



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

Article from:

The Actuary Magazine

October/November 2013 – Volume 10, Issue 5

ACTUARIES ON THEIR OWN TIME

Chef de Cuisine

For **SHIRLEY SONG**, being an actuary shaped her into a hard-working, responsible and reliable individual who can well execute her goals and dreams. And one of her dreams is to become a chef de cuisine.

She is training professionally in Paris at her “dream culinary school.” “Time management, communication, interpersonal and organization skills that I have developed from my actuarial background are definitely a plus in the kitchen,” Song says.

She didn’t start cooking until her early 20s. “Having lived in Asia, North America and Europe, I have had many opportunities to experience a variety of cuisines and restaurants. ... I always wondered how each ingredient was prepared and how each element on the plate was executed,” she says. “Then a thought came to my mind: Tasting the dish is not enough; I really want to know how to make this myself.”

Her first masterpiece since going to study in Paris was the classic French dish boeuf à la Bourguignonne. “I have always wanted to try it because of Julia Child, and I finally made it at school in the beginning of this year,” Song says. “It was pretty tasty.”

Now in a higher level at the school, she recently took place in an “atelier,” a five-hour workshop where the students design and serve appetizers and main plates for two from a list of mandatory ingredients and techniques. Her menu for appetizers included sea bream carpaccio with

red bell pepper, tomato confit, celery brunoise, and prawn cake with green herb and avocado sauce. For the main course, she presented stuffed chicken breast roll, carrot flan, and mille-feuille and chicken jus. It was a hit with the head chef.

She has stored a lot of memories of France and her temporary departure from being an actuary: “The moment I put on my chef uniform for the first time; the moment I saw my puff pastry rise perfectly; the moment my homemade macaroons came fresh out of the oven; the moment I had to kill a lobster live; the moment I tasted my dish and absolutely loved it; the moment I got a ‘perfect’ from the chef; the moment I watched the Eiffel Tower sparkle on my way home after a whole day in the kitchen; the moment I felt my sweat dropping from my face continuously while working in the kitchen in the summer; the moment I had to hide in the fridge to plate my appetizer dish with jelly (to stop it from melting) ... Paris has become a part of me already.

“There are certainly surprises along the way: having cuts and burns, witnessing how strict and stressful working in a kitchen can be, getting my cell phone stolen in Paris, having to cook a rabbit, a squab, and a quail dish from its original form (yes, use your imagination) ... small surprises here and there, but it’s all good.”

Being a chef is quite different from being an actuary, even though she will always consider herself an actuary first. “Working in a kitchen is no joke. Usually all the stoves and ovens are on, big pots of stocks are boiling on the side, and imagine that you will be working and running around nonstop in a 40 C [about 105 Fahrenheit] kitchen like this for 12 hours a day,



sweating and sometimes being yelled at, in French,” she says. “I will soon be staffed to a two-Michelin-stars restaurant here in Paris, and I already see myself in that picture.”

Even if Song doesn’t plan to stay in Paris—North America is always home, she says—whether it is to return to the actuarial world after her culinary training or not, her experience will always be a part of her. Ernest Hemingway summed it up for her: “If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast.” **A**

Shirley Song, FSA, MAAA, was a consulting actuary with Milliman Inc. She can be reached at Shirleyzj.song@gmail.com.

Bat Enthusiast

RICK BURD believes most people get a chance to make a contribution to something. He was given the opportunity to help preserve wildlife—the bats found in the cave he owns and manages in central Pennsylvania.

Woodward Cave (www.woodwardcave.com) is one of eight remaining limestone caverns open to the public in the state. The cave has also been a major hibernating site for Pennsylvania bats, but white nose syndrome (WNS) has devastated the population.

“I am very active in working with biologists and scientists to do research on bats and WNS,” Burd says. “They love to use my cave for research due to the history of the bat habitat and availability of electricity for equipment.”

The cave was one of the largest hibernating sites in the state for about six species of bats. It was so well known that, in 1929, four rare bats (the endangered Indiana bat) were taken for permanent display in the Smithsonian Institute, he says. The bats used the cave for hibernating during the winter. During the summer, they left and spent the warm season in the wild.

