

Paul Sletten of Social and Abreo Says, “I’m a Big Fan of Other Restaurants”

Visitors add nearly \$330 million to Winnebago County’s economy when they come here for sports tournaments, visit our attractions, stay at our hotels and eat at our restaurants, like Social, Abreo and others. That’s significant economic impact.

I want to periodically highlight a local businessperson who understands the value of tourism dollars and helps position the Rockford Region as a unique destination. For us to successfully market the area, it takes teamwork from businesses, government and other partners to put our best foot forward and help us get more tournaments, more visitors and more dollars.

Restaurateur Paul Sletten’s Thoughts About Visitors

Let’s begin with Paul Sletten, owner of Abreo and Social, two “Rockford Original” restaurants, and a Rockford Chamber member.

Many of you know that WTTW’s Emmy-winning show “Check, Please!” included the Rockford Region on its June 20 episode, and featured Paul’s restaurant Social, as well as other area highlights. The segment resulted in 130,000 media impressions. Paul said, “it definitely created excitement and pride, for our guests and for us as well.” His restaurants have long had a small contingent of Chicago guests, so he hopes to see more people from Chicago as a result of the exposure.

Paul has been in the hospitality industry for 20 years, starting with catering and adding the Abreo and Social restaurants 10 years and 4 years later, respectively. Today he has 50 full-time-equivalent employees. Tourism supports about 2,700 jobs, nearly \$72 million in payroll. This fall Paul plans to open a third restaurant, a breakfast/lunch spot in Colonial Village.

“Amazing Tournaments, Parks”

Having served as a board member on the Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau gave Paul the opportunity to learn about the tourism industry. “I learned the impact of all these soccer tournaments, and what a big deal Sportscore One and Two are for us. It’s really amazing what they do for our area,” he said.

“There are a lot of really cool things happening, like the West Rock Wake Park that will draw wakeboarders and other water sports enthusiasts to a portion of Levings Lake near U.S. Route 20,” Paul noted. The Rockford Park District, City of Rockford and Winnebago County are assisting and private businessman Dan Jarrett will be the primary investor. “We also have amazing parks, like Rock Cut Park,” Paul added.

Positive Impressions Help

“For us to grow the tourism industry, to get more visitors to come here and spend more than the \$330 million annually, I think we could work together a little more.

Businesses, government and the RACVB do collaborate, we just need to keep improving, so that we present ourselves positively and constructively to our visitors

and to our residents. For example, when big sports tournaments come here, we need accurate and helpful signage to help the traffic flow, so visitors are not routed away from our unique downtown area,” advised Paul.

Support Other Businesses, Create More Success Stories

“The best things businesses can do to grow tourism is to support each other, and to be open to each others ideas. I’m a big fan of other restaurants. I want people to try Octane and Alchemy. The more of those we have, the better our draw will be to visitors. I also think franchise restaurants are part of the mix. Visitors know what they will get with franchises, so it’s a comfort zone. Franchises started as a local restaurant. They’re all success stories. The more opportunities you have for people to have a success, the more unique character your town will have, to set us apart from other places,” suggested Paul.

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