

The Anteater

SPRING 2025

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE UC IRVINE ALUMNI ASSOCIATION



Food for Thought

Nourishing Students, Alums and Dreams

Alumni Impacting the Culinary World

The Anteater: Habitually Green

Cooking Up Healthier Recipes



From the *President*

Dear fellow Anteaters,

I think you'll agree that there's nothing quite like the buzz of Ring Road on a busy day – especially when it includes the aromas of fresh food, the sounds of students connecting and the energy that defines our UC Irvine community. The accompanying image captures just that spirit: a student vendor fair that's as much about nourishment before midterms as it is about school spirit, creativity and connection.

Welcome to this deliciously curated edition of *The Anteater*, in which we dig into the many ways food weaves itself into the Anteater experience – from iconic campus bites (yes, The Anteater is still standing strong) to alumni-founded eateries making waves to groundbreaking research at the intersection of health, sustainability and food systems.

As president of the UC Irvine Alumni Association, I'm continually inspired by how our alumni carry their passions from campus into the world. And when it comes to food, it's more than just what's on the plate – it's about culture, innovation, entrepreneurship and community impact. You'll find those values echoed throughout these pages.

Whether you're reminiscing about late-night pho runs, grabbing a bite between classes or attending one of the Dinners with Anteaters, I hope this issue fills your heart (and your stomach) with pride. I'm hungry just thinking about it. ;)

My term as president is almost over, and like a good dinner guest, I need to say thank you. It's been an honor and a delight having a seat at the table. We're so grateful for your continued connection to UC Irvine. Stay engaged, support each other and don't forget the next time you're back on campus: Ring Road is still serving up all the good stuff, so don't be a stranger.

With gratitude and a healthy serving of Zot! Zot! Zot!,

Derek Sabori '95, MBA '02

Outgoing president, UC Irvine Alumni Association



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Brains for Business, Passion for Food

From CEOs of popular fast-casual chains – including Wahoo's Tacos and Farmer Boys – to proprietors of local food trucks and eateries, UC Irvine alumni are making their mark with successful ventures in the restaurant and culinary industries. We catch up with some Anteater alums to find out what motivated them to pursue their foodie dreams.



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Eat, Drink and Be Green

The Anteater, a 900-seat, all-you-care-to-eat dining hall, has had a sustainable mission since its start in 2016. It provides students with not only tasty offerings – from a Mongolian grill to a Dole-esque pineapple whip – but low-carbon meal options as well as produce sourced from its own vertical garden or local growers – all helping students make environmentally friendly choices on a daily basis.





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Mouth-Watering 'Medicine'

Whether it's transforming mushrooms to seem like scallops or creating a delicious, lower-calorie version of chicken shawarma (see recipe), the Mussallem Nutritional Education Kitchen offers cooking classes that help individuals – including members of the public – learn to prepare healthier-for-you recipes. The kitchen, part of UC Irvine's Susan Samueli Integrative Health Institute, is headed by executive chef Jessica VanRoo, who says: "Most people find that they love to cook."



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The Anteater

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UC Irvine Alumni

Traditions



Mentoring

By Greg Hardesty

Is on the Menu

Dinners with Anteaters get students and alumni together for mutually rewarding meals that come with a side of advice

"Cool! Free food!" That was Brandon Ng's reaction when the Earth system science major first heard about Dinners with Anteaters, the program in which alumni, staff and faculty members host meals for a group of students and feast, for two to three hours, on UC Irvine stories – along with generous servings of advice and mentoring.

But Ng says the evening proved to be more beneficial and long-lasting than the tasty meal he enjoyed during sunset on the backyard patio of an alum's house. The third-year undergrad learned how career paths aren't always linear (his host, now a patent attorney, majored in biology) and about policy work that piqued his interest.

"It was a very low-stakes but valuable way to casually network," says Ng, who was so impressed that he volunteered to organize the evening gatherings for a year.

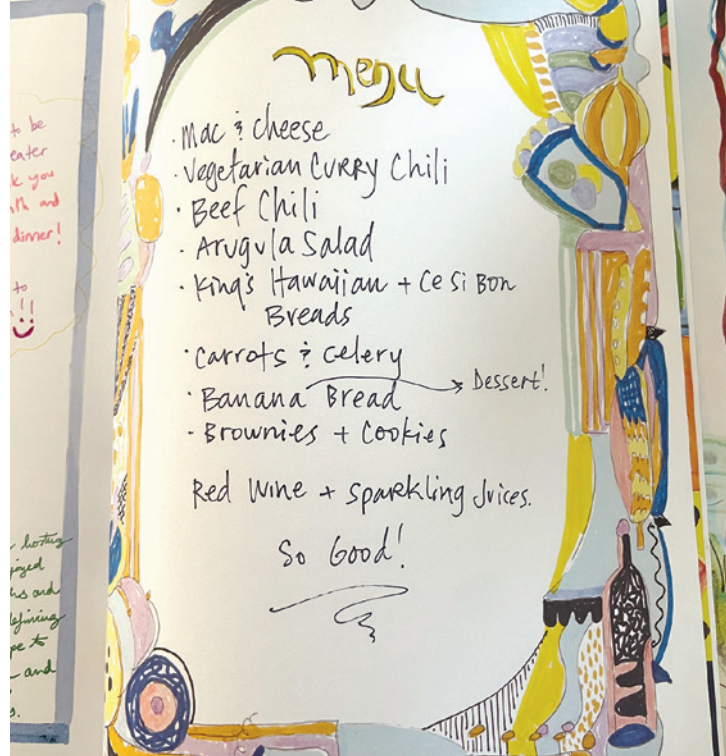
Now a long-held, cherished tradition, Dinners with Anteaters – founded in 2003 and run by the Student Alumni Association – are just as rewarding for the adults who create the home-cooked meals or pick up the tab at local eateries.

"It's a good connecting experience for us all," says Derek Sabori '95, MBA '02, a sustainability consultant and president of the UC Irvine Alumni Association, who has hosted four dinners at his Costa Mesa home with his wife, Sibley, an instructor at Orange Coast College.

"Beyond the students connecting with me," Sabori adds, "what I love is watching them connect with each other, learning what their favorite campus experiences are and what complaints they have. They discover new places to hang out and study – all these hidden tips and tricks."

Originally called Dinner for 12 Anteaters, the get-togethers now are held twice a year. On each night, as many as 15 groups break bread at spots on or near campus.

Goran Matijasevic, who earned his doctorate at UC Irvine in electrical engineering and computer science in 1991 and is now executive director of the university's Chief Executive Roundtable, has been having the dinners at restaurants, including alumni-owned establishments.



“Beyond the students connecting with me, what I love is watching them connect with each other.”

Since 2014, he has hosted almost every year, including a virtual dinner during the pandemic that kept the bonding sessions going at a time when such opportunities were sorely lacking.

In recent years, Matijasevic has been pairing the dinners with UC Irvine arts events so the students get to also enjoy a musical performance or a play. “I’m always surprised at how many students have never been to a symphony concert or ventured over to the UCI Claire Trevor School of the Arts,” he says.

At the dinners, Matijasevic always tries to get the students to talk about their career goals. “I encourage them to seek out alumni who are in career paths they wish to be in and reach out to them via LinkedIn,” he says.

Typically, six to 10 students attend each dinner, with organizers placing most of them with hosts who share their academic and career interests. But sometimes the hosts go large. In 2017, social commerce entrepreneur and former CEO of Buy.com Neel Grover ’92 held a huge bash on the sands of Laguna Beach; and Erin Gruwell ’91 has fed 50 students twice at her nonprofit Freedom Writers Foundation in Long Beach.

Naja Spotsworth Christmas ’23, currently in the Asian American studies master’s program, attended a dinner held at a nearby Irvine restaurant. Her long-term goal is to produce historical research on South



Korean law and to work in foreign diplomacy. She learned from her attorney host that not everyone who wants to work in the legal field has to be a lawyer and that there are opportunities for what she envisions.

“This perspective is very different from how the legal profession is often presented,” Christmas says. “I found it refreshing and extremely helpful in understanding how to plan my path. Oftentimes, students look for big signs that they should take a certain path; for me, the simplicity of this guidance was very special.”

She adds: “It was a different perspective that came with having access to an Anteater who had more experience than me. It was truly valuable and transformative.”

Sabori and his wife have assembled a Dinners with Anteaters scrapbook of their various dinner menus and group snapshots. “We have great conversations,” he says. “It’s something really meaningful that we look forward to.”

Cheers to the Memories

By Greg Hardesty

On a recent weeknight, UC Irvine alums Temo Galvez '97 and his wife, Cynthia Barrientos-Galvez '96, shared a burger and sipped beers in the Anthill Pub & Grille ahead of their high school daughter Paloma's spring dance showcase at the Irvine Barclay Theatre.

Sitting at the 12-stool wooden bar, the couple enjoyed the low-lit venue filled with memorabilia, including neon signs, sports jerseys, an Anteater Republic flag and a

UC Irvine team surfboard. "It's nice and low-key here and brings back a lot of memories," Temo Galvez says. His wife adds: "We pop in here every chance we get."

The original Anthill Pub & Grille opened in 1991, slightly tucked away on the second floor of the then-new Student Center overlooking West Peltason and Pereira drives.

"It was a fun place to be," recalls Edgar Dormitorio '97, assistant vice chancellor and chief of staff for UC Irvine Student Affairs. The pub had pool tables and an outdoor seating area and featured small music and dance performances and poetry and trivia nights. "Being a relatively new university, it was very intentional to open a pub on campus to create a sense of student life," Dormitorio says.

The original pub was demolished along with the old Student Center in 2006. It reopened the following year at its more central location on the second floor of the new Student Center.

The pub no longer has any pool tables or outdoor seating, but card, chess, trivia and board games are available. There are 32 beer taps and pub food. The Stoner Tots and Stoner Fries – both topped with carne asada, cheese sauce, sour cream, fire-roasted salsa and guacamole – are popular, as are the burgers and chicken sandwiches, says manager Sallie Petras. There's a jukebox and plenty of tables and even a coin-operated Breathalyzer. Minors and children are welcome; those who want to imbibe need to show their IDs and wear wristbands.

