



PHOTOS ALTERED WITH BLUR EFFECT

In campus-area neigh

House

*Who runs them? Who
And is there more at*

Thai Liu '06 is standing in an aisle of a Target store on Madison's west side, deliberating plastic cups.

"You can't just get the traditional red cup," Liu explains. "Everyone throwing a party gets red cups, because that is what they sell at the liquor stores on campus."

Liu is throwing a party tomorrow night, and he wants cups in different colors so he can recognize who has paid to drink at his party. There's a lot to choosing cups, he says. You can't have the same cups for the keg and for the beer-pong tables, for one thing, because then someone could just steal one of the beer-pong cups and get beer without paying. That's why Liu has driven twenty minutes off campus to shop where there is a better assortment of sizes and colors. After careful consideration, he settles on blue cups for the keg and small, clear cups for beer pong.

Needless to say, Liu has thrown a party once or twice before.

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY JOANNA SALMEN '06

In recent years, UW-Madison has been ranked as the nation's top party school by both *Playboy* and the *Princeton Review*, and students like Liu are a big reason why. As much as State Street bars and football tailgaters add to the aura, the university's social scene revolves around house parties — the large, sometimes raucous gatherings students host in their off-campus

neighborhoods, the house party scene is thriving.

Rules



*Are you trying to shut them down?
Or is it just a little college fun?*

residences. Walk down Langdon or Mifflin or Breese Terrace on any Saturday night, and you'll see dozens of them.

Depending on your perspective, that's either reason to celebrate or cause for concern. While students flock to house parties because they offer an inexpensive way to drink and hang out with friends, Madison police and university officials worry that they fuel excessive drinking and lead to rampant lawlessness. Each side has special strategies to subvert the other's intentions. Police try to keep parties small and orderly, and hosts try to keep police from finding out about the parties in the first place. The result is a lively, complex subculture that plays out every weekend around campus — one that has rituals, rules, and, sometimes, serious repercussions.

As seniors in their final semester of school, Liu and his roommates know those routines well. They've thrown dozens of parties during the past four years, and now they're practically professionals. Weeks beforehand, they began booking entertainment, stocking up on alcohol, and spreading the word. A communication arts major, Liu put his academic training to work designing fluorescent-colored fliers, which he taped to trees and street signs around his Bassett Street neighborhood. He sent the poster by e-mail to fifty of his closest friends. He ordered seven kegs of beer, knowing from experience that people who show

up usually number about three times as many as were invited.

Liu and his roommates are also well aware of the risks. As hosts, they could face stiff fines for noise violations or disorderly conduct resulting from their party. Any guest who is underage and caught drinking alcohol could lead to charges of serving minors. For this, too, they have a plan: they will require people to come in through the back door. To limit noise — and make it harder for any passing police to see what's going on inside — they'll set up the music in the basement. If the cops do show up, the hosts will say that they are only accepting donations to help pay for the entertainment, so they can't be tagged for selling alcohol without a license.

With their past parties, Liu and his roommates have had a few run-ins with the police, and those encounters have taught them to be careful. No party they've thrown in the past two years has been busted. They're hoping for the same luck tomorrow night.

It's raining hard on Langdon Street as Tony Fiore circles the block for the umpteenth time on his Friday night shift, and for the moment, the Madison police officer is happy for the comfort of his cruiser.

"I don't care if people have parties," says Fiore, who has worked the campus-area neighborhood for two years. "It just

can't get out of hand. I'm not here to bust up a good time between people and a few of their friends."

As he cruises the side streets and back alleys around Langdon — a neighborhood dominated by fraternities, sororities, and student apartments — Fiore watches parties flare up and simmer down. Tonight, there are at least four houses he's watching, but at the moment, none pose the kind of disturbance that concerns him. From one house, twisted up behind Langdon Street, he can hear loud music and voices, and he circles the block to drive by again. He passes slowly, hoping someone inside will notice that he's watching.

Sometimes, just the sight of a squad car can be enough to get parties to settle down. For a while, Fiore parks his car in front of one of the party houses and sits, sipping a Mountain Dew and listening to announcements coming over the police radio. Eventually, a door opens and young men and women emerge, scattering like mice, trying to look casual while hurrying away. When an obviously drunken woman trips right in front of Fiore's car, he laughs. "Real cool," he says, as her friends tease her for blowing their cover.

Breaking up parties is hardly Fiore's only job, and a night on the beat means being constantly aware of any threat to residents' security. He's particularly concerned by a recent rash of assaults in the area, and at one point, he trails a woman

walking alone on a side street until she enters an apartment building. But there's no denying that neighborhood officers such as Fiore spend a great deal of time monitoring the party scene.

