

UC SANTA BARBARA

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Epicurean Delight

When Indras Govender first visited the United States, he was stunned by the welcoming attitude he encountered wherever he went.

“To come to a country and just walk into any restaurant or go anywhere you want, it was like, ‘Whoa,’” he recalled.

Coming from apartheid-era South Africa, Indras and wife, Tilly, (now an assistant dean in the social sciences division of the College of Letters & Science) lived a life fraught with overt racism and discrimination due to their Indian heritage. It was the early 1990s. Nelson Mandela had just been freed after 27 years in state prison, and South African president F. W. de Klerk had just signed a peace accord to end the oppressive system. Still the effects of the 50-year-long regime lingered.

Here in California, however, life was instantly — and vastly — different for the Govenders.

“California’s quite the melting pot,” he said. “There are people from every country in the world here. And so you don’t feel out of place, and people are welcoming.”

It’s the feeling of that first welcome that Govender pays forward every day in his role as food and beverage manager at The Club & Guest House. Joining the campus in 2016 to head the newly revamped fine dining facility formerly known as the Faculty Club, Govender brings more than 10 years of experience as a restaurant owner, combined with his formal training as a certified public accountant and his genuine passion for the epicurean experience.

“My job was to come up with the menu and our whole method of operation,” he said. Doing so meant taking into account dietary restrictions for the food-savvy Santa Barbara crowd, tapping into the locavore movement with farm- and ocean-fresh fare, and bringing in new dishes to tempt the palates of an increasingly diverse campus population.

Impeccably turned out in a suit and stylish eyeglass frames, it’s hard to think of Govender as anything but an expert in fine dining. He makes his way around the remodeled restaurant with ease as his staff works diligently to keep the place up to spec even during the slow hours. For Govender, no detail is too small or unimportant to warrant his attention.

But if you were a UC Santa Barbara student, or a staff or faculty member, or even an Isla Vista in the 1990s, you might recognize Govender as the owner of Giovanni’s Pizza on Pardall Road, the hands-on boss working in the trenches of the college food scene.

“That opportunity came up in 1995 and I thought it was fantastic,” he said. “I just ran with that and I had a great time being out in Isla Vista and interacting with students.” Govender still sees many of his old customers — students who have gone on to become campus faculty and staff.

In 2007 Govender moved on from cheesy, carb-loaded college fare to specialty salads, trading the pizza place for Fresco Café North on Calle Real in Goleta. It was a shift inspired by his love of fresh local produce and a desire to focus on organic dishes.

“I thought, I could have a restaurant in Santa Barbara that could put out really good food that’s nourishing and that makes you feel happy,” said Govender.

About a decade in, though, he was ready for change once again, and UC Santa Barbara provided a new opportunity. The campus’s Faculty Club was embarking on some changes of its own, with the almost 50-year-old dining and guest room complex undergoing a massive renovation. The two-year project would double the facility’s size, update its amenities and modernize its operations.

Govender leapt at the chance to get involved.

“We opened The Club & Guest House in January 2017, with a whole new spin on things,” Govender said.

That spin includes a focus on fresh, local and sustainable food, in farm-to-table menus that change twice a year to take advantage of the seasons. Govender, in collaboration with head chef Chris Rossi and sous chef Jacob Kneuer, toes the line between comfort “club” fare that was a staple of the old Faculty Club, and a rotating list of items that shows off the freshest food of the moment.

“We wanted a completely new outlook because it’s a brand new building and we didn’t want to go back to an old menu,” Govender said. “Not that there was anything wrong, particularly, with the menu, but we wanted to showcase our chefs’ skills.” A constant work-in-progress, newer menu items — such as the seared salmon salad, or the miso marinated black cod — pop up periodically as specials, and, depending on feedback, they might earn a more permanent spot next to the tried-and-true club trio.

A focus on food sustainability also means that in addition to a smaller carbon footprint, the restaurant composts 100% of pre- and post-consumer waste, and all cooking oil is recycled into biodiesel. In addition, the menu recognizes certain food allergies as well as vegan and vegetarian preferences.

“I should be able to tell you where that Caesar salad dressing is from, if it’s made in house, and where the lettuce comes from,” Govender said.

This attention to detail is the type of conscientiousness Govender works to instill in the students who comprise the waitstaff.

“I tell them they’re going to learn punctuality, they’re going to learn communication, they’re going to learn teamwork and all of these things that they’re going to take to whatever career they’re going to have,” he said. Thanks to flexible scheduling and a priority on helping them get through school, student workers typically stay on until they leave UCSB.

“My most recent reference was a student that got a position with Stanford Medical School as a researcher and worked for eight months here as a server,” Govender said. “I’m not saying he got the job because I gave him the reference — he’s a smart kid on his own. But this is the thing that’s the most satisfying, rewarding part of my job.” It’s a full circle, he added, for someone who started out working with students

and developing a good relationship with the campus.

“And now to be actually working on campus with the students, in a venue like this,” he said, “I mean this is pretty nice, you know.”

Since the grand reopening of The Club & Guest House, Govender and his crew are moving along like well-oiled machine, with only the occasional “teething problems” expected of any new restaurant.

He said he is looking forward to seeing more and more diverse groups of people frequenting The Club & Guest House. Looking to the future, he hopes to obtain a liquor license and launch an evening happy hour with tapas-style food — not to mention the countless adjustments and new ideas he and his team will inevitably dream up to enhance the dining experience and make sure people feel welcome.

“Who knows; I might have stayed in the CPA business,” he mused. “I would probably have been a partner in one of the local firms. But I went this different path. It’s in my heart.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.