Alum Rebecca Pinaroc '22 was eating fries and chicken tenders and drinking an Anteater Lager – UC Irvine Athletics' newly branded beer. "It's a very lively environment and a great place to gather for small or large groups," she says. "I love it here."



A Lager That Hits the Zot!

UC Irvine Athletics has rolled out its first branded beer – a growing trend in the collegiate athletics space – in partnership with San Clemente-based Left Coast Brewing Co. Anteater Lager is a light (5.1 percent ABV) beer that comes in 12-ounce cans with the UC Irvine Athletics logo front and center.

The beverage debuted early this year at the Bren Events Center and at Cicerone Field at Anteater Ballpark and is also available at the Anthill Pub & Grille on campus, at the local Albertson's and at Left Coast Brewing Co. in Irvine. "This would be a great tailgate beer," says Jordan Pinaroc '22, sipping the brew at the Anthill Pub & Grille.

An advertising partner with UC Irvine, Left Coast Brewing initially planned to introduce a stronger "Anteater Ale" but settled on the Mexican-style lager that uses corn as an ingredient to lighten the body, color and flavor, says Tommy Hadjis, the company's general manager. "It's selling well," he adds. "It's very challenging with all the brands out there, but we're hoping the sales develop organically."

So far, so good, says Phil Wang, UC Irvine senior associate athletic director for external affairs. "We've been extremely pleased with the popularity of Anteater Lager," he says. "This is really about bringing something to fruition that UC Irvine alumni and fans could get excited about."





Six-Wheel Deliveries

Nicknamed “Zot Bots” and introduced in 2020 after the COVID-19 pandemic began, more than 20 white mobile robots festooned with a raised orange flag and flashing lights continue to zip around UC Irvine, delivering food and drinks from campus eateries in a tamper-proof, temperature-controlled compartment that customers open with an app from Starship Technologies, creator of the licensed delivery system. The six-wheel Zot Bots run 99 percent autonomously and navigate and avoid objects via radar, 12 cameras, sensors and machine learning. First-year pre-med student Bear Galvez, who lives on campus, was happy with a recent sushi platter order. “The minimal fees paired with the quick delivery time straight to my hall’s door were a plus over traditionally ordering food,” he says. “Getting my food and sending the bot away may have been the easiest part; I only needed a swipe of my finger.”

Making a Good Meal Easier to Find

By Alison Van Houten

Three tech platforms are helping Anteaters eat better, whether by reducing waste on campus, comparing dining hall options or finding nutritional information at local restaurants.

Zot Bites

At the end of an event, caterers often wind up with a surplus of uneaten food and nowhere for it to go. To keep that from happening at UC Irvine, the UCI Basic Needs Center created a system to text students – an increasing number of whom experience food insecurity – notifications about leftovers once on-campus activities wrap up. “It was a multigenerational student project,” says Andrea Mora ’15, director of the UCI Basic Needs Center. “From 2017 to 2020, different Global Food Initiative fellows carried out the research, development and implementation of Zot Bites.”

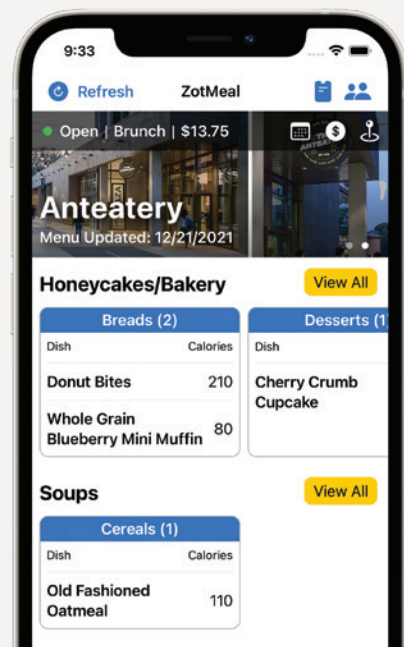


Nutripair

Searching for a restaurant with detailed allergen information or gluten-free options? Catlin Tran ’23 can help. “I started Nutripair in my second year at UCI, around the same time my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer,” Tran says, noting her mother’s need to be aware of certain food and drug interactions during treatment. With a recent \$25,000 small-business grant from Verizon, her team has now developed an app to help the 33 million Americans who have at least one food allergy find the right restaurants for their dietary needs, as well as assisting individuals with food intolerance or religious restrictions.

ZotMeal

As an undergrad, Shengyuan Lu ’24 found it difficult to easily compare dining hall options on any given day, so he prototyped an app as part of the HackUCI programming competition. Today, ZotMeal compiles offerings from the Anteater and Brandywine dining halls and includes detailed nutritional data plus other handy-to-have information, such as schedules, pricing and special themes. “To date, our app has been adopted by over 10,000 users on campus,” Lu says.



Ahead of *the Curve*

Skeletal Tissue Discovery Offers Regenerative Medicine Potential

An international research team – led by Maksim Plikus, UC Irvine professor of developmental and cell biology, and UC Irvine postdoctoral researcher Raul Ramos – has discovered a new type of skeletal tissue that offers great potential for advancing regenerative medicine and tissue engineering. Most cartilage relies on an external extracellular matrix for strength, but “lipocartilage,” which is found in the ears, nose and throat of mammals, is uniquely packed with fat-filled cells called “lipochondrocytes” that provide super-stable internal support, enabling the tissue to remain soft and springy – similar to bubbled packaging material. “Lipocartilage’s resilience and stability provide a compliant, elastic quality that’s perfect for flexible body parts such as earlobes or the tip of the nose, opening exciting possibilities in regenerative medicine and tissue engineering, particularly for facial defects or injuries,” said Plikus, corresponding author of the study, published in *Science*. “Currently, cartilage reconstruction often requires harvesting tissue from the patient’s rib – a painful and invasive procedure. In the future, patient-specific lipochondrocytes could be derived from stem cells, purified and used to manufacture living cartilage tailored to individual needs.”



‘RNA Lanterns’ May Reveal the Secrets of Viruses and Human Memory

UC Irvine scientists have found a way to tag RNA with a glowing bioluminescence that allows them to track the molecule in real time as it moves throughout the body. Published in *Nature Communications*, the discovery promises to help scientists better understand everything from the way viruses propagate to how memories form in the brain. If scientists can tag viral RNA with the team’s “RNA lanterns,” they can learn how a virus infiltrates the body’s defenses, said Andrej Lupták, UC Irvine professor and chair of pharmaceutical sciences and co-lead corresponding author of the study. RNA also appears to play a key role in the creation of memories in the brain, according to Jennifer Prescher, UC Irvine professor of chemistry and co-lead corresponding author. “Being able to see early events and the transport of RNA from the cell body out to neural synapses where connections are being made to other neurons – that directly correlates with memory formation,” she said. “If you have a way to watch that in real time, that could tell you something fundamental about the brain and memory, which has been a holy grail in science for a long time.”



A New Valve for the Most Vulnerable

Nnaoma Agwu, a UC Irvine Ph.D. candidate in biomedical engineering, and Arash Kheradvar, UC Irvine professor of biomedical engineering, have developed a unique transcatheter pulmonary heart valve to address an unmet need of children born with congenital heart defects. The first of its kind, the origami-inspired Iris Valve is designed to be implanted in children as small as 17 pounds and expanded to accommodate the blood flow needs of growing children. An alternative to open-heart surgery, the Iris Valve is folded and implanted through the femoral vein using the smallest transcatheter delivery system, which has a 4-millimeter diameter. Kheradvar said that when closed, the Iris Valve looks like the Mercedes-Benz three-pointed star logo. “It’s crucial for the valve to be competent, meaning that when it’s closed, it should stay closed without any leakage,” he said. Next steps include additional studies and proceeding with the Food and Drug Administration approval process for the first human implantation.



Health & Wellness

The Perks of Minimizing Meat and **Putting Plants** Center Stage

By Amy Paturel

In our fast-paced world where convenience often drives choices, plant-based foods frequently take a backseat. Whether prepping fresh produce feels like too much effort or meat-centric meals seem more satisfying, the impact is clear: Most Americans are not eating enough plant foods. In fact, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, only 1 in 10 adults are meeting daily fruit and vegetable recommendations.

Yet research consistently suggests that treating vegetables as the main course, not just a side dish, comes with surprising benefits. In a recent study, published in *American Journal of Preventive Cardiology*, Matthew Landry, assistant professor of population health and disease prevention at UC Irvine's Joe C. Wen School of Population & Public Health, reports that going meat-free reduces the risk of heart disease. His team analyzed 21 systematic reviews published between 2018 and 2024 comparing cardiovascular risk factors and health outcomes among people following vegetarian, vegan and nonvegetarian diets.

"Vegetarian and vegan diets are linked to lower body mass index, blood pressure and harmful LDL cholesterol, all of which are major risk factors for heart disease and stroke," Landry says.

But it's not just ditching animal products that yields these positive changes. It's what you *add* to your plate in their absence. Plant foods, including fruits, vegetables and legumes, are loaded with heart-healthy powerhouses like fiber, potassium and magnesium.



Did You Know?

Current U.S. dietary guidelines recommend the equivalent of 2 cups of fruit and 2½ cups of vegetables daily for an adult on a 2,000-calorie-per-day diet.

In an earlier study of 22 pairs of identical twins – published in *Journal of the American Medical Association Network Open* and featured in the Netflix docuseries "You Are What You Eat" – Landry and colleagues found that after just one month of eating a vegan diet, LDL cholesterol levels dropped below 100 milligrams per deciliter, a significant shift toward better health. Other studies have shown that eating large quantities of plant foods prompts the digestive tract to develop more fiber-fermenting bacteria and fewer meat-processing bacteria linked to disease-driving inflammation. The result: a robust ecosystem of favorable bacteria in the gut.

