

Why MBA Students are Hungry for Courses on Food and Wine

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Most of John Monaghan's MBA classmates at UC Berkeley's Haas School of Business in California interned at technology, consultancy or finance companies. But this summer Monaghan spent his time at Danone, helping the French food group behind Evian water and Activia yogurt to develop its brand.

"I love working in food because we all have such a deep personal connection to our choices," he says. "Wrapped up in every meal or snack is a reflection of our values, culture, history and aspirations."

An increased focus on sustainability

Like a growing crop of MBA candidates at multiple business schools, Monaghan also wants to focus on food sustainability, utilizing a commercial mindset to develop production techniques that do not cost the earth.

"Beyond balancing economic, environmental and social goals, sustainable food has the added challenge of ensuring adequate nutrition," says Monaghan, the former director of strategy and business development at the Innovation Center for US Dairy. He also relishes the challenge.

As global sustainable agriculture products are projected to grow in value from \$793bn in 2015 to \$872bn this year, Berkeley Haas reports that the number of MBA students working in the food and beverage industry has doubled in the past three years.

The number of food startups created by students is also increasing, as environmentally conscious consumers and ethical investors push changes in buying habits.

One example is Nearfarms, an online marketplace that connects local farmers and consumers in the Bay Area, thereby helping to make small independent farmers financially viable and potentially reducing carbon emissions from seed to plate.

"Many students of this generation [millennials] seem to want to align their personal values with their professional actions," says Will Rosenzweig, head of Berkeley's Sustainable Food Initiative, a collection of courses, projects and internships focused on

food.

“The food sector is the perfect place for this. Moving toward plant-based diets and environmentally superior agricultural practices is creating new jobs for mission-driven people.”

Strong demand from students and corporate recruiters including General Mills, Applegate, Patagonia and Clif Bar prompted Haas to add new courses and initiatives focused on sustainable food.

Some 60 students signed up for the first Food Venture Lab for entrepreneurs. Flagship programs include Edible Education 101 and a new course, partnering with Berkeley's Alternative Meats Lab on sustainable protein production.

“Every company large or small needs smart digital marketing leaders who can engage eaters in creative and authentic ways. These are roles that didn't exist five years ago,” says Rosenzweig, who co-founded the Republic of Tea, a premium tea brand.

Berkeley Haas graduates work at Kraft Heinz's innovation team in Chicago, and for the Rockefeller Foundation's Food Vision Prize, focused on sustainable solutions. Several are interviewing with Califia Farms, which makes plant-based drinks.

Monaghan has accepted a brand marketing position at Nestle Ice Cream upon graduation. “There are an almost overwhelming number of opportunities,” he says.

“I've connected with recent Haas alumni working in food venture capital, meal delivery, restaurant robotics, agtech, seed genetics and sustainability.”

Around the world, business schools report a similar increase in demand for content on food sustainability, tackling poor nutrition and environmental damage. The Global MBA in Food and Wine at Bologna Business School in Italy has adapted to these major market forces.

“Sustainability is a topic that crosses many courses and subjects,” says the head of the program, Ludovica Leone. “In our business development laboratory, we worked with Food for Soul, the association founded by chef Massimo Bottura, to reduce food waste.” The school also has courses on business ethics, CSR, food culture and sustainable tourism.

Often, it is technological innovation that is making many sustainable food and drinks practices to become cost-effective and therefore widespread. One example is nitrification inhibitors that slow the rate at which excess nitrogen in soil fertilisers is turned into a greenhouse gas.

“The Italian food and wine industry is constantly dealing with the trade-off between preserving tradition and keeping up with innovation,” says Leone. “We try to show our students how successful companies deal with this issue and innovate. We organize every

year a series of cross-disciplinary seminars, hosting world recognized innovation leaders.”

Food and Wine MBA programs attracting a diverse range of students

The growth in popularity of food and drink programs at business school is reflected in the diversification of the cohorts, with far more students coming from Asia, mirroring the growth of consuming nations there.

“More students coming from more Asian countries are joining us, including China, Japan and Vietnam,” says Jacques Thébault, director of the MBA Wine & Spirits Business program at the Burgundy School of Business in France. “In Asia, the industry is growing and the need for talented wine and spirits managers is growing.”

He adds that a South African student from last year’s cohort, joined a “bevtech” startup in Singapore recently.

There are also far more women enrolling in these traditionally male-dominated courses. “We have more female than male students in our wine programs this year for the first time,” says Jeremy Cukierman, director of the Wine & Spirits Academy at Kedge Business School in France.

“Why? Simply because the world of wine used to be very misogynist and fortunately it’s less the case now. Also, it’s probably because there are more examples of successful women in the world of wine and hospitality.”

He adds that many students are drawn to the school’s focus on sustainability. “The wine, spirits and hospitality industries — and broadly speaking, humanity — are facing one of the most important challenges in climate change,” he says.

“It’s our role, as a wine school, to shape more responsible, adaptable wine managers.”