The goal is not to extinguish parties, but to keep them manageable, says Madison police chief Noble Wray x'84. "We try to prevent out-of-control situations," he says. Each fall, he sends Fiore and other campus-area neighborhood officers out to talk with residents about what kind of behavior they will tolerate, part of a community-policing approach that strives to improve relations between police and students.

In many ways, the dialogue is working, says Wray. "We have seen a more cooperative community when we talk to residents before the school year starts and let them know how we will enforce laws," he says. But there are still many parties that cross the line.

Around midnight, Fiore thinks he hears one of those parties a few blocks away. With his window open, his left arm soaking from the pouring rain, he turns toward the music until he finds the source: a first-floor apartment packed with people and throbbing with the sounds of classic rock. As he pulls in front of the apartment, Fiore radios that he is going to check out a noisy party. A fellow officer responds, asking if he needs backup. "If you aren't doing anything else," Fiore answers. "I don't think it will take that long." Just then, a drunken young man comes stumbling out of the apartment building and hobbles up a staircase leading toward Langdon Street. Along the way, he kicks a residential window and punches a Coca-Cola vending machine while shouting something indiscernible.

Fiore's intent is merely to ask the tenants to turn down the music and to see how many people are inside. After two knocks at the door, no one answers, so Fiore walks along the side of the house and pounds on a window. Again he gets no response.

Two other officers join Fiore, knocking on doors and windows and shouting over the music. Finally, a man emerges

"The problem with house parties is that they are operating as unlicensed taverns. They do not have trained managers to control situations."

and stands at the top of the stairs leading to the door. Fiore, soaking wet and growing impatient, asks the man if he lives in the apartment.

"Is there a problem?" the man retorts, his arms crossed.

"Do you live here?" Fiore asks again.

"Is there a problem?" The young man repeats.

Exchanging tired glances, the officers climb the stairs to stand directly in front of the man. Fiore explains that the music is too loud and he would like to speak to a tenant. When the man admits he lives there, Fiore asks him for identification so that he can issue a warning for excessive noise.

As the tenant goes inside to fetch his driver's license, a group of men and women emerge from the party. Although Fiore hasn't asked about their ages, they all begin insisting that they are twenty-one and hold out driver's licenses. One man, adamantly declaring that Fiore can't write a ticket unless someone called in a noise complaint, demands to know who complained. Fiore twice encourages the man to go back inside and let his roommate handle the situation. But the young man is defiant, protesting loudly as he wavers on his feet. Finally, Fiore takes his driver's license and runs his name through the squad car's computer. Seeing that the man has numerous previous warnings, Fiore writes the tenants a \$172 ticket for violating noise ordinances.

"Some people are good at talking their way into trouble," Fiore says as

he pulls away from the house, clearly annoyed that the partygoers' combative attitude wasted three officers' time. Putting up with drunken students is part of the job, and it's one of the main reasons, Fiore says, that he doesn't drink alcohol. But in the next hour, he'll be reminded that he has other duties.

The DJs have arrived at Thai Liu's house and are unloading a van full of speakers and turntables into the basement. As they're setting up, the doorbell rings again, signaling the arrival of beer kegs. One of Liu's roommates directs the delivery man into the kitchen, where large buckets of ice await. With guests due to arrive in an hour, the students make sure valuables are locked up in a side room, then tap the first keg to drink a toast to a trouble-free party.

Time flies, the sun goes down, and suddenly the house is full of people. Music from the basement creates a dull roar upstairs, where friends mingle and get drinks. A woman enters the house and makes a beeline for the living room, but she is met at the entrance by a friend of Liu's, who stands next to a child-safety gate that blocks the doorway.

After identifying herself as Liu's friend, she is allowed to enter the party's VIP room, which has its own keg and liquor stash. The rest of the crowd gravitates toward the kitchen, where three kegs are tapped.



Liu moves from room to room, checking on guests and making sure those who are drinking have paid the five-dollar cover charge. Once his pockets are full of cash, he slips into the locked room and unloads the money into a vase. If hosts plan well, a house party can be lucrative, earning hundreds of dollars above the costs of beer and entertainment. Some students, Fiore says, throw parties to make money for rent or utilities. But, says Liu, he and his roommates just want to break even.

“In my experience, the more money we end up making, the more likely it is that the cops come and we have to pay noise violations,” he says. “And we just end up breaking even or losing a few bucks.”