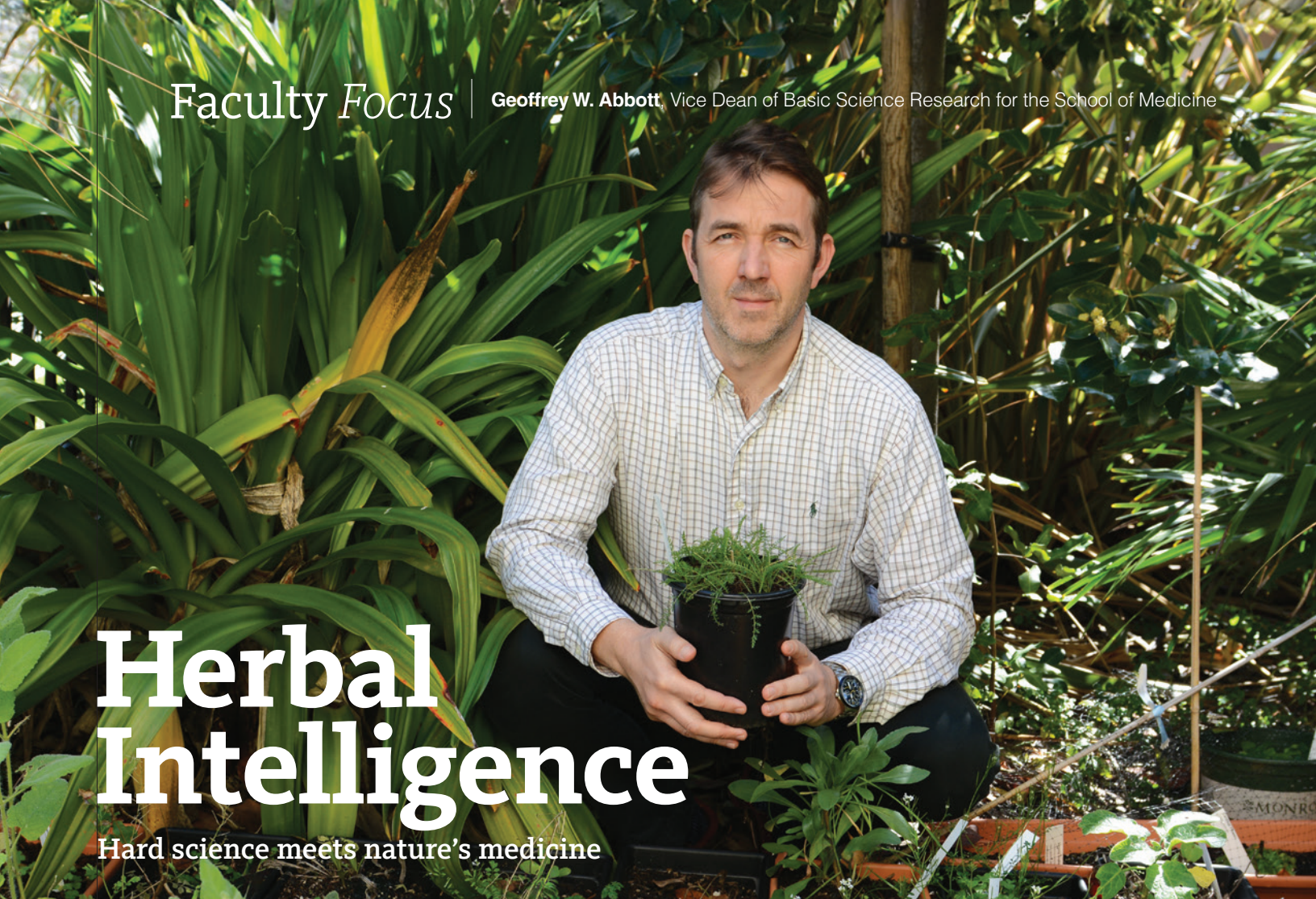
And going completely meat-free isn't necessary to get the benefits. Focus instead on making wise food choices. "Swapping meat for ultraprocessed vegan alternatives – like no-meat hamburgers – isn't likely to offer the same health perks and could even be harmful," Landry says, noting that those foods can be packed with excess sodium, sugars and other additives.

If you do choose to go vegetarian or vegan, he recommends working with a health professional to ensure you're getting necessary nutrients that typically come from meat sources, such as vitamin D, B12 and iron. Then, instead of overhauling your diet overnight, consider making gradual changes. "It's never an all-or-nothing proposition," Landry says. "Any shift we make toward eating more produce and less meat is beneficial for our health."

Easy Ways to Pack in More Plants

- **Get creative.** Add shredded zucchini or raw spinach leaves to pasta sauce, toss greens into smoothies or top pizza with roasted veggies for an extra nutrient boost.
- **Make smart swaps.** Try replacing half the ground meat in tacos or chili with lentils, mushrooms or beans for a hearty and healthy alternative.
- **Experiment with preparation methods.** Roasting, grilling or sautéing vegetables can bring out natural sweetness and make them more palatable.
- **Keep it simple.** Frozen vegetables are just as nutritious as fresh, can be stored longer and require minimal prep. Steam, stir-fry or toss them into soups and stews.



A man with short brown hair and a light beard, wearing a light-colored checkered button-down shirt and dark pants, is kneeling in a lush garden. He is holding a small black pot containing a green plant with feathery leaves. The background is filled with various green plants, including large-leafed ones and some with yellowish-brown tips. The lighting is bright, suggesting a sunny day.

Herbal Intelligence

Hard science meets nature's medicine

Geoffrey W. Abbott's expeditions have taken him from the dry sands of the Mojave Desert to the lush forests of the Virgin Islands – and into the grocery store produce aisle – in search of herbal medicines.

As vice dean of basic science research and professor of physiology and biophysics at UC Irvine's School of Medicine, Abbott investigates the inner workings of cells. But a chance discovery in his lab led to a new quest: identifying herbal medicines that hold promise for treating serious diseases.

Abbott studies voltage-gated potassium channels, passageways in cell membranes that regulate the electrical signals that cells use to function. Faulty potassium channels are linked to a wide range of maladies, including heart rhythm problems and neurological disorders such as epilepsy. Several years ago, Abbott and Rían Manville, a postdoctoral researcher in his lab, were looking for chemical compounds that could activate the potassium channels they were interested in.

Testing samples from a vast library of chemicals, Manville found one that, unexpectedly, opened an important potassium channel in the brain. The compound was derived from a genus of tropical

shrubs, they learned. "I did a bit of digging and found that across Africa, that plant is used in folk medicine to treat seizures," Abbott says. "I realized we could use state-of-the-art research techniques to understand things that have been used in folk medicine for thousands of years."

So he hit the shops, loading his cart with organic herbs like basil and thyme to study their effects on potassium channel function. People often think of herbs as seasonings or garnishes, Abbott notes, but humans have employed these plants as medicine since prehistoric times. He spoke with *The Anteater* contributor Kirsten Weir about the leading-edge science his lab utilizes to uncover the secrets of herbal medicine.

How did you decide to go all in on botanical medicine?

After discovering the link between potassium channel modulation and the African plant used to treat seizures, we studied it further and found two different molecules that combine to have the anticonvulsant effect. When we gave those molecules to mice, it suppressed seizures. I realized this could be a bigger phenomenon than had been appreciated.

Abbott's research has identified several promising medicinal compounds hiding in plain sight – in the organic produce aisle of his local grocery store. Here are some potential uses of the herbs he's exploring:



Rosemary

Reduce cravings for cocaine and other drugs



Cilantro
Treat epileptic seizures



Lavender

Treat high blood pressure



Thyme

Treat fungal infections (including yeast infections resistant to existing treatments)



Fennel

Widen blood vessels and reduce high blood pressure

We started going to the supermarket and buying plants like cilantro and thyme and oregano – herbs that have a long history as folk remedies. We began testing them on the potassium channels that are our targets and started to see promising effects. Then I got permits to collect plants in national parks, which opened up hundreds or even thousands of species that haven't been studied much. We now have about 3,500 plant extracts from national parks, each one of which I collected personally on solo trips or with my lab team.

What's your approach to identifying promising plant compounds?

We take two different approaches. The first is essentially random. We mash up the plants and screen them against two different potassium channels, one in the brain that can cause neurological problems when it's underactive and one in the immune system that can contribute to inflammation if it's overactive. Once we find a plant that's good at activating the brain channel or inhibiting the immune system channel, we try to identify the specific active compound in the plant.

The other approach is more targeted. For instance, we had been studying episodic ataxia Type 1. EA1 is a movement disorder caused by mutations in a potassium channel gene; it's characterized by uncoordinated movements and loss of balance. We went to the Native American literature and found that a First Nations people in the Pacific Northwest, the Kwakwaka'wakw, historically used three plants to treat ataxia. We tried all of them, and they worked remarkably but weren't universal – they worked on only some of the various genetic mutations associated with ataxia. So we went back to the literature and found that Native Americans have often used pine tree extracts to treat movement disorders more generally, not just ataxia. We started looking at pines and found a Japanese cypress that corrected 12 out of 12 mutated channels linked to EA1. We determined the molecule responsible and tested it in mouse models of ataxia, and it worked. The treated mice moved just like wild mice. I now have a grant from the National Ataxia Foundation to further study these compounds.

Have you found any other promising plants?

In University Hills, rosemary grows everywhere. One day I told my kids to collect some from the garden so we could test it. It had a small effect on the first potassium channel we looked at, but when we tested a second channel, the results were spectacular. We found that a compound in rosemary, carnosic acid, is the most effective opener of this potassium channel ever discovered. I was talking to my UCI colleague Kevin Beier, now an associate professor of physiology and biophysics, who had discovered a new brain circuit in mice that's involved in cocaine addiction. It turns out the two channels we found that are activated by carnosic acid are exactly the same channels that are involved in that circuit. When he gave addicted mice carnosic acid, it diminished their cocaine-seeking behavior. It worked brilliantly. We're really excited about the possibility that rosemary extract could one day be used to get people un-addicted to cocaine and other psychotropic drugs.

Herbal medicine isn't always taken seriously. Is there skepticism about the folk remedies you're studying?