“After some years, I realized many bats return to the exact same crack in the wall,” he says. “I felt like I got to know some of them and would watch for their return every year.”

In 1971 Burd’s parents visited the cave. “My mother, too afraid to enter the dark cavern, sat and waited for my father to complete the tour and got chatting with an old guy sitting there who said it was for sale. They ... eventually bought the business. I was in college at the time,” he says.

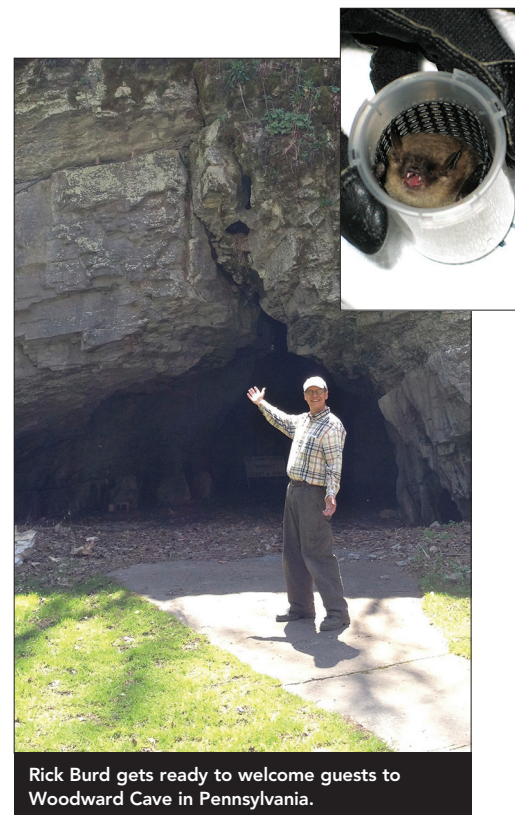
In 1987 Burd and his brothers bought the cave from their parents and began efforts to preserve the large but dwindling bat population. The bats had caused distress and disruption to the [tour] business. “People were afraid [of the bats]. Parents of school kids complained. Business was lost,” he says.

Solid steel doors had been build into the natural entrance to the cave to prevent the bats from entering. In 1988 Burd and his brothers removed the steel door and installed a bat-friendly door with steel bars that allow the bats to fly through but keep people out. The bat population gradually grew from about 1,200 to 4,000.

Over the decades, visitors to the cave became more appreciative of the chance to see wildlife in their native habitat, and gradually the bats became as much of an attraction as a distraction. “Some are still scared, but most people move in for a closer look and are fascinated at the gentle little bats quietly sleeping on the limestone walls,” he says. “We even put the bats on our logo and focused the school education programs on the bats.”

After their hard work to build the population, almost all the bats died in the winter of 2010 with the onset of WNS. Thousands of dead bats were scattered around the landscape within a mile of the cave entrance. “The fungus (the cause of white nose) agitated the bats during hibernation and caused them to burn up reserve fat, so they left the cave [early] looking for food,” he says.

Bat biologists who monitored the wildlife population recommended Woodward Cave for a research site. Scientists came from around the country and placed equipment in the cave, including motion-sensitive



Rick Burd gets ready to welcome guests to Woodward Cave in Pennsylvania.

infrared cameras to film sleeping bats. Burd went in with the scientists whenever possible. “I figured it’s a rare chance to participate in wildlife research fighting a huge threat to an important mammal in our ecosystem,” he says.

“What a switch from the actuarial routine! It’s interesting—they just rig up their equipment with stuff bought at Walmart or the hardware store or somewhere. They bought a bunch of Styrofoam coolers, little plastic bottles, clear tubing, and so on and jury-rigged research equipment they needed. I guess you don’t just order white nose research equipment out of the bat research catalog.” **A**

Rick Burd, FSA, MAAA, is president at Contribution Health, Inc. He can be reached at rburd@contributionhealth.com.