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ILLINOIS RESTAURANT ASSOCIATION INSTALLS 2021 OFFICERS AND BOARD OF DIRECTORS, ANNOUNCES AWARD RECIPIENTS AT ANNUAL MEETING

(CHICAGO, IL; February 26, 2021) – Yesterday, the [Illinois Restaurant Association](#) (IRA) hosted its 2021 Annual Meeting. Held live in virtual form, the event was open to all members of the hospitality industry and included the installation of new members of the IRA's Board of Directors and Advisory Council and the organization's annual awards presentation.

The meeting also announced **Sam Sanchez** as the newly elected Chairman of the Board. Stepping into the role held for the past two years by **Gregory Schulson**, CEO of [Burrito Beach](#) and [Lunan Corporation](#), Sanchez most recently served as the IRA's First Vice Chairman and is the Founder and CEO of [Third Coast Hospitality Group](#).

"We are thankful for Gregory's contributions over the past two years," said IRA President and CEO **Sam Toia**. "As Chairman, he faced the unimaginable challenges of 2020 head on. He has been tireless in his leadership and advocacy for restaurants statewide, and his efforts during the COVID-19 crisis leave us in a hopeful place.

"As we look to the future, we are honored to work alongside Sam Sanchez as the IRA's new Chairman," Toia added. "As the first Mexican-American to step into this role, his story is one of resilience, hard work, and passion. As restaurants begin to slowly reopen, his vision and expertise in entrepreneurship will prove to be invaluable on the long road to recovery."

In the mid-eighties, Sam Sanchez moved from his family's hometown in Sabinas Hidalgo, Mexico to start what is now an accomplished hospitality career in Chicago. With an extensive background that spans concept development to daily operations, his extensive knowledge of all things restaurant-related drives the success in his businesses. He is the principal partner overseeing operations and business development for Moe's Cantina, Old Crow Smokehouse, and Tree House, with forthcoming concepts on the horizon.



In addition to his restaurants, Sanchez owns EMC Construction, a full-service construction company that handles renovations of existing properties and new construction. In June 2020, he founded SDS Blocker Manufacturing, a company producing high quality disposable face masks. Highly involved in civic, charitable, and mentorship activities, he is highly regarded as community leader and was named Restaurateur of the Year from the Illinois Restaurant Association in 2015. (Full bio follows.)

"I am honored to have been elected Chairman of the IRA," said Sanchez. "I've been involved with the association in many ways over the years, but it is a proud moment to be the first Mexican-American operator to serve in this role. Gregory Schulson has been a force of leadership during his time as chairman, and he's set the stage for us to move forward. We have a big journey ahead of us, and I'm ready to get to it and work in lockstep with Sam Toia, his team, and the industry that is so critical to our local economy."

The IRA also announced its annual award recipients in four categories: Restaurateur of the Year to Gregory Schulson, CEO of Burrito Beach and Lunan Corporation; Vendor of the Year to Gordon Food Service, Performance Foodservice, US Foods, and Sysco; the Sara Rowe ProStart® Company of the Year to Mariano's; and a special Lifetime Achievement Award to Phil Vettel of the Chicago Tribune. Details include:

- **Restaurateur of the Year** was awarded to **Gregory Schulson**, CEO of **Burrito Beach and Lunan Corporation**. In serving as the IRA's Chairman of the Board for two years, Schulson demonstrated unparalleled leadership and devotion to the restaurant industry throughout the COVID-19 crisis. In his own restaurants, he continued to champion the community, implementing numerous efforts to feed courageous healthcare workers serving on the frontlines of the pandemic. Among them, his "Buy a Hero a Burrito" campaign at Burrito Beach allowed guests to easily share gift cards and personal messages of gratitude to healthcare workers at Northwestern Memorial Hospital. The award was presented by incoming IRA Chairman **Sam Sanchez**.
- **Vendor of the Year** was awarded to **Gordon Foodservice, Performance Foodservice, SYSCO, and US Foods**. In naming all companies as award recipients, the IRA recognizes all four broadliners for their extreme generosity throughout the pandemic. Whether partnering with restaurants to provide meals for industry workers in need, healthcare workers, and the community at large, no stone was left unturned in helping others, providing tens of thousands of meals to those in need. Representatives accepting this award included:
 - **John Willard**, Director of Sales, Gordon Food Service
 - **Kevin Pribilsky**, President, Performance Foodservice
 - **Peter Peluso**, Region President – Great Lakes, SYSCO Chicago
 - **Mark Van Dam**, Midwest Region Vice President of Sales, US FoodsThe award was presented by award-winning chef **Carlos Gaytán** of Tzucu.