There *is* skepticism, and sometimes it's for good reason, because there's some nonsense out there. But we've sort of forgotten that some of the most successful medicines we have come from plants. Aspirin is derived from a compound in willow bark, but when you buy a bottle of white pills, it's disconnected from nature. Native Americans used at least 3,000 wild plant species as medicine, so there's a lot to go on. We're trying to put some hard science to it.

Anteater Spotlight | Tea and Coffee Mavens

By Kristin Baird Rattini



Sashee Chandran '07, economics

For her patented Tea Drops, Sashee Chandran compresses organic, premium, loose-leaf tea into fun, bag-less, single-serve shapes. It's fitting that one of those shapes is a star. In the decade since their launch, Tea Drops have been featured on the "Today" show and "Good Morning America," been partnered with Hello Kitty, and found fans among such A-listers as Oprah Winfrey, Michelle Obama and Chrissy Teigen.

Chandran wasn't starry-eyed when she came up with the idea for Tea Drops. She simply wanted to find a mess-free way to make a cup of loose-leaf tea to relax at her bustling job in market research at eBay.

She'd grown up in a tea family. Her Chinese mother would brew chrysanthemum tea when Chandran was sick. Her dad was raised on a tea plantation in Sri Lanka; his family always served chai at gatherings.

Chandran brought that tradition with her to UC Irvine. She'd invite friends over to her rooms in Middle Earth and Campus Village to watch "The Oprah Winfrey Show" and have a chat and a chai. "Tea is a vehicle for connection and introspection," she says. "It's a bridge to other people and other cultures."

It took Chandran 18 months of weekend and weeknight experimentation to find her winning Tea Drops formula. She left eBay and, instead of getting an MBA, invested that money and a home equity loan into launching her company in 2015 with the tagline "Think Outside the Bag" – reflecting the products' reduced waste and zero microplastics.

Chandran was turned down by more than 70 investors before winning several prestigious pitch slams, one of which snagged her a \$100,000 grant from the Tory Burch Foundation. "Winning the prize money was great, but it also gave me visibility before panels of judges who got to learn about me and my product," she says. Several have since invested in the company.

To date, Chandran has sold over 8 million Tea Drops via more than 2,000 retailers, including such dream outlets as Walmart and Sprouts. Since 2017, she has donated a portion of her profits to Thirst Project, a nonprofit that over the years has built water wells in Uganda and a dozen other nations that have served over 500,000 individuals. "We're happy we've been able to make an impact," Chandran says.

While she's extremely grateful for the stellar endorsements and retailer list, she considers Tea Drops' longevity to be their greatest success. "A large percentage of startups fail in the first five years," Chandran says. "The persistence to keep going, even when things were really hard, is what I'm most proud of."

Tea Time



Bold Ventures

Michelle Tu '08, biomedical engineering

When Michelle Tu launched Daybreak Coffee in 2021, she chose “unapologetically bold” as a tagline for her ready-to-drink Vietnamese coffee. It’s an apt description for the career trajectory of this self-described “biologist turned business builder,” who moved on from a scientific career path to pursue entrepreneurial endeavors that have tapped into her creative side and reflected her own values.

A San Mateo native, Tu was excited to join UC Irvine’s biomedical engineering program soon after its launch. Its rigorous curriculum taught her perseverance. “I learned I can do hard things,” she says. “Anything is possible.” After five years of studying tissue regeneration to receive her Ph.D. at UC Davis, Tu struck out on her own in 2015 and launched CURA Skincare based on her research.

Over time, she realized that her favorite part of her work was designing the product packaging, which reignited her creative spirit. “As a kid, I was always drawing, painting, even making my own Barbie clothes out of whatever I could find,” she says.

Tu started crafting candles to decompress from her business, relishing the creative license to curate fragrances. In 2020, as people started cocooning during the pandemic and online candle sales soared, she pivoted from CURA as her “little hobby” swiftly evolved into a thriving candle enterprise named Modern Theory Co.

The pandemic also launched Tu on a quest to re-create the authentic Vietnamese coffee she missed from visiting relatives in the Southeast Asian country. Working with her childhood friend and “big coffee nerd” Stanislav Kroll, Tu drew on her scientific training as they methodically experimented with Vietnamese beans, traditional butter roasting, and various times and temperatures. Nine months later, they produced a strong, rich and pleasantly bitter coffee balanced with the creamy sweetness of locally sourced condensed milk.

Tu named their bean-to-bottle product Daybreak Vietnamese Coffee, after a cherished memory of watching locals line up at dawn for coffee from street vendors on her first trip to Vietnam, at age 9.

Customers soon started lining up for Daybreak Coffee at the pair’s booth in the Burlingame Farmers Market. That led to distribution in about 20 Bay Area grocery retailers and at events for Google, eBay and other tech firms. It also landed them in their “dream outlet”: San Francisco International Airport. “It’s the perfect spot for us,” Tu says.

As a side hustle, she consults on product and brand development. Her top advice: “You don’t have to fit yourself into a specific mold; you are your own mold. You create your path. Life will throw you curveballs, so it’s important to be adaptable. But stay true to yourself.”



Brains for Business, Passion for Food

Anteaters make a mark in the culinary world



If you're situated in renowned food meccas like Paris or Rome or even New York, it might be expected that local college alumni will gravitate toward restaurant and culinary industry careers. But Irvine? Well, yes! A surprising number of Anteaters have found that their UCI-trained business and econ brains pair nicely with their passion for good food. And the city of Irvine, a growing paradise for foodies in search of international cuisine, is also a global hub for innovation and technology – increasingly important in food professions. Plus, there are resources everywhere you look: vendors, marketing pros and diverse populations hungry for new culinary concepts. It's a great place to dream, a great place to create and a great place to eat.

On the following pages, we catch up with some UC Irvine alumni – from CEOs of major restaurant chains to proprietors of local eateries – who are cooking up good things.



By Victoria Clayton



Mingo Lee '90 (above), *economics*
Co-founder and CEO/CFO
Wahoo's Fish Tacos

Taking a Chance on a 'Wacky' Fusion Dream

Out of five boys born to the Lee family, the eldest two listened to their restaurateur parents and pursued professions outside the food world. But the three youngest – Renato “Mingo” Lee '90 and elder brothers Ed Lee and Wing Lam Lee are where Wahoo's Fish Tacos starts.

The brothers, born to Chinese parents who immigrated to Brazil and then Orange County, grew up working in their parents' Balboa Island restaurant, Shanghai Pine Garden.

“We all worked at the restaurant seven days a week, and so the message to the boys was: Go to school! Get your degrees and do something else!” says Mingo Lee, who has two daughters of his own. “I get it. We all want our children to pursue an easier life.”

In 1988, his parents were on the brink of retiring, and the three youngest brothers (when Lee was still a UC Irvine student) became intent on opening a fish taco shop. Despite reservations, their parents put up

seed money to get them started in a single store in Costa Mesa. Lee believed he'd be selling tacos for a couple of years before he moved on.

“We had parents who taught us about the value of hard work and sacrifice,” he says. “We didn't have to look far for the ultimate role models.” The brothers logged 12-hour days at Wahoo's, Lee carved out time for classes and studying, and afterward they'd all find the local late-night dining spots to try new food. “And then we'd get up the next morning to surf ... and repeat!” Lee says.

After graduating with a B.A. in economics, he was accepted into law school and planned to move to San Francisco. Then Lee made a sudden U-turn. That taco shop was doing really well. Now, more than 35 years later, the brothers command a chain of 45 Wahoo's Fish Tacos outlets across the country, with one in Japan.

"An economics degree is a lot of theory, but what it did for me is give me sort of a foundation for the way I look at the world and the way I execute things," Lee says. His UC Irvine education bolstered his analytical, quantitative and problem-solving skills – all much needed, because Lee, who tends to "hold down the fort" while his brothers are more public-facing, is now in charge of formidable tasks like technology innovation.

But how do sons of Chinese descent born in Brazil and raised in Orange County become taco purveyors?

Tacos were their westside Costa Mesa neighborhood food and what the brothers grew up eating, especially on surfing trips to Ensenada and Rosarito Beach in Baja California. Some of the tacos offered at Wahoo's have Asian-inspired flavor profiles, and some of the salsas, black beans and rice, which customers always rave about, are Brazilian-influenced.

"I'm not sure how I feel about the word 'fusion,' but before there was that word in food, I think we were doing it because of our wacky upbringing with blended cultures," Lee says.

And, he notes, a trip to Wahoo's wouldn't be complete without a splash of Mr. Lee's Chili Sauce: "I'm sure people wonder why there's this Asian red chili sauce on the table. That's because it was my dad's recipe, and we loved it on our food growing up." The brothers attempted to get their father to create a Mexican version, but it never tasted right, so they stuck to the original.

Lee says Orange County can be a tough and expensive place to start a business – and the restaurant industry in general has become increasingly tech-intensive, with an overwhelming number of payment-related and delivery innovations to keep up with – but it's also a fortunate environment.

"This whole area is a hotbed where a lot of concepts are born and bred," he says. "There are resources here every which way you look. UC Irvine and the entire region support and inspire entrepreneurs."

Ed Lee's son is now a UC Irvine alumnus, and all three Wahoo's brothers have kids who have worked in the restaurants at various times, but so far, no offspring are clamoring to carry on the fish taco tradition. This fall, Mingo Lee's elder daughter is heading to law school at the University of San Diego. (She was wait-listed at UC Irvine.) Does he have any regrets that he didn't follow a similar path?

"We've been blessed beyond imagination, and we are very, very thankful, but I admit there is a little part of me that wonders what my life would've been like if I had gone in that direction," Lee says. "Then again, I hang out with a lot of guys who happen to be attorneys, and not one of them has ever said, 'You should've gone to law school.'"



