

ALUMNI CONNECTIONS FEATURED PROFILE

Alumni Profile: Alumna Avisheh Avini of Union Square Hospitality Group (USHG)

In September, Member and Alumni Program Chair Narges Kakalia and Member Charlotte Edelman spoke to alumna Avisheh Avini about her wide-ranging career, Mintz memories, extracurricular priorities, and a few of the lessons she's learned on her professional and personal path.



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Narges Kakalia

You've had such a varied and diverse legal career. Tell us about it.

I have. I started out doing international commercial arbitration and litigation and maritime law. I moved on to vessel financing — you know, buying and selling ships, etc. — and then reinvented myself as an M&A and VC financing associate at MoFo. After a while, I went back in-house to a shipping company. There I met an outside counsel named Ken Koch. You know what happened next. And after a pretty long stint at Mintz, I went back in-house, this time to USHG.

So you've navigated literally everything, from ships to kitchen sinks. Greatest lessons learned?

Know your audience. A shipping magnate will respond to very different incentives in a negotiation than a chef. And don't just provide abstract legal advice, give your client something practical that can actually be implemented.

You've obviously seen a lot and learned a lot. Does anything still surprise you?

Constantly. In this new role, for example, I knew I had to be a generalist and therefore would be looking things up and practicing in areas I never had practiced in before. What I hadn't anticipated is how much my personality would grow along with my brain. In my previous jobs I had dealt almost exclusively with other lawyers or with lawyer-adjacent business people. Everyone spoke and understood the same jargon and I knew which arguments would resonate in a negotiation and which would not. But as a general counsel of a consortium of restaurants and consulting, catering, and venue hospitality businesses as well as a private equity division, I've had to learn entirely new ways of communication and persuasion because I'm no longer dealing with lawyers and bankers. In fact, I work in and represent a business that prioritizes exuding warmth and hospitality. The entire enterprise is about valuing good food and wine and creating the best, most memorable experience. There is no room here for desk-pounding or aggressive negotiations. Also no road map for how to conduct myself. So I've had to learn new ways of negotiating and persuading. While I still negotiate the best deal for my internal clients, I do it very differently than I would have for my Mintz clients.

And speaking of Mintz, any favorite memories?

I was in-house at the shipping company working on the acquisition of Navios with Ken Koch

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as our outside counsel when Ken happened to go on vacation right at a crucial moment in the deal. Joel substituted for him. I met Joel outside the conference room and then entered the conference room, where the meeting quickly got adversarial. Joel listened to the contentious back and forth for a few minutes. I did not know him very well, and I was trying to figure out why he had put about 20 sharpened pencils, all different lengths, on the table. I was really worried that the deal was going to fall apart, and that Joel couldn't possibly catch up on all of the deal details. Soon after arranging his pencils on the table, Joel asked everyone to take a breath and, with a few sentences, he cut through all of the details, dispelled all the arguments, and took command of the room. And the deal did indeed close, and Mintz did indeed collect its fees. Watching Joel command the room was a real revelation. I learned a lot from him that day. And since that day he's been a valuable mentor and friend. He has advised me on professional issues, and he has also looked out for me in other respects. He once gave me a book about dating, he left me many delightfully garbled voicemails and news clippings over the course of my time at the firm (anyone who knows Joel knows exactly what I am talking about), and he generally looked out for the whole Avisheh, not just Avisheh the corporate lawyer. I really value that.

So maybe you've already answered this, but ... favorite person at Mintz?

Hmmm ... I am definitely *not* answering that question — too much potential for getting in trouble with the people I don't name!

Fair enough. Ok, back to the present. You are a major foodie, and you've become the chief legal officer of a company that is all about food. How has that been?

Every single person I work for and with has a passion for food, wine, and creating memorable moments. What could possibly be bad about that? [laughs] Though it really isn't about food and alcohol, it's about imparting a feeling — it's about having our customers experience warmth and hospitality, about treating them like they are the most important people in the room. It's not about the Michelin stars (though we have those, and they are wonderful). It's about the customers' experience of feeling well cared for and appreciated. It's been a revelation coming from a corporate environment.

On to less serious things. What do you do in your spare time?

I play with Juju, my dog. Watch movies. Read. And I'm taking design classes. It's something I've always loved but never had time for before. It's been great!

What are you currently reading?

At the Existentialist Café. It's about the development of existentialism through the eyes of the philosophers in 1930s Paris. Fascinating!

If there was one piece of advice you could give to your younger self, or to a mentee or protégé who is just embarking on a career, what advice would you give?

Always ask yourself if you're being as open to experiences, and as self-aware, as you can possibly be at any given time. A missed experience is a missed opportunity.

Do you have a professional bucket list? What's on it?

To combine my love of travel with my career. Also, to help those who can't help themselves, not through fundraising or other "remote" activities, but by being in the field and hands-on, where you can see the difference being made through the looks on those people's faces.