu?

SM: Well originally it was all things that I cooked. And I love to cook, and it was thing that I thought was really good and I wanted to try that. And I wanted to have food cooked and prepared in that quality way, and that artful way. So it started as all the things that I carried with me in my history of work. And then later, as it evolved, it was more of a collaboration of what employees like to eat and what other cooks who work there like to cook or brought into the mix that customers like. Well, we developed dishes that just from the feedback from the people in the building, those dishes ended up on the menu. But really grew into a more collaborative menu but it started my personal experience.

MS: What is one of your favorite dishes on the menu?

SM: Well, personally I like the ginger stir fry. All of the dishes have there own little history too. The stir fry, the sauce came from a combination of recipes. I had a sesame stir fry and I had a ginger stir fry. And I combined the recipes and created a sauce. We had both and we flip back and forth and then I simplified it and created one that was kind of a mixture of the two. But originally the recipes came from my grandmother (Dorothy Benson), my grandmother who didn't like to cook much. She had a zesty chicken salad recipe that she made and I copied that, and it evolved. It nothing like what she made but it's now something of its own kind and that's a pretty good sign. And the vegetables that you put in, and the meat that you put it are all of the relevance. It's the technique once you have the sauce and the stir-fry technique. You prepare your vegetables and your meats in a way that's appropriate for stir-fry and put the sauce on and put it in the pan. Another favorite recipe of mine is the cafe scramble and it has an interesting history. It also evolved a long time ago, my father (William Murray) and I were talking about um heart-smart, and not eating as much meat (pork, in particular) but how pork creates such a delicious flavor, because of the fat, so we created the cafe scramble, which had a little bit of a sausage, a pork sausage that we made, just in small amounts, mixed with tofu and vegetables and it was all sautéed in a pan with a little garlic and butter and sauce and then some vegetables, onion, tomatoes, and broccoli and some tofu and then a little bit of the pork sausage so it creates this light flavorful kind of dish. Then people ordered it without the pork, so it was a vegetarian thing right from the start, and then a lot of people changed it a bit, you know, ordered it special. They'd order it with feta cheese, with out the sausage with feta cheese or a million different ways. I remember the frustration of one chef: he got an order for eight people who were all sitting at the table and six of them had ordered the cafe scramble and every single one was different. For a standard dish, over time that evolved. We steam the dish now instead of sautéing it. that's because um there are stations in the kitchen and uh the station where they make omelets and eggs and sauté is very overloaded by our menu and the station where we make toast and sandwiches and steam items is very under loaded so we changed the recipe and preparation method and steamed it a little bit and created a juice sauce and we serve that in a cup, now everybody likes it that way although I remember how it was so it, too, evolved over time according to the needs of the kitchen and what people liked and (what the cooked enjoyed making)

MS: So you said that you started steaming it because the area that was sautéing was overloaded. Does that kind of show that some of the inefficiencies of the building had an influence on the menu?

SM: Over time it did, but it wasn't so much the inefficiency at that point, it's was that you're

standing there and you have a dining room full of people ordering breakfast, um, there's you know a couple of burners for eggs and everything there's a station that serves (?) that makes the eggs and everything, there's a griddle and you know French toast and other kinds of things go down on the griddle, potatoes. And then there's a steamer that precooks the potatoes and does some prep work for us but also cooks a few. Anything that needs to be cooked in the steamer. We do poached eggs in there, also and then a toaster so there's this line of them, so we have three people working. They have to divide out. So everything's made on those four burners that are sautéed, like we make all our omelets in a pan. We make all of our eggs in a pan. So if you add cafe scramble to the pan. You add the spiced potatoes to the pan. So then, a lot of things are happening on four burners, and the person next to them can't really help, because it's a bottleneck at the burner, so we just. It's a balance at the menu and what people are ordering so we shifted many items over, and we do think of that when we, I think any restaurant does, it's not a matter, think about what the stations are, and how to balance the work in the stations so everybody can be efficient.

MS: How do you decide what decorations to put up?

SM: Well, the season decides it. We put up shows for artists in the community. And basically, it's their art that we display at our states. And we change it every six weeks. It's something that Ursula does. A lot of people really appreciate the idea that the art changes and that the local artists have the opportunity to hang their art. And not all the art is for sale either, which I really appreciate. I think it's fun to be able to say to people, "No that piece of art isn't for sale, you can't have that, you can't buy that. That's just for your appreciation right now." It's the way I feel about food sometimes. You make a lovely meal, and you can't make it again. It's never going to be the same. Not exactly, because food isn't that way and I like to be able to say, "Well, no, enjoy that food right now the way it is because you won't get it again. It's a one time thing."

MS: What are the different jobs at the Sweet Water, and what are their responsibilities.

SM: Oh, there are many jobs. Well you have owners and I'm an owner and a general manager. And you have service managers, and kitchen managers, which are on the same level. And you have kitchen staff, cleaners who clean everything including the dishes, and servers, and that's the service staff. Service managers and kitchen managers are in a supervisory sort of role. Everyone there is expected to perform at a certain level of responsibilities, that is somewhat minimized. It's just that those managers make calls, judgment calls when it's necessary. So there's a hierarchy of let them decide. And have it be done, so that there's no conflict. It minimizes conflict. The service staff is there to be prepared to serve people and for actually serving people. The kitchen staff is responsible for being prepared to serve food, prepare for to order and for actually preparing that food cooking that food as well. Cleaners are responsible for the organization and orderliness for all of the utensils in the building, and getting them back to where they go after they've been cleaned and cleaning them, as well as custodial duties. And cleaning the facilities and cleaning up to prepare for serving people.