BURNT CRUMBS AND THE BURNT GROUP CATERING

UC Irvine alum **Minh Pham '03** (international studies) and childhood friend Paul Cao (who graduated from a UC farther north on the 405) are the team behind Irvine's Burnt Crumbs, a brunch restaurant in Los Olivos Marketplace that's known for innovative breakfasts and sandwiches. Try the Japanese soufflé pancakes or the ever-popular spaghetti grilled cheese sandwich. Though Cao is a trained chef, Pham says a lot of the inspiration behind dishes comes from members of the restaurant team. "If they go out and eat something that's kind of cool, we'll try to figure out a new twist on it," he says. "We're not pretentious about it. Good food ideas can come from anywhere." Before brick and mortar, Pham and Cao, both Irvine-born and -bred, rode the food truck wave with The Burnt Truck, which serves up creative sliders. They made friends with a fellow food trucker, UC Irvine alum **Martin Hanson Tse '02** (international studies), who operates Dogzilla, which sells hotdogs. In addition to Burnt Crumbs, the three friends now combine forces for catering under The Burnt Group. Look for The Burnt Truck (sliders), Dogzilla (hotdogs) or their collaborative venture Burntzilla (sliders and mini-hotdogs) at area events.



SALT & LIME

Zach Ficke may have attended UC Irvine for only a year (2012-13) before he felt a calling to go to culinary school in Chicago, but he sure made a lot of Anteater friends. Ficke joined Alpha Epsilon Pi fraternity while on campus, and his AEPI brothers now come out in spades to support his Tulum, Mexico-inspired restaurant, Salt & Lime Modern Taqueria, in Costa Mesa. Must-tries, he says, include prime rib-eye tacos, Mexican shrimp tacos, poke nachos, burritos and – naturally – margaritas. "We're an upscale fast-casual restaurant," explains Ficke, who opened Salt & Lime in 2024 after cooking in Laguna Beach, Costa Mesa and Newport Beach restaurants.



Karen Nation '93, *economics*
Founder, Creation Nation

Out of Necessity, a Baller Is Born

In 2008, when the economy took a downturn, Karen Nation '93, who was working in real estate, found herself in flux. But instead of striving for the same old, same old, she had a surge of ingenuity. In one mad rush, Nation penned a business plan for a healthy, do-it-yourself, no-bake snack concept. "There were baking mixes for cookies and protein powders for smoothies but nothing for an easy, healthy, homemade snack," she explains.

These days, Nation is the solopreneur behind Creation Nation, a line of mixes for customers to easily customize and whip up their own healthy balls, bars and bites. Her favorite must-tries, she says, are Oat Yes Chocolate Chip and Oat Cocoa Bliss.



Nation has been featured on the TV shows "Shark Tank" (she didn't garner an investment because the hosts said she was doing great on her own) and "Good Morning America" and in the magazine *Good Housekeeping*, where her Energy Bite Mix received the Best Snack Award. The munchies are all created with Nation's mixes, and the user decides the rest – throw in water or any type of milk, a banana or nut butter, coconut oil or syrup, for example. All the snacks are vegan, gluten-free and keto-optional. They're also school-friendly because they can be made without nuts.

Fans of the morsels are affectionately called "ballers" because many of the snacks are best served rolled into balls. But how does a kid who grew up in small-town Colorado, sometimes in foster care, become such a baller herself?

"I had a lot of food allergies, and that really led me to become interested in healthy eating and then fitness. I think I was drawn to Southern California originally because of this," explains Nation, who came to the Golden State on her own to finish high school and then got into UC Irvine. "But I also had a business mind, so studying economics made sense." She gained a greater understanding of supply chains and distribution channels, for example.

Studying economics, working in real estate and eventually launching a healthy snack company may sound like disparate activities, but she says that – just like her mixes – everything blends well.

"Running a snack company is project- and process-oriented. It also takes sales, marketing, networking, business development – all these flow from business to business," says Nation, who spends considerable time interacting with members of her baller club and developing social media and other digital content since she now sells the mixes primarily online.

And what's next?

"I love collaborating with other food brands and women-owned businesses. I'd like to do more of that," she says, "while providing healthy snacks for moms, families and athletes."

Joseph Ortiz, MBA '06
President and chief operating officer
Farmer Boys

From Intern to the Helm of a Popular Southwest Chain



"I'm pretty much a career restaurant nerd," says Joseph Ortiz, MBA '06, president and chief operating officer of Farmer Boys restaurants. The Whittier native completed his undergraduate degree at Cal State Long Beach. But it wasn't until Ortiz entered the UC Irvine Paul Merage School of Business' MBA program that he felt serendipity at play.

"I got accepted into several other business schools, but I went with UCI because it was smaller," Ortiz recalls, noting that he believed he'd benefit from a more intimate program. "Plus, I was paying for school on my own, and they offered me a good financial package, which told me that they really wanted me there."

At UC Irvine, Ortiz connected with a mentor who recognized his talent and eventually recommended him for an important internship at the corporate headquarters of Southern California-based Panda Express. From then on, Ortiz's career path was set.

This is not to suggest that the food industry was an obvious choice. "Going into the restaurant industry from business school is probably not a traditional path," he says. "But for me it was a strategic choice. Maybe it's not as glamorous as tech or some other industries, but it's where my skill set really stood out."

Ortiz worked at several restaurant and food companies, mostly in finance positions, for 14 years before accepting the role of Farmer Boys vice president of finance and accounting five years ago. A little over two years ago, he was offered the top spot of president and chief operating officer. The chain, which is still held by five brothers from a farm family in Cyprus, operates more

than 100 restaurants serving breakfast, burgers, salads and sandwiches in Arizona, California and Nevada. (Ortiz recommends the Hog Heaven breakfast burrito or, on the healthier side, the Cobb salad with house-made ranch dressing.)

Ortiz says his UC Irvine MBA training not only set his course but also exposed him to many of the decision-making processes he uses today. "Sometimes as a student you don't always have the perspective to understand why you're doing every assignment," Ortiz says. "But now I often come across a problem and remember certain tasks we did in business school, and I'll think, 'Ah! That's what that was for.'"

At work, he has two primary focuses: his restaurant employees and the customers.

"I always say that as a company, we make our money 10 or 15 bucks at a time," Ortiz notes. "The person who is serving that meal, the person who is cooking it – those are the most important people in our system. That's who is making direct contact with the customer, and that's who is determining the customer's experience."

As a kid, Ortiz overcame a stutter with hard work and speech therapy. He credits his parents for encouraging him to not let anything hold him back. His mother's and father's families emigrated from Mexico, and Ortiz was a first-gen college student. He says he comes from the same background as a lot of his restaurant workforce.

"I wear my UCI sweatshirt and hat often so that kids who might be from the same place where I started will see that there are possibilities out there if you work hard, remain curious and focus on your goals," Ortiz says.



CHIPOTLE

Neville Panthaky, MBA '22, vice president of culinary and menu development at Chipotle Mexican Grill, earned a bachelor's degree at The Culinary Institute of America and worked as an executive chef at several restaurant groups before embarking on UC Irvine's MBA program. He grew up in the business, with a chef father who moved into management of luxury hotels. His family resided in India, Africa, England and the Middle East. Despite this lived experience, Panthaky says education is still key. "I felt that for me to play a much more influential role in the restaurant and hospitality industry, getting an MBA would be valuable," he says. The program, which he describes as fun, helped Panthaky further understand digital transformation, as well as what it takes to run a profitable business and build a brand, great teams and efficient processes. "These are all the tools you need to execute at a high level," he says. And he didn't have a long commute to class since his test kitchen is in UC Irvine's Research Park. So what's his team's latest Chipotle innovation? Chipotle Honey Chicken. "It's got the right balance of sweet and spicy," Panthaky says.



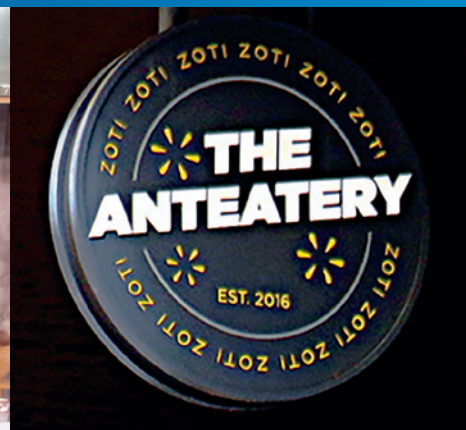
ARIA KITCHEN, IRVINE GRILL AND SUPER IRVINE INTERNATIONAL MARKET

When **Mahta Ariarad '16** was still an undergrad at UC Irvine, she was hitting the books while running a restaurant out of her parents' supermarket. After graduating with a B.A. in business economics, Ariarad headed to New York to earn an MBA at Columbia University and logged some time as a business consultant. But Irvine and a passion for feeding people beckoned her back. Now she's the co-owner (along with sister Ana Ariarad) of restaurants Irvine Grill, which serves kebabs, stews, rices and other Persian dishes; and Aria Kitchen, which offers Persian-Mexican fusion. Ariarad recommends Aria's empanadas, nachos and kebab tacos. In addition to the two restaurants, she will open a Super Irvine International Market in Parkview Center in July. The grocery store and deli will stock Persian delicacies and staples as well as German, Italian and Asian foodstuffs and more. (UC Irvine students get 10 percent off every day!) "Running a restaurant while attending UCI really prepared me for the pressure of balancing all of these businesses," says Ariarad, who is also a real estate agent. "Plus, I learned a lot from my econ professors! In fact, I enjoyed UC Irvine even more than I did my graduate program."



EAT, DRINK AND BE

The Anteater makes sustainability a daily habit





It was a vision to have a local garden on campus provide produce to support the dining hall. ”

GREEN

By Alison Van Houten

Sit outside on The Anteater's patio for long enough and you'll get a little treat. Every 15 minutes, the water turns on in the adjacent aeroponic garden and begins to trickle down the vertical stacks of plants. "Listening to the bubbling water is very calming," says Lou Gill, UC Irvine senior director of undergraduate housing and residential life. Students have come to enjoy this water-feature effect – a moment of tranquility in an otherwise bustling environment.

Inside, cutlery clatters as natural light streams in through giant skylights and floor-to-ceiling windows, illuminating a large anteater mural. The dining hall's name was selected by students living in the Mesa Court complex – a pun, of course, on UC Irvine's mascot, which itself was conceived by several Mesa Court residents back in 1966.

