UC SANTA BARBARA

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Sonia Fernandez

# ‘The Dumpling King’

Isla Vista: For many of us these words evoke a sun-drenched, sea salt-sprayed college student enclave at the edge of the Pacific Ocean. For fisherman and cook Tingsheng Wang, his version of the Santa Barbara County South Coast is decidedly different — deep blue water often enshrouded in fog, the hallmark of the gray early morning hours spent fishing for the food that will soon become part of the staple offering of Dumpling King restaurant in IV.

Though accustomed to the coast and the water, Wang, like many immigrants, is far from home, far from the Yellow Sea, a marginal sea shared by China, North and South Korea that envelops Shandong Province’s eastern border. The dumplings that his restaurant serves are his link to the place he left 20 years ago, an antidote to the loneliness that he shares with the students who come to his place to get a bit of the Chinese comfort food Shandong is known for.

UC Santa Barbara film and media studies major Zizheng Liu knows this feeling well. Originally from Beijing, he, too, has struggled to embrace the surroundings that are his new home and will be for at least a few more years. So when he chanced upon a middle-aged Chinese man cooking dumplings on a cold Isla Vista night, he struck up a friendship, one that led to the student short documentary, “The Dumpling King,” which has been selected for the 2020 Santa Barbara Film Festival (SBIFF). The film will show at the Arlington Theatre on Sunday, Jan. 19 at 5 p.m. as part of the SBIFF’s Santa Barbara Documentary Shorts program.

“Loneliness is a frequent visitor,” Liu said, “and I felt related to Wang at this point.” From his conversations with Wang, Liu decided to do a short documentary. “It was not only going to be just about dumplings and fishing, but about him: his identity, his loneliness and his perseverance,” he said.

“The Dumpling King” is an ambient documentary film, depicting an almost alternate-reality version of the South Coast — calmer, more muted, more introspective. According to Janet Walker, UCSB professor of film and media studies, “ ‘The Dumpling King’ is striking for its cinematography, its editing and for the special quality of empathy that is a signature of Liu’s work.”

Filmed on location in places including Isla Vista and in the Santa Barbara Channel, the documentary follows Wang doing what many immigrants do: bringing the best of the old home to the new one. In the roughly two-and-a-half years since the restaurant has opened, it has become a go-to for international Chinese students as well.

“As an international student myself, I am always carrying tags like ‘Chinese,’ or ‘Asian,’” Liu said, “and I feel the strong responsibility to show the better side of us, as well as breaking down the stereotypes through (cross-cultural) activities as well as through films.”

Tickets will be available at the door. More information is available at the SBIFF website.

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