

Interview with Ursula Stock, Marquette MI, April 7th 2007
(On the Sweet Water Café, a restaurant on 3rd street in Marquette)

Melinda Stock: Ursula when were you born?

Ursula Stock: I was born in January of 1957

MS: Where did you go to high school?

US: I went to high school in Fairview, Ohio, which is a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio, on the Westside.

MS: Where did you go to college?

US: My college was Bemidji State University in Northern Minnesota. And I studied Biology there.

MS: Where did you go to grad school?

US: For graduate school I went to Cornell University, in Ithaca New York. And I studied in the school of Hotel Administration.

MS: How did you meet your future business partner, Sean Murray?

US: I went to graduate school to look for him. I was living in Amish country prior to that. And it took me more than six years to figure out that I didn't want to marry an Amish man. And so I did decide at some point that I did want to find a partner, and I had also decided that I wanted to do business so I went to look around to see what I needed to open my own business. And I needed financial back round. So I applied for job for a company in Cleveland called (?) And that company was a consulting firm. And I would have got lots of experience crunching numbers and looking at peoples businesses. However, in the last interview, after the position had been offered to me the head of the Cleveland office, who was 65 and married and had a few children tried to kiss me. That was disgusting, yeah. Fortunately, that very same day when I got home my acceptance to Cornell University was awaiting me in the mail box. So I decide to go to Cornell. And that's where I met Sean.

MS: Why did you decide to come to Marquette?

US: Well, after grad school. Sean and I drove across the United States, in his 1972 VW bus, with my big brother Chris. And the purpose of this journey was for him to meet my family and for me to meet his family, and to attend the annual Stock Family and Friend Canoe Trip, and to look for a town to open our restaurant in. We drove across the country, and we found Marquette. They're nodding because that's not the answer Sean gave. And that's okay. We're two very different people.

Sean Murray: That wasn't the purpose of the journey.

US: For me it was, but okay.

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

US: Well I'm from a family of entrepreneurs. My granddad (Arthur J. Stock) started a company called Stock Equipment Company (1929) that made one of his inventions which is called a Coal Feeder. It's a machine that feeds coal into generators to make electricity and both power plants in

Marquette have Stock feeders inside of them. That was just one grandfather. And the other grandfather created the nickel/chromium alloy (patented in 1906), I'm sorry, great grandfather (Albert Leroy Marsh), he invented the nickel/chromium alloy, which is the medal that turns red hot in toasters and heating elements. And it doesn't just liquefy. And, I'm sorry; I forgot what the question was already.

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

US: That's right. I helped my aunt to open a country inn (The Inn at Honey Run) in Holmes County, Ohio. That was in Amish country. That job was a lot of fun. And then later I went to work at the Wooster Inn. And I was part of a team that help that in stop \$2,000 a year losses. And from there I decided I wanted to open my own business.

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

US: I was working full time in hospitality and I really enjoyed the work. And I especially enjoyed the food part. And I realized that I was making very money per hour doing that. Most of my employees were making more than I was. And I figured maybe if I worked for myself, that would change. It hasn't changed, but I've accomplished a lot of other goals, in opening a business. And I'm proud of that.

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

US: The Sweet Water Café use to be Ten O'clock Charlie's. It was built by a guy named Chad Martin. The open Ten O'clock Charlie's and that was a dance bar that served American and Chinese cuisine. It was a very, very fun place. It was open for about seven years, and declared bankruptcy, which is how we got a hold of the building. Prior to that Chad had owned the Tip Top Café, which was actually located two buildings up and right now the Business Club Casualties is in that building. The booths that are in the Sweet Water came from the Tip Top, and we use to have an old phone booth too, a beautiful old maple phone booth, but that was sold and it's in one of the Victorian homes here in Marquette. And the Tip Top was owned by a couple. Rose is still alive but her husband died a long time ago and they were known for sitting in the booths and talking to their costumers. It was a very popular place.

MS: What were some of the problems you had when you first started?

US: Some of the problems we had when we first started we didn't know how to handle all the business that came to us. We were swamped. And even though we were overstaffed, we just weren't ready for the huge welcome we got in Marquette. We had some funny little problems too. Like we decided not to have a grand opening but to just open for two days and invite all the people who had helped us to get this restaurant open in Marquette. They could come and eat free for the first two days, so that we could work out the bugs, in the restaurant. And that was really fun, so all these people came. And they came in whenever they felt like it. And they ordered whatever they wanted, and told us what we needed to hear. And we also figured out a lot of little things needed to be worked out. So we could make our service a little, or simple things like have the silverware in the most convenient location, how to set up the line in the kitchen so that you could produce the plates fast enough if you got a big seating of people all at once. And then after those two days, the next day we were going to open for real to the public. And it was about ten o'clock at night, and Sean and I realized, we had no money for the cash register. We had completely forgotten about that. And at that point in time, neither one of us had a bank card; we

couldn't just drive to the bank and get money out of the teller machine. I don't know if they even existed then. They must have, I don't remember them though, we weren't ready for that. So we, at ten o'clock at night we were calling our friends asking if they had any change in their house. And we finally found one friend Brad Levans, who had fifty-three dollars of change. So we went over to his house and got the change and opened with that next morning. We opened at 6am. And by nine o'clock we could go to the bank and get some real money, to run the restaurant on.