The Anteater, one of two all-you-care-to-eat dining halls, features a Mongolian grill, fresh salad and fruit from the farmers market, and stone-oven pizza, along with such student favorites as Dole Whip-esque pineapple soft serve and deconstructed California roll sushi bowls.

Opened in 2016 as part of Mesa Court's expansion, the 900-seat, LEED-certified Anteater was slated to be a sustainable dining hall from the start. It's not the newest dining option on campus; Brandywine opened at Middle Earth in 2019. Both are plant-forward, zero-waste, Irvine Green Business-certified facilities with reusable containers (which get returned and sanitized) for residents who may wish to take their food to go during any meal period. But the One Mile Meals vertical garden, so named because its produce is used hyper-locally on campus, is unique to The Anteater.

"It was a vision to have a local garden on campus provide produce to support the dining hall," says Lin Tang, director of UC Irvine Dining Services. Her team brought in a Los Angeles vendor to help set up a glass-enclosed plot of growing towers, which expose plants' roots to air. It reduces the need for water by 90 percent, helps the vegetation mature two or even three times as fast, and can yield 10 times the amount of produce as a traditional space. Tended by Cerca Cultivation, a third-party urban farm company, the Anteater garden currently grows fresh herbs like basil, parsley and chives, which are brought inside for use in hot meals as well as at the salad bar.

Other ingredients are obtained locally too, if not quite as close. "We have made it our mission to source foods from local farmers that meet our standards for social and environmental governance," says Devin Grabiec '22, dining sustainability coordinator for Aramark, which runs the dining hall. "This has helped us make considerable progress past the UC goal of 25 percent sustainable food purchasing by 2025 to our current total of 31 percent."

Having pledged to be part of the Coolfood Meals initiative, the university ensures that at least one low-carbon menu option is available during each meal period. Certified by the World Resources Institute, a Coolfood Meal might include a guacamole black bean burger or orange chicken with sesame noodles.

The Anteater also hosts programs like Wiping Out Waste, which educates students about the environmental pitfalls of food waste, and another called Love Your Food, Don't Waste It. For the latter, interns sort postconsumer scraps to create displays. "We've found that a strong visual imprint is most impactful in shifting perceptions," Grabiec says. It's a good reminder of the power we hold even in daily acts like dining.



Mouth-Watering

‘Medicine’

By Ilene Schneider

Cooking classes focus on healthier-for-you recipes

The adage “You are what you eat” takes on new meaning at UC Irvine’s Susan Samueli Integrative Health Institute. Participating in a class recently in the high-tech kitchen there proved that ingredients and cooking methods can make all the difference in maintaining a healthy diet that’s also enjoyable.

In the class on Mediterranean cooking, I was surprised to learn that a staple in my home – shawarma (see recipe) – could be made healthier by using chicken instead of lamb, baking instead of frying and choosing spices without preservatives. Even the baklava had fewer fattening ingredients while still tasting great.

Part of the institute’s mission is providing services to encourage optimal health in the community. SSIHI seeks to bridge the gap between what doctors learn about nutrition in medical school and what people need to know about making healthy diet modifications.

Opened two years ago, the institute’s Mussallem Nutritional Education Kitchen, a state-of-the-art teaching facility, has become a nexus for educating doctors, medical students and patients on how to prepare meals that, according to SSIHI, “please the palate and promote culinary medicine.”

Directing the program is executive chef Jessica VanRoo, who was born in Wisconsin and raised in the vibrant food hub of Taiwan. A globe-trotter with a palate for international flavors, VanRoo has cultivated an eclectic mix of culinary tastes and says she “found a passion for teaching about food” because “food connects with everybody and connects us all.”

The kitchen has eight individual cooking stations equipped with an oven, a stove, a sink and drawers full of the most up-to-date kitchen tools. Each station has an open view of the entire room; even the hoods that cover them offer unobstructed sightlines to the instructor. Further enhancing the learning experience,



Chicken Shawarma

By Jessica VanRoo



INGREDIENTS

- ¼ cup fresh lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon minced garlic
- 1 tablespoon oil
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- ¼ teaspoon ground oregano
- ½ teaspoon smoked paprika
- ¼ teaspoon ground ginger
- A pinch of cinnamon
- A pinch of allspice
- 1¼ pounds of boneless, skinless chicken thighs

STEPS

1. Thoroughly mix all ingredients except the chicken in a bowl.
2. Place the chicken in the bowl and rub with the marinade ingredients. Set aside to marinate for 2 hours.
3. Preheat oven to 400 degrees and line a baking sheet with parchment.
4. Heat a cast iron pan or grill to medium high. Cook or grill the meat, flipping it as needed to brown nicely. Place on the baking sheet, reduce oven temperature to 350 degrees and cook in oven for 10 minutes or until cooked through to an internal temperature of 165 degrees.
5. Shred the chicken, cutting as fine as possible. After cutting, you can place it under the broiler to create crispier pieces.
6. Serve with mujadara and yogurt sauce if desired.

Find more healthy recipes – from broccomole to avocado brownies – at m.uci.edu/SSIHI-Recipes.

every station has its own audiovisual display to enable participants to see up close and in detail what the teacher is cooking or preparing. The kitchen space also has broadcasting capabilities to engage with participants who are unable to attend in person.

The program was opened to the public to “inspire integrative, whole-person health and live up to its communitywide focus,” VanRoo says. Now, with the assistance of health coach and educator Sarah Meier, five classes per week are offered to doctors, students, patients and members of the public.

“In the community classes, people want to learn to cook healthy, delicious meals in an environment where there is science-based research,” VanRoo says. “We teach people how to make foods that they might eat in a restaurant or get out of a package, but they learn how to make them in a healthy way at home. Most people find that they love to cook.”

Initially, these classes posed a different kind of challenge, she notes, because she had to figure out what the public wanted to learn about healthy cooking. There have been classes addressing specific nutrients for those with certain health

conditions (like diabetes, Crohn’s disease and cancer) and others on plant-based foods. There’s even one on knife skills to help budding chefs prep wholesome meals. My Mediterranean cooking classmates were quick to suggest ideas for future sessions, including healthy menus for brunch and appetizers. Says VanRoo: “As an instructor, I’m constantly learning.”

For the basis of another class, doctors involved in the program wanted to emphasize the health benefits of mushrooms, so VanRoo made them look and taste like scallops by cutting them in the right shape, boiling them, searing them with nori and kelp, and serving them with a vegetarian oyster sauce or fish sauce. Yet another class, The Picky Eater Playbook: Turning “No, Thanks” Into “More, Please!,” makes better-for-you food look and taste like less healthy options, with participants learning to make creamy tofu Alfredo pasta, veggie tater tots, homemade hidden veggie chicken nuggets and ketchup, and chocolate brownie bites. If there’s a way to make healthy food taste great, the kitchen will find it.

Individuals can register for upcoming classes at m.uci.edu/Cooking-Classes. The cost to attend is \$70 per person.

Alumna Evelyn Gonzalez's calling is investing in healthy communities

Nourishing Change

By Christine Byrd

Échale ganas was the motto Evelyn Gonzalez's parents instilled in her. Give it your all. So she did, excelling in school while bagging groceries at the family's market and later helping to manage a store as a first-generation college student at UC Irvine.

Gonzalez is a third-generation family member to help run Northgate Market. Her grandfather, Don Miguel Gonzalez, emigrated from Jalisco, Mexico, and alongside his children opened the first Northgate in a former liquor store in Anaheim – without changing the existing name – in 1980. Now

Northgate has 43 locations and employs more than 7,500 people across Southern California.

"In the '80s, there were not a lot of stores in the area where the people spoke Spanish and sold mostly Mexican products," Gonzalez says. "My aunt said going to Northgate was like going to the center of the *pueblo* – it felt like home and family. We still have a bit of that magic today."

The first in her tight-knit family to go to college, Gonzalez chose UC Irvine so she would not have to stray too far from home. Although she dabbled in biology courses, the lifelong bookworm gravitated

to a major in English literature, with an emphasis on creative writing. Gonzalez did eventually spread her wings, spending a transformative semester in Madrid through the UC Education Abroad Program. Yet the most profound impact of her college experience was the friendships she forged with her Anteater peers.

"UCI was like a huge melting pot of people with different backgrounds and aspirations," Gonzalez says. "Those four years of college really bonded us and made it so those relationships have withstood the test of time."

She and the "201 Club," as they still call themselves, met in 201 Mesa Court as wide-eyed freshmen and remain close 15 years later, even as they've charted such divergent paths as pharmacy, technology and children's entertainment and scattered to the Pacific Northwest, East Coast and as far as Ethiopia.

In 2012, shortly before Gonzalez graduated from UC Irvine, the family business made a major splash. Michelle Obama paid a highly publicized visit to its store opening in South Los Angeles – a so-called food desert, where food is plentiful, but healthy, fresh options are sparse. It was part of the then-first lady's effort to reduce childhood obesity through better nutrition and increased physical activity.

"I was mind-blown," Gonzalez says. "It felt like Michelle Obama's visit was the 'We made it' moment."

It was also a pivotal moment for Gonzalez, who not only saw nutrition as a catalyst for health but sensed the rising tide of public interest in eating better. She began to work with Northgate's *Viva la Salud* (Long Live Health) community wellness program. Leveraging some of her early UC Irvine coursework in biology and chemistry, Gonzalez went back to school to earn a master's degree in nutrition and dietetics at Loma Linda University, becoming a registered dietician in 2019.

"I saw my purpose," she says. "And once I saw it, I couldn't unsee it."

Today, as director of well-being for Northgate Markets, Gonzalez facilitates employee health programs and supports Northgate's outreach team around nutrition education, including school field trips that include information about the U.S. Department of Agriculture's MyPlate nutrition recommendations and how to make healthy choices at the grocery store. "Nopales are the new superfood," she says of the high-fiber, antioxidant-rich cactus pads that are popular in Mexican cuisine and now gaining fans internationally. "Our focus at Northgate is on

authentic Mexican cuisine, and thankfully, it has a lot of healthy options with its abundance of fresh produce, herbs and spices."

