

SKAL: How a clandestine hospitality group wields clout behind the scenes

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Its mystery elicits the Masons. Its inner workings remind one of Yale's Order of Skull and Bones. But SKAL is neither about brotherhood nor fraternal exclusion, though historically the exclusive club comprised mostly men.

SKAL is about making room at a hotel for guests in a pinch or adding direct international flights to foster travel and tourism, worldwide and locally.

It is an international organization whose local chapters comprise the highest ranking hospitality professionals in the world. It is a classic example of how such organizations are an inner source of power, how the friendships fostered and connections maintained reach into the fabric of someone's life and business. There is no fancy ring or secret handshake. But there is a toast, a Scandinavian toast -- S.K.A.L. -- whose initials stand for "good health," "friendship," "long life" and "happiness." It is the foundation of the organization founded in Paris in 1934. The toast begins any SKAL gathering where drink and food are ever-present.

The Boston chapter is one of the largest and oldest in the nation, its history embodied in a necklace of golden medallions inscribed with the names of former presidents. Founded in 1939, Boston's chapter numbers about 147 members, a handful of whose efforts helped increase international flights from Boston's Logan International Airport to major European cities, brought events such as Sail Boston to the city and helped increase business for hoteliers and tour operators.

If SKAL has been a secret to the rest of the world until now, it's because traditionally SKAL was closed to reporters -- though some of its members include travel writers -- and conducting business, at least during its legendary five-hour luncheons, was forbidden. Slipping a business card under a butter plate was a common clandestine way to suggest, "Call me. Let's do business."

"Times have changed," says Timothy Kirwan, the new GM of Intercontinental Boston and a 20-some-year SKAL member. "The whole B-to-B thing is part and parcel of what we do."

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