I think we had a lot of problems with learning how to hire people. We tended to hire people who were really in need. And we're not counselors. That was the wrong kind of need. We needed to hire people who were well and whole, and able to work hard because food services is really challenging. So I think hiring took us a lot of time.

And other issues, other hard thing was just how much time it'd take; we were open seven days a week. We had two very young children at the time. It took a huge, huge amount of our time. Sean was working 12 (and) 14 hour days. And as soon as I could, I was pitching in so that he could be home with the boys now and then.

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

US: Really, Sean did most of the menu design. And I don't think that we actually started with this. We started the mission immediately. We had a mission statement that said "a quality food service package." Well what does quality mean? It can mean all different kinds of things. But over the years it's really evolved to mean making foods from whole ingredients. That's what the Sweet Water is all about. Why do we care about whole ingredients? Well, there's corporate food production in the United States where everything is pre-made in massive factories, pre packaged, and it comes and it comes to you and that processing takes a lot of steps that probably aren't very good for human health. Like for instance, you heat things really hot, you trash the nutrients and vitamins. You add a lot of fats; you're wrecking the original whole food. When you have to package it and ship it, and you know it's not going to be eaten for a week or two, you add food coloring and stabilizers and texturizers. Those things are non-food products. So really our menu started developing around "what can we make that's absolutely just heavenly, out of whole ingredients?" And really, that's just around everything.

We both have had a lovely lifetime of eating a fair amount of ethic foods too. So there's a bit of ethnic flavor on our menu. When it first opened we had humus and tubule on our menu, and I remember many, many people coming in and furrowing their brows, wondering what the heck those foods were, they'd never heard of them here. And within a few years, you could buy them in all the grocery stores. You could buy pre-made humus; people just didn't know what it was.

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

US: I had worked in a lot of restaurants. Restaurants typically rent out there space for weddings and stuff. And I remember we had this one dining room with this beautiful green and peach carpeting and gold. And a couple rented it and there wedding was pink and lavender. And so we had pink and lavender tablecloths with this green, peach, and gold carpeting and when you walked into the room, it was really atrocious. I hated it. And I realized that if I were to ever design a room for flexibility I would make it as neutral as possible, so that you could change the flavor of the room very quickly, just with tablecloths, or napkins, or a little splash of color here and there. So I did that. And then it was time for us to open. And here's our dining room, pretty

monochromatic. A dull grey blue, white walls, and light wood. And it was very stark, like an Amish home. I liked it but it was to stark for a restaurant, it wasn't warm.

So I had this friend who had these three daughters who were very talented at making art. I called her up and asked if I could barrow a bunch of her kids pictures. They were these wax resist pictures and the color was remarkable, and very, very bright. And she said yes. So I borrowed a whole bunch of kids art and hung them on the walls. And of course that only lasted a little while. Then we were tired of those, and kids wanted their art back. So I started finding artists to display there. And in the beginning it was all local artists. It's still mostly local artists, but I've had some art from China, and from the Philippines. But it's mostly local artists and it changes every six weeks. And I think I'm on my eighty-seventh art display now.

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

US: Well the most important are the cleaners. We start with the cleaners. We have about eight cleaners. They are mostly college students. They come in and wash all the dishes. They maintain the entire building. They mop the floor, clean the bathroom, clean all the kitchen equipment. They take care of the walls, rafters, which get dusty, that's a bit of a job, to take care of that. The parking lot, everything. They have to be very good time managers. They operate off of a list. I don't hover over them and tell them what to do. They use a list and they get it done as thoroughly as they can and as fast as they can. And they have a manual and all of us as reference people to help them.

The next job is the service staff. They are responsible for selling and serving food to our customers. And educating customers about the food, and answering their questions. Then we have service managers. They're the people who are back as hosts. They seat guests, they supervise an entire dining room, answer the telephone. They manage all kinds of communication between all the staff within the café. Recently they've been taking over advertising and scheduling too. They're really the front of the house managers.

We have our cooks in the back of the house. We have about nine cooks, actually they're all chefs. And their responsibility is to prepare food according to our recipes for our standard menu. And they also all make specialty items that are their own recipes or ones they research. And that's why we keep our chefs at the wages we pay them. The wages aren't fantastic. They're comparable to Marquette wages, but they're nothing like the University with full benefits. But we keep staff at the Sweet Water because they really enjoy that ability to do their own thing. And they get to do that with soups, and deserts, and specials.

