Thursday, September 16, 2021 | A Chicago Tribune Publication
DBR

Q&A: Hinsdale native, 19, one of this year's James Beard Foundation national scholars

By Zareen Syed
Pioneer Press

For studying food professionals, up and coming restaurateurs and those striving for a critically acclaimed career in the hospitality industry, the James Beard Foundation Award is the tippity top.

The foundation's National Scholars Program, which was established in 2016, is an exclusive club — made up of students blazing the way to make the industry better. One of it's newest members is Hinsdale local, Anna Gruvberger.

The 19-year-old is part of 12 food-focused individuals who were awarded scholarships of $20,000 each to pursue an education in culinary arts, food studies, agriculture, hospitality or related fields.

Gruvberger, who graduated from Hinsdale Central High School in 2020 and was a four-time Illinois High School Association Swim State Finalist, is in her sophomore year at Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration where her focus is largely on food service management and hospitality management.

The James Beard Foundation isn't just about showcasing chefs, it also amplifies those that give chefs a space to play, and rising leaders in the industry like Gruvberger are just getting started. She spoke to Pioneer Press about what it means to be recognized by the industry's best and the source of her inspiration.

Q&A:

How does it feel to be one of 2021's James Beard Foundation National Scholars?

It's definitely surreal — crazy to think that I was in the running with so many incredible, amazing people and that I was chosen as one of the leading contenders in the pool. I honestly can't believe it, I was shocked the day I found out and still am.

What's been your experience at Cornell so far?

I haven't chosen a concentration yet, but I'm taking classes on hospitality management, finance classes, accounting. I think learning everything under hospitality, not just hotels, has been the best part about going to school here. It's widened my interests so much that I didn't even know I would be interested in food service management until I took an amazing class on it freshman year.

In the snippet James Beard Foundation included of you, it says your goal is "to create sensory and imaginative dining experiences." Can you tell us more?

A couple years ago my family and I went to Bangkok, Thailand, it was one of the most incredible trips of my life. The entire trip, going around the city on motorcycles — from breakfast to dessert, every single day there was never a bad meal. Those places ranged from a hole in the wall restaurant where you'd never see anything like it in the Hinsdale area to critically acclaimed high-end upscale spots. They were all just equally as transcending and showcased the culture perfectly. No food was better than the other, it was all about different experiences at different places. That was a really cool trip for me in realizing how important it is to taste food you're not familiar with and the care put into creating those experiences. It's something I won't forget.

You interned at Kimpton Gray Hotel Group in Chicago recently, what was that like?

Yes! I interned there twice, once in the winter and again this past summer. I learned that the restaurant group is unlike any hotel group that I've stayed at my entire life and I've been so lucky to travel a lot with my family. I was stationed at the front desk most of the time but was able to circulate around the hotel to learn about other functions. The rooftop bar opened up while I was there so I got to work as a host, help out with events and catering; run around with housekeeping and engineering. The lobby bar is my favorite place in the city — I didn't drink there, I'm underage (laughs) — but it is the perfect spot.

Is that the type of place you see yourself at in the future?

If I had to pick one group that I'd strive to be a part of and that captures the right idea of creating an experience, I think it would be going after Kimpton. I loved my time there, it was amazing.

I've gone back and forth about my future path especially after my knowledge of other industries involved in hospitality has blossomed. But I think building and developing has been my thing consistently and I'd love to show off different cultures and put together dining and drink experiences at restaurants and hotels.

How would you describe your design style aesthetic?

I actually just finished decorating my apartment room this so I know this is small scale, but I love neutrals. And having very neutral, almost bland colors and coming out with statement pieces, like a pop! Kimpton Group for example, are primarily gray but they have a thing where every single door you walk into makes you smile. When you open the closet door, its super bright and floral. The idea of having elements that pop and make you smile and really recognize the effort that was put into, that's kind of what I go for. But I also really love a modern, farmhouse feel using modern neutral tones.

Quotes from Anna were edited for clarity.



Anna Gruvberger, who graduated from Hinsdale Central High School in 2020, is in her sophomore year at Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration. **ANNA GRUVEBERGER / COURTESY**