Alum brings "social dining experiment" to Freeman

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As Al Green croons in the background, a chef assembles small plates of sous vide pork belly with shiso and corn espuma at a work station in the front of the room as Paco Robert, the evening's host, places them in front of diners gathered at two long, candlelit tables.



Paco Robert (MBA '11), center, brought his fast-growing social dining venture Dinner Lab to the Freeman School for a live case study on the business. (Photo by Ryan Rivet)

The scene may sound like something out of a trendy restaurant, but the dining room in question is actually an MBA classroom at the A. B. Freeman School of Business.

Robert (MBA ’11) brought his innovative startup Dinner Lab to the business school earlier this month for a live case study on the fast-growing social dining venture.

A graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, Robert founded Dinner Lab a year ago to create one-of-kind experiences for adventurous eaters. For a $100-per-person annual fee, members are invited to special communal dining events presided over by both up-and-coming and renowned chefs and hosted in extraordinary locations. One dinner took place overlooking the city on the 21st floor of Canal Place, which was under construction at the time. Another was held in an abandoned church off Magazine Street.

The case study was part of New Product Development in the Hospitality Industry, a new MBA elective that focuses on innovation in the hospitality sector.

“The course was created to focus students on the consumer experience in hospitality-related ventures,” says Ralph Maurer, professor of practice and instructor in the course. “From that perspective, it was great to be able to bring in Paco to talk with students about the business and what he’s done to create this very successful, very innovative product.”

Since its start in New Orleans last year, Dinner Lab has branched out into Austin, Nashville and New York, and all but Nashville — which just launched — have a waiting list to join. Despite the rapid growth, however, Robert says the focus of the concept remains the same as when he started.

“It’s all about the food, the people and the experience,” Robert says.