And then there is one other job, that's the general manager. That's Sean and I. We do all the paper work, A fair amount of meetings with the staff, trying to keep things up to date, writing all the manuals, updating the manuals, keeping track of the sales and the numbers and scheduling so that we're not losing money, building maintenance, business plan, we keep a business plan going all the time for how we're going to move into the future. And that's all the jobs at the Sweet Water.

MS: How do you decide who to hire?

US: We have a standard set of interview questions that we ask everybody. We accept applications all year long. We go through those applications, we through the standard set of interview questions. And we try to determine if that individual would be a good match for the Sweet Water, and also the Sweet Water for that person. What are they trying to do in their lives. How would the job at the Sweet Water fit in with that. And will they have enough energy to do

the job that is required of them at the Sweet Water. And does it fit there lifestyle. So we try to look at those questions, and we encourage them to look at that also. And that's really one of the most fun jobs I have, is interviewing people. I love it. Meeting new people, it's great, finding out what people are up to.

MS: What are some of the problems you have today?

US: At the Sweet Water, some of the problems we have today is there is an awful amount of competition in Marquette. Particularly changes are coming in. And my theory is that for a lot of people, who are native Yoopers, going to a change restaurant is kind of an exciting thing. It's almost like being able to use a telephone, and being connected to the world. For them, it's a connection to the world. And it's hard for them to jump to that getting old, and being old, and being corporate food that's really not very nutritious, full of salt and sugar and fat, not very good for you and kind of standardized. And all that goes with that. To appreciating what the Sweet Water is doing in making food from scratch, where you have a little more variability in your food, it's not quite as consistent, but you still got to pay for it. I think that a lot of Marquette people can't quite make that leap. Although, there are people who can obviously, we've been in business for fourteen years so there are. We have a regular following of customers who love what we're doing. And it's actually amazing that in a town of 20,000 people we made it. Making alternative food the way we have, as much alternative food. We have a lot of really standardized food too. You know steak and potato kind of things. So we have a lot of competition, and our sales are significantly down this year. We also had a terrible winter with no snow. Although, right now I'm sitting hear and I think we've had about 36 inches or maybe more in the last three days. Which is spectacular, I love it. All the snow had melted and now we're just blasted. You could even ski in the street, that was fun.

So the low customer count has made us do things like shave hours off of every bodies shifts. We've never had to do that before. And I think our other issue is Sean and I are getting ready to transition to another challenge in life. And, we're not sure how to do that with the Sweet Water. We'll figure it out, but, we're in that mode right now.

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

US: That's a big one. It's been really fun. It's what I wanted to do. I had a dream, I took the risk, and it's what I wanted to do. How lucky is that. There's a huge amount of work and responsibility with it. But I think it's been really good for Sean's and my relationship. Sometimes big decisions have to be made in very short amounts of time, and Sean's way over in the right field, and I'm way over in the left field and we have three minutes to come to the middle, somewhere. We got good at it fast, because we had to.

MS: How do you think the café has influenced Marquette?

US: I do think the café has influenced Marquette. Thank you for asking this question. And the only reason I think that is because four or five times now I've heard people say, "Oh, you know, I came to Northern to be interviewed for a position, and I asked around about restaurants, and I found this restaurant. And it was really because this restaurant was here, that I believed Marquette was progressive enough for me to move here." Or someone upon at the hospital saying, "Well, I ate at a bunch of different restaurants, and all they had for vegetarian food was steamed vegetables with cheese sauce. And, you know, I travel, and I was so happy to find this restaurant that has a huge array of vegetarian food that I can eat. And that's fun and interesting.

That someone here knows about it, and enjoys making it, you can tell it. And that's brought me to Marquette." A lot of people have said that there's a certain progressiveness about Marquette that somehow the Sweet Water played into. And that pleases me. I hope so, I really hope so.

MS: What are your future plans for the café?

US: Well right now it needs a face lift. It needs new carpet, the walls need to be painted, some repairs, and we're actually considering about reorganizing the whole layout of the café, changing the flow of business so that it's a little bit more lucrative. I think too, that Sean and I are working on moving out of it. Probably in the next ten years. So that's coming down the road too. And I don't really know what that means. I don't know if I'll hire managers to run it for us, or sell it, I don't know. I know that right now our first thing is to basically give it a face lift, clean it up, keep it going. Because right now it's really strong food wise, the food is the best it's ever been. It's consistent and wonderful, we have really talented chefs there, who like doing what they're doing and it shows in their food. And so I don't want to lose that just because our carpet is worn out and it looks a little used. I want to pick that part up and keep the food part going. We've got the system now for that, it's good.

MS: Is there anything you would like to add?

US: I think you're a really wonderful niece.

MS: Thank you, and thanks for letting me interview you.

US: Your welcome.



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