Because of the prospect of stiff fines, house parties are a risky business. Last year, police busted a Halloween party at the Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity house and cited 266 violations, including serving underage drinkers, selling alcohol without a license, and exceeding the maximum capacity for the house. The party’s eleven hosts earned a combined total of more than \$94,000 in fines, which police believe is the largest total fine resulting from a Madison house party.

Dan Gundry ’06 and his roommates found out just how costly parties can be when police busted one at their house two years ago, leading to fines of more than \$8,000 for each of the four hosts. Although the fines were reduced in court

to \$700, Gundry says he thinks twice about hosting such a large party now.

“We still have parties,” he says. “We are just more smart about who we have over.”

In college towns across the country, police and university officials are working together to regulate house parties, often resorting to extreme penalties. In Lincoln, Nebraska, for example, a judge sentenced a twenty-one-year-old man to thirty days in jail simply because he shared an apartment with two roommates who threw a rowdy house party — one that he didn’t even attend.

While Madison police and UW officials say they don’t want to go that far with penalties, they are putting a greater emphasis on patrolling parties than they did a few decades ago. They do so in part because UW-Madison has been identified as having one of the heaviest-drinking student populations in the nation. In a 2004 survey, 59 percent of UW students said that they had binged — they drank enough to get drunk — at least once in a two-week period, well above the national average of 44 percent.

Citing links between excessive drinking and higher rates of injury, vandalism, and sexual assault, the UW launched a public-health campaign in the 1990s to combat that drinking culture. Known as PACE — or Policy, Alternatives, Community, and Education — the project has targeted stricter enforcement of

alcohol policies throughout the city, including a tougher stand on large, unrestrained house parties.

“The problem with house parties is that they are operating as unlicensed taverns,” says Susan Crowley, PACE’s director. “They do not have trained managers to control situations.”

Many students view PACE as an effort to suck the fun out of college, believing that administrators such as Crowley would be happier if students did nothing but study all day and night. Crowley insists that nothing could be further from the truth. She notes that PACE enlisted students to write a guide to throwing a safe house party, which includes advice such as limiting the number of guests and not selling cups for drinking.

“We are not trying to regulate against a group of friends having a good time,” she says.

At the same time, PACE has encouraged police to begin informing landlords about tenants’ partying habits, which Crowley believes is helping to rein in the number of out-of-control parties.

At Liu’s house, landlord pressure isn’t an issue. “Our landlord loves us,” he says. Liu also doesn’t buy the argument that house parties are any more problematic than bars or other places students drink. He says he collects his money up front and has no financial incentive to keep drunken guests around his house.

Continued on page 62

House Rules

Continued from page 33

Sure enough, as he circles the party, he notices a young man flailing wildly in the kitchen. He tells the man's friends to take him home, because he doesn't want that kind of thing in his house.

Tony Fiore hears a call over the radio that an officer needs backup at a house on East Washington Avenue, several blocks from campus. Within minutes, he arrives on the scene. A fire truck and ambulance are already parked in front of the house. A crime-scene investigation team arrives next.

Fiore enters the house and disappears. Thirty minutes later, he gets back in the car and explains that a middle-aged man inside had tried to commit suicide by slitting his throat.

"A drinking ticket isn't so bad," he says.

On the way back to the station, Fiore passes a party on Bassett Street. An offi-

cer is already there, and Fiore slows to ask if he needs backup. The officer says he has the situation under control, so Fiore leaves to handle paperwork on the attempted suicide.

Later that night, Fiore learns that the man successfully took his own life.

"There are other things to worry about besides parties," Fiore says.

At four in the morning, the party at Liu's house on Bassett Street has begun to die down. He looks around the house, now covered with blue cups and puddles of beer, and checks to make sure he knows everyone who has passed out on empty beds, chairs, and couches. Liu locks the doors and heads to bed, only to find that two friends have beaten him to it. He finds a clean spot on the floor and within minutes is sound asleep.

At noon the next day, he awakens to find his house still full of people who don't live there. Several are discussing


going to the library, which Liu says sounds like a great idea because he wants to begin cleaning up. Once they're gone, he opens a closet and pulls out a carpet shampooer. His roommates begin the routine of stacking the furniture and picking up the cups and other trash.

Later on, Liu loads the seven drained kegs into a friend's truck and heads to the liquor store to return them and collect his deposit. As he enters the parking lot, a young man approaches him.