"Food is so important – not just in health but in bringing families together and communities together," Gonzalez says. "So I started to focus on how, as a grocer, we could better support our community."

When someone reached out to her from the Joe C. Wen School of Population & Public Health (when it was still a program and not a full-fledged school), she was thrilled. If the public health program had been around when she was a student, Gonzalez says, she might have pursued it. Hoping to encourage a new generation of students, she became a founding member of Wen Public Health's Community Advisory Council and, later, a member of the UCI-OC Alliance, which connects business and local leaders to support Latino students through mentorships, scholarships and internships.

Gonzalez was moved by a persistent memory from her college years: commuting frequently from Irvine to work at a nearby Northgate Market in Santa Ana. Despite the two cities sharing a border, their residents have dramatically different life expectancies, with Irvine's the longest in Orange County and Santa Ana's among the shortest. Yet as Gonzalez drove into Santa Ana, she reflected that the area was home to the

customers and employees who helped Northgate keep growing, decade after decade.

"Wondering how we could be better neighbors, I wanted to bring some of the brilliance of UCI public health students to Santa Ana to focus on some of the health disparities in our community," she says.

The Northgate Market Scholarship was born, offering summer research funding for a doctoral or master's student in public health concentrating on food insecurity or nutrition and working with Latinos in Orange County. Ph.D. student Juan Carlos Ruiz Malagon received the inaugural scholarship in 2023, backing his research on health disparities among California's migrant farmworkers.

"Donor-funded scholarships like Northgate's enable first-gen, low-income students like me to pursue meaningful research and travel to the communities I work with," Ruiz Malagon says, "while also juggling courses and helping to support my family back home."

Adds Gonzalez: "It feels like we're paying it forward in a way that will be rewarded tenfold later. We're investing in people – brilliant people – who are going to make an impact in public health in our community, and I can't think of a better investment."

“
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purpose. And
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ENJOYING EXTRA INNINGS

For infielder with epilepsy, 'courage' is the name of the game

By Mark Whicker

His day begins with the little plastic "SMTWTFS" receptacle by his sink, the one with the pills. Most of the time, he takes his medication, goes to class and gets ready to play the game that doctors advised him never to play again.

But there are some days when the trip from the bed to the sink suggests that Will Bermudez might need to cool it.

"Migraines are the biggest tell," says the Whittier native. "There are times when I have to let the coaches know I'm down for the day."

As UC Irvine won 33 of its first 42 baseball games this spring and rose to No. 8 in the national polls, infielder Bermudez had only missed one game (given a day of rest). Every pitch, at this point, is a gift.

Bermudez is an epileptic. He plays with the knowledge that any collision or bad-hop grounder or headfirst slide could be disastrous. Trainer Justin Hostert always has emergency nasal spray on hand, in case an episode lasts more than four minutes.

The nightmare began seven years ago. Playing shortstop for the Trombly Tribe, a high school-level travel ball team, Bermudez dove for a pop fly and took a head shot from the knee of the converging second baseman.

"Those triangles in the field can be tough," he says. "My teammate was trying to jump over me, and he hit me in the head."



Top and bottom right: Matt Brown
Bottom left and middle: Robert Huske



UCI SportsZone



Men's basketball advanced to the championship of the National Invitational Tournament before falling to Chattanooga, 85-84, in overtime. The Anteaters ended with a school-record 32 wins; the only teams with equal or more wins nationally were the Final Four participants: Florida (36), Houston (35), Duke (35) and Auburn (32).

Men's volleyball player **Hilir Henno**, who is a three-time first-team All-American, recorded six aces at the Big West Championship semifinal on April 26, giving him 255 in his career and tying the NCAA all-time record held by UC Santa Barbara's Evan Patek (2004-07). The third-seeded Anteaters fell to Hawaii, 3-1.



Sophomore women's water polo player **Lauren Hett** was named All-Big West first team and to the watch list for the prestigious Peter J. Cutino Award, which honors both the best female and male college players in the country. She contributed four goals in UC Irvine's school-record 28 goals in a win over Concordia.



Men's tennis player **Noah Zamora** clinched the Big West Championship with a win at No. 1 singles and was named Big West Player of the Year. It's the 10th time overall and first time since 2015 that an Anteater has won the award. The senior was named to the All-Big West first team in singles and doubles.



I'd been playing for 12 of my 17 years. And something happened once. You can't be scared of something that only happened once.



For a while, he couldn't feel his legs. For a much longer while, Bermudez lost the memory of a significant part of his previous five years. Once the swelling in his brain subsided, his life returned. But the most serious diagnosis was yet to come: juvenile myoclonic epilepsy.

That meant Bermudez had to give up his original plan of attending the Air Force Academy – his scholarship was rescinded – and majoring in aeronautical engineering, with the goal of designing aircrafts. Jumping out of planes was part of the training, and his doctors vetoed that.

When they also told him he couldn't play baseball, Bermudez drew the line.

"I'd been playing for 12 of my 17 years," he says. "And something happened once. You can't be scared of something that only happened once."

His dad, William, still talks to the EMTs at every ballpark the Anteaters visit and finds the most convenient exits in case "something" happens again.

Bermudez went to UC Davis and was redshirted, then transferred to Mt. San Antonio College and hit .373. UC Irvine coach Ben Orloff appreciated his toughness and offered Bermudez another chance.

He had a triumphant return to Division I in 2023. The only stat that mattered was 49, the number of games he started. Bermudez was better in 2024, making second-team All-Big West, hitting .301 with only one error at second base. In 2025, he has played in all but one game.

In fall of 2024, Bermudez received the CalHOPE award, which goes to college players who have faced trauma and refused to blink.

"I actually think I might be a better player than I would have been if nothing had happened," he says. "I took the game for granted. I talk to coaches and players on other teams, and they always talk about respecting the game. That's something I want to pass along."

A senior in psychological science, Bermudez is now aiming for a coaching career. At 16, he helped run infield drills with the softball team at Cal State Dominguez Hills, and he has helped disabled kids in the Little League's Challenger program.

Bermudez also has been hit by pitches a campus-record 56 times, and counting, in three-plus seasons. That's 56 times he's gone to first base because he's refused to abandon the batter's box. In Bermudez's case, some stats are metaphors in themselves.

If You Build It, They Will Come

Steve Borowski '79 would have loved this team. Of course, he loved UC Irvine baseball in general, since he pitched for the Anteaters from 1976 through 1979.

Whenever his schedule permitted, the co-founder of Aristotle Capital Management was on hand.

"He was probably here two out of every three games," says coach Ben Orloff. "He always said the people he met here really shaped his life."

In turn, Borowski, 67, who died peacefully at home on Feb. 16, left his mark on the campus by contributing \$5 million for a new baseball performance center at the ballpark.

"We're trying to stay relevant in the national picture with baseball at UC Irvine," Orloff says. "We're in this phase where you need finances and resources to continue to win. That includes facilities, scholarships, revenue and NIL, and this gift is a step toward us trying to go for it. We could not be more appreciative of the Borowski family for giving us this opportunity."

The Borowski Player Development Center – whose timetable is still pending – will give the team everything it needs to continue the program's success all at one location: Cicerone Field at Anteater Ballpark.

The center will have a weight room, a training room, upgrades to the batting cages and a pitching lab, "which is part of the shift you see in the sport nowadays toward analytics being more common in the development of players and in winning," Orloff notes. "We also want to have a lounge that supports our alums who come back every year – a number that continues to grow."

He adds: "We've gotten interest from Major League Baseball teams that want to work with us and collaborate on designing the layout and technology to make the space MLB-quality. This could be a place that our alums in the big leagues can use as a training ground and to continue their own development as well."



Take Me Out to the Ballgame

Even the most dedicated UC Irvine fans don't mind missing half an inning for the ballpark meals that Sean Tedder and Kelly Kuehnert in UCI Dining Services provide.

The concession trailer at Cicerone Field at Anteater Ballpark features one of the most extensive and inventive menus in baseball. There are 22 specialty items available, all of them worthy of scrutiny. Where else can you watch Division I baseball with a grilled cheese sandwich and Gouda-cheese pepper soup? Or enjoy tri-tip fries?

Tedder and Kuehnert haven't missed a game in non-COVID times since 2008. They start working four and a half hours before the first pitch.

And there's a story in almost every sandwich. Associate athletics director Melissa Ramos inspired the Ramos dog (chili, cheese, grilled onions and peppers). The Acuna chicken sandwich (bacon, chipotle mayo, Swiss cheese, guacamole) is named for former UC Irvine Police Sgt. Eladio Acuna, who used to work security during the games before retiring in 2021. Jorge Lozano was a cook in the trailer for many years and came up with the Lozano burger (fried egg, pastrami, sriracha mayo). Sarai Ramirez, who worked in food services, got her own burger too (an Angus patty with chili, cheese, jalapeno pepper and an onion ring).

There's something for everyone. Want a vegetarian option? There's the grilled portobello mushroom burger. Have a sweet tooth? Try the funnel cakes with strawberry sauce.

Sometimes the appetite for romance comes into play. In 2024, UCI Dining was put in charge of a first-pitch ceremony. Lozano and Ramirez did the honors, and Lozano proposed to Ramirez on the pitcher's mound. As Tedder says: "It's truly a labor of love."



Upcoming Events

July

2 *All's Well That Ends Well*

The play's the thing! Attend a New Swan Shakespeare Festival performance of *All's Well That Ends Well*, a singular tale of true love and courage that brims with a timeless spirit of adventure, framed in the vibrant setting of the Romantic era. Through Aug. 29.

9 *Much Ado About Nothing*

Set in the Wild West, this retelling of the Shakespearean masterpiece *Much Ado About Nothing*, staged by the New Swan Shakespeare Festival, features dazzling wordplay, a posse of memorable characters and a live bluegrass band. Through Aug. 30.



26 UC Irvine Angels Night

Watch the Angels take on the Mariners at Angel Stadium of Anaheim and join more than 2,000 UC Irvine alumni, students, faculty, staff, retirees and community friends for the annual UC Irvine Angels Night. Visit the UCI Village, enjoy a great evening with 'Eater Nation and stick around for a postgame fireworks show. Purchase special tickets through UCI that include limited-edition UC Irvine / Angels jerseys (while supplies last). Zot! Zot! Zot!