- **Sara Rowe ProStart® Company of the Year** was awarded to **Mariano's** for going above and beyond to support the IRA Educational Foundation's (IRAEF) ProStart Program and

newly established Hospitality Employee Relief Fund, which provides one-time grants to industry workers facing unforeseen financial crisis as a result of COVID-19. **Amanda Puck**, Director of Strategic Brand Development, accepted the award. An unyielding supporter of the IRAEF, Mariano's has long been a generous sponsor of Chicago Gourmet and the IRA, continually developing creative programming and virtual events throughout the calendar year to give back to the organization's vital missions. The award was presented by James Beard Award-winning chef **Sarah Grueneberg** of Monteverde.

- The **Lifetime Achievement Award** was awarded to **Phil Vettel**, who recently left his post as the Chicago Tribune's dining critic after more than three decades. For 31 years, Phil championed Chicago's culinary community – tracing the journeys of our founding chefs and the generations of talent that have followed. Through his reviews, Phil told their stories with boundless curiosity and integrity. In addition to his weekly review column, he also often editorialized the depth of the restaurant industry, including its moments of innovation, success, or - in more recent times - tribulation. Through it all, he espoused Chicago as one of the nation's finest culinary destinations. This special award is intended to thank Phil for his contributions and congratulate him on a career that has left an indelible impression on Chicago. Sam Toia presented him with the honor.

For more information about the Illinois Restaurant Association, visit www.illinoisrestaurants.org.

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About Sam Sanchez, Chairman of the Board, Illinois Restaurant Association. In the mid-eighties, Sam Sanchez moved from his hometown in Sabinas Hidalgo, Mexico to start what is now an accomplished hospitality career in Chicago. He cut his teeth in restaurants at what would become his first location, John Barleycorn in Lincoln Park. Sanchez was given an opportunity by his uncle Frank Mendoza and he ran with it. Throughout the years, Sanchez has continued to open restaurants throughout Chicago and he has even expanded into California. With an extensive background that goes from concept development to daily operations, his extensive knowledge of all things restaurant-related continues to drive success in his businesses. In 2015, Sanchez was rewarded for his hard work and dedication and received the Restaurateur of the Year from the Illinois Restaurant Association.

Sanchez is a principal partner who oversees all facets of restaurant management, including operations and business development for Moe's Cantina, Old Crow Smokehouse, and Tree House, with new concepts on the horizon.

In addition to his restaurants, Sanchez owns EMC Construction, a full-service construction company that handles renovations of existing properties and new construction. In June 2020, Sanchez started SDS Blocker Manufacturing, a company that makes high quality disposable face masks.

Sanchez is actively involved with the Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy, Excellence in Education, Chicago Hospitality Association, River North Business Association, Central Lakeview

Merchants Association, Lakeview Special Service Area #17 , Lakeview East Chamber of Commerce, and the Illinois Restaurant Association. His volunteer work throughout the city has been extensive. From feeding seniors every year for Thanksgiving to annually charity picnics, Sanchez has never turned down an opportunity to give back to the community. Perhaps his most fulfilling volunteer work has been through mentorship. Sanchez has spoken to thousands of youth over the years and has been a guide and inspiration, particularly among the LatinX community.

In 2014, Sanchez was recognized and honored by the House of Representatives of the Ninety-Eighth General Assembly of the State of Illinois for his accomplishments within the business community, and his devotion to the betterment of the neighborhoods in which he lives and works. In 2015, Sanchez received the title of Corporate Secretary of the Illinois Restaurant Association. He most recently served as First Vice Chair and was elected Chairman of the Illinois Restaurant Association in February 2021.

Sanchez has been married to his wife, Marga, for 33 years, and has three daughters: Samantha, Korina, and Camila. In his spare time, he enjoys entertaining at home, cooking for his family and friends, and horseback riding.

About Illinois Restaurant Association. Founded in 1914, the Illinois Restaurant Association is a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting, protecting, educating and improving the restaurant industry in Illinois. The IRA owns and produces Chicago Gourmet – the annual food and wine festival uniting hundreds of restaurants, chefs and beverage experts for a weekend filled with food and drink tastings, entertainment, cooking demonstrations, book signings, interactive seminars and more. For more information about the Illinois Restaurant Association, visit www.illinoisrestaurants.org and follow on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#) and [LinkedIn](#).