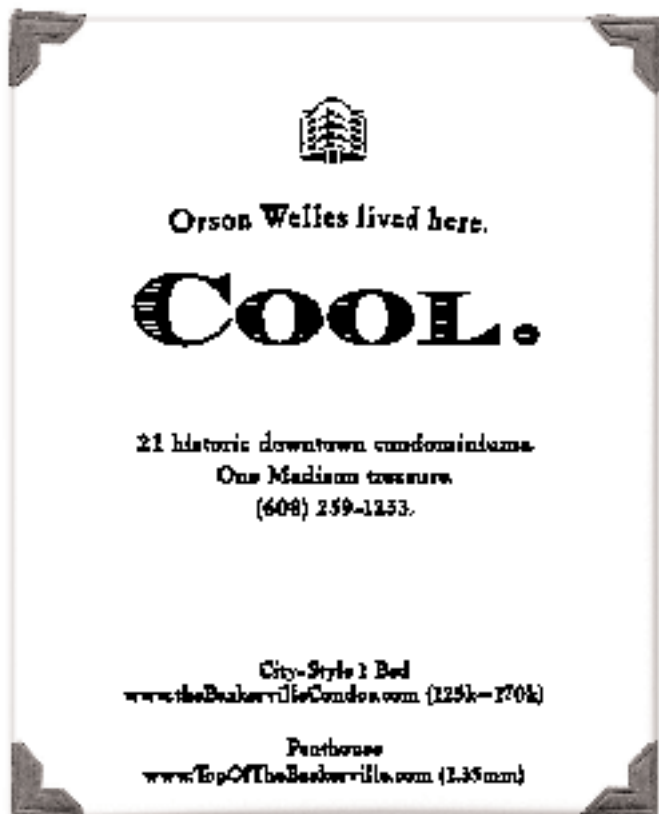
"Did you throw that party last night?" the man asks.


"Sure did," Liu replies.

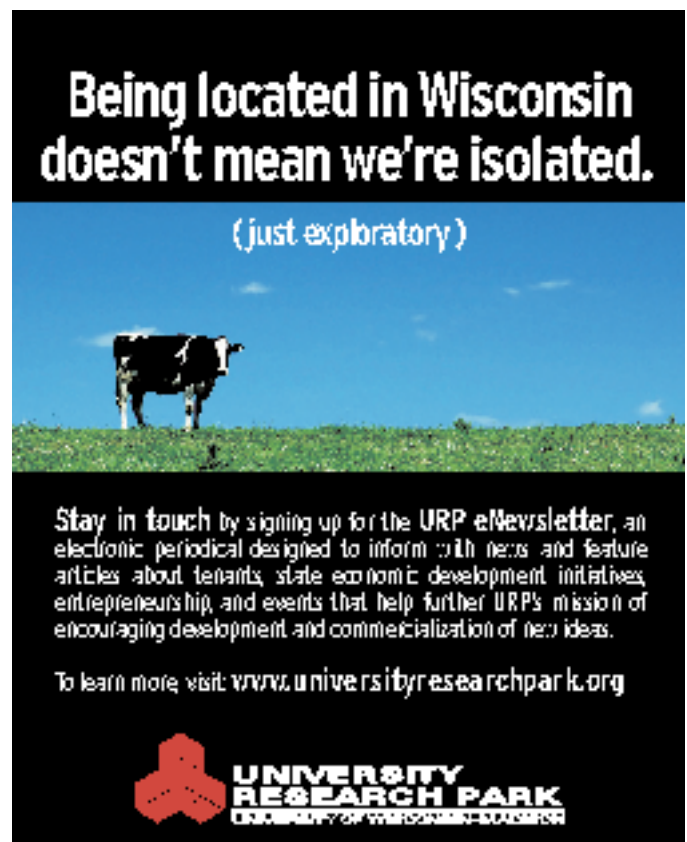
"That was, like, the best party I have been to in a while, man. Thanks," the man says.

"Watch out for the next one," Liu says. And if his luck holds, there will be a next one. 


Joanna Salmen '06 graduated in May with a degree in journalism and Spanish. This was her final assignment as *On Wisconsin's* editorial intern.




Orson Welles lived here.
COOL.
21 historic downtown condominiums.
One Madison treasure.
(608) 259-1233.
City-Style 1 Bed
www.TheBacksvilleCondos.com (125k-170k)
Penthouse
www.TopOffTheBacksville.com (1.35mm)




**Being located in Wisconsin
doesn't mean we're isolated.**
(just exploratory)



Stay in touch by signing up for the URP eNewsletter, an electronic periodical designed to inform with news and feature articles about tenants, state economic development initiatives, entrepreneurship, and events that help further URP's mission of encouraging development and commercialization of new ideas.

To learn more visit: www.universityresearchpark.org



**UNIVERSITY
RESEARCH PARK**
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-DOMER