September



13 Anteaters in Service Day

Calling all Anteaters! Join forces with fellow UC Irvine alumni and make a real difference in our communities. This isn't just any day; it's a celebration of our collective power to create a brilliant future together. No matter where you are or how connected you feel to UC Irvine, your contribution counts. Let's show the world the incredible impact that comes from being part of such an innovative and vibrant Anteater community.



Events subject to change. For updates and additional information, scan the QR code or go to: <https://engage.alumni.uci.edu/magazine-events>.

20 *Habitat Exhibition*

This IMCA exhibition presents landscape paintings from the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a time capsule of California's evolving natural environment. Explore the ways artists captured the ecological transformation of the state during this pivotal period. Through Jan. 10.

20 SOM 15th Reunion

Come commemorate the UC Irvine School of Medicine class of 2010's 15th anniversary at a family event on the medical school campus, followed by a cocktail reception in Newport Beach.

October



11 Anti-Cancer Challenge

When you cycle, run or walk for the UC Irvine Anti-Cancer Challenge on campus, you impact the fight against cancer. Every participant-raised dollar directly funds pilot studies and early-phase clinical trials at the UCI Health Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center that aim to develop new insights into cancer prevention, treatment and cures – to save lives. Enjoy a family-friendly festival featuring food, live music and more!

11 1960s SOM Alumni Luncheon

We honor UC Irvine School of Medicine alumni from the 1960s with a celebratory luncheon on the medical campus.

12 Golden Anteater Society Luncheon

Join us at the Newkirk Alumni Center for a luncheon honoring Anteaters who graduated 50 or more years ago and reminisce about six remarkable decades of UC Irvine milestones as the university reaches the 60th anniversary of opening its doors for instruction.



15 Field Study Career Summit

Attend the School of Social Ecology's second annual Field Study Career Summit at the Irvine Barclay Theatre. The free, daylong event – with various workshops and recruiter panels – focuses on assisting social ecology students and alumni in their professional career trajectories.

UC Irvine Alumni

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Stay Connected. Stay Engaged. Stay Proud.

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As an official member of the UC Irvine Alumni Association, you'll receive exclusive invitations to alumni events and networking opportunities as well as access to a global community that can help you succeed.

SPECIAL OFFER!

The first 50 alumni who join using the promo code **THEANTEATER** will receive a UC Irvine garden flag and will be entered to win a limited-edition UC Irvine hoodie.



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engage.alumni.uci.edu/membership

The Inside ZOT!

Known for her modern Californian cuisine with Asian flavors, award-winning chef **Melissa King '05** (cognitive sciences) continues to push culinary boundaries while championing diversity and representation in the food industry. The "Top Chef: All-Stars L.A." winner is a dedicated advocate of LGBTQ+ and Asian communities. Here, King answers the ZOT! questionnaire, reflecting on wanting to be a chef since she was 5, dabbling in kitchens during her undergrad years, and writing her debut cookbook, *Cook Like a King*, which will be released this fall.

What is your favorite food?

I have many! I love sushi, fresh pastas, and anything shaped like a meatball and covered in sauce.

When and where do you cook best?

At home, when it's just a casual dinner with friends. It's special to be able to turn off my professional life and go back to the reason why I fell in love with cooking to begin with, which is nurturing friends and family through food.

What was your best inspirational moment?

Certainly my time competing on "Top Chef." Both seasons [she also appeared on "Top Chef: Boston"] unlocked me creatively and emotionally in ways I never expected. Many of the dishes I created on "Top Chef: All-Stars L.A." hold a special place in my heart. Prosciutto XO, Hong Kong milk tea tiramisu and truffle congee were birthed in the moment and inspired by my surroundings during the finale in Tuscany [Italy].

What is your most influential read and why?

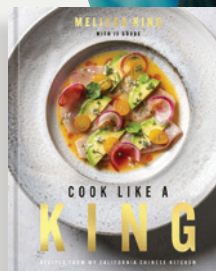
A book I read when I was 17 called *Becoming a Chef*, by Andrew Dornenburg and Karen Page, published in 1995. I'd wanted to be a chef since I was 5 and was dabbling in kitchens during my undergrad years. I didn't have many resources to fully grasp what I was getting myself into with the culinary industry, but an early chef mentor gifted me the book and said that if I wanted to be a chef, I had to read it. The book inspired me and guided my decision to dive fully into the industry and pursue culinary school after UCI.

What cookbook can you not live without?

I feel like I have to say mine now that it's done! I spent four years writing *Cook Like a King* and really invested so much of my heart and creativity into it. The book feels deeply personal, with bits of my life story wound through each dish, from my dad's Shanghaiese lion's head meatballs I used to make with him as a kid to Hong Kong milk tea tiramisu from my journey through "Top Chef."

What was your favorite spot on the UC Irvine campus?

The Panda Express in the Student Center. I spent a lot of time there between classes eating orange chicken over white rice smothered with sriracha.



What is your favorite UC Irvine memory?

Aside from hanging out with hip-hop dance crews like CADC [Chinese Association Dance Crew] and Kaba Modern while they battled in the UCI parking garages, I'd say the child development course I took as a cognitive sciences major. I think often about parenting and leadership styles, why we're shaped the way we are, and how it all really is rooted in our childhoods.

Who are your heroes?

My parents. They came to this country from Hong Kong with very little and had to grow up quickly. They were the first college graduates of their families, and I deeply admire their perseverance and their dedication to their children. They are the most hardworking people I know and are the reason I have the opportunities I have today.

What is your most treasured possession?

I collect artisan ceramics from around the world. Each cup or plate is a little reminder of the places I've traveled, the dishes I've created in them and the stories of the makers I met behind them.

What is the best advice you've ever been given?

It's a version of "You have to try, or you'll never know your potential" from my mom. She was always pushing us to lean into new things, grow and experience as much as we can in life, and not worry about the fear of failure.

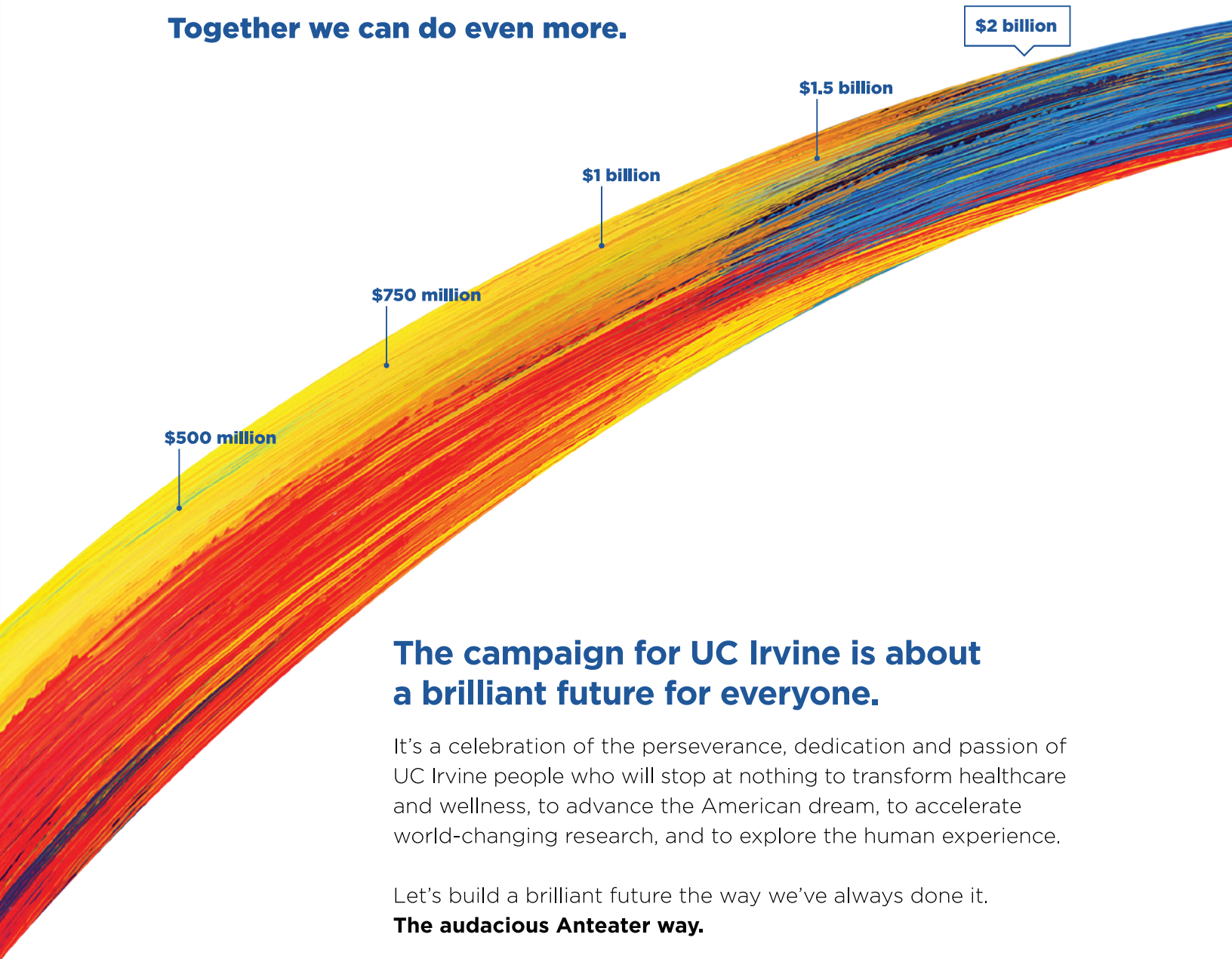
What is the best advice you could give?

Prioritize you first. I think we can easily put pressure on ourselves to do or be or chase what everyone else expects of us, but I believe we find our happiness when we strip away all that noise and begin to listen to who we really are and what we want.

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UC Irvine

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