MS: How do you decide who to hire?

SM: Well, I prepared a list of twenty questions that I still use in interviews today. I don't need to use all of them and they're a little bit repetitive sometimes and after using those questions for so many years, it comes down to, I chose people based on whether I think that they are capable of learning, and continuing to learn the art of food service. And I prioritize that learning dimension

over what experience they have. There might be a case where I'm looking at two people and one of them has a lot more experience but I feel they won't do as well in the job because of the learning aspect. The other thing that's really important, kind of secondary is whether they'll fit in with the coworkers and the staff that's there at that time, the culture. If I think that somebody is not going to fit in with that culture and not going to have a positive experience working there because of whatever the culture is at the time, it does change from time to time, then I would probably not hire that person, just because only we have so have energy, and we can't sort out those conflicts that are not important to serving people. The whole idea of the mission is to serve. To serve food to people and that's what we have to focus on.

MS: Can you give an example of some of the questions you asked to determine those qualities about the person?

SM: Yeah, well, one of the things I ask, I ask if a person has. What are the goals at this time in your life? And it's a really broad, open ended question. The response provides insight into how that person thinks about their life. And that response is sometimes more telling than anything else. Interviewing somebody for custodial work cleaning and dishwashing, you have no idea on if they're going to be good or not. What their experience is. It's just, there's no way to figure out ahead of time whether they have what it takes to do that job, so some of these other dimensions become important, in trying to solve a person's ability to work for you.

MS: What are some of the problems you have in running the Sweet Water today?

SM: Well, this year everything has changed. We have for years and years and years, you could use last years sales on this. On the 273<sup>rd</sup> day of the year, or the 45<sup>th</sup> Monday of the year, the sales on that day of the year would be a very good predictor of what the sales of that day of the year for the next year would be. And there's some growth and a like but in general for all kinds of reasons, it was reasonable to predict sales based on that. But this year, or this past year, things changed, the minimum wage increase, and there's more minimum wage increases scheduled for this coming year, this year in July actually, and so that increase was a big jump and so we had to raise our prices to respond to that. And the market place responded to that by not eating out as much. And I think that, that generally happened with a lot of restaurants around town. But behind all that there's a skittishness with regards to the economy, and spending money in general. And I think there's sort of a, hold your breath and see kind of thing. I know that there other businesses that suffered lower demand that aren't in the service industry this year as well, and it's not really clear where that's coming from or why. So there's so a price increase because of the labor price increase, and there's something going on in the economy. And we were raising our prices because of cost of food, cost of (?), and the overhead was going up for the minimum wage increase. Then there's a lot of restaurants around, a lot more than there used to be. So all of these things, and then the tourist economy was poor this year, we had a poor snow season in the beginning before Christmas, even after Christmas. And last summer, the counts coming across the bridge, our summer tourism is down, and so all these things have created a degree of uncertainty. Don't know how to look at the future, don't know if we should change a lot or just a little, or just hang tight or what we should do exactly. It's hard to figure it all out. So that's, I'd say that's the biggest problem facing the café right now, cause you can't pattern the future on the past. We're in a new era, and we've been open for fourteen years, and we're in a new era.

MS: What is the most beneficial thing about owning the café?

SM: Well, I like the ability to get good quality food at whole sale prices, that's a side thing. I can buy organic spring mix greens from California at wholesale price, which are very expensive in the supermarkets, that kind of thing. I think also just being in contact with so many different people, both customers and staff, we have about one hundred staff a year and about three hundred percent turn over rate. Um we do have people who stay, for you know, four or five years at a time, but we have a lot of people who come and go, so since we've opened, I would guess that we've had about fourteen hundred employees, and they come back and see us from time to time. And that's kind of a benefit, that social aspect. Also I like the ability to have control over my time. I can set my work, a lot of work that needs to be done, but if I want go and see my child performance at school or presentation at school or athletic event, I can just go and do that. I'm not held to somebody else's time.

MS: What are your future plans for the café?

SM: Well, we're right in the process of creating those future plans now, and revamping the whole system, the whole business. What kind of remodeling do we need to do? What kind of new menu do we want? Future plans are being formulated for the café. It's kind of along the ball that uncertainty of the economy and what to do about it. It's just time for the café to rethink what it's going to be. What kind of menu it should be offering? What kind of remodeling we should do.

MS: Is there anything you would like to add?

SM: Nope,

MS: Thank you for letting me interview you.

A Dining Area of ms2

04-23-2007

Entrance of the Sweet Water

04-23-2007

Kitchen of Sweet Water

04-23-2007

Sam Murray and Ursula Stock 11-2006



Side of Sweet Water Café 04-23-2007



Sean Murray 04-23-2007



A Dining Area of café 04-23-2007



Entrance of the Sweet Water 04-23-2007



Kitchen of Sweet Water 04-23-2007



Sean Murray and Ursula Stock 11-2006