

# THE *Current*

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Sarah Kidwell

## Recipe for a life in food

It's 12:34 pm in The Club & Guest House kitchen and the Wednesday lunch rush has just started. As orders come in, Chef Hayden Dozier switches quickly and seamlessly from preparing the dough for pear tarts for a Friday event to pitching in on today's orders. He dishes up a bowl of soup, deftly adds a parsley garnish, then puts the finishing touches on a plate of appetizers before handing it to a server, who swiftly carries it out to the dining room.

"It's a team thing," said Dozier. "Everyone in here has to be doing exactly the right thing at the right time. And if you're standing around in the kitchen, you're doing something wrong."

A kitchen is not something Dozier envisioned as the locus for his life's work. Nor would he have imagined he would be back on the UC Santa Barbara campus, where [his late father Jeff Dozier taught](#), and where he earned his undergraduate degree in 1996 — in geography with a focus on hydrology and snow science.

Dozier recalls a circuitous seven-year journey through his undergraduate studies, punctuated by winters in Mammoth, where he taught skiing by day and worked nights in a French restaurant. Summers were spent traveling in Central America and Asia, with forays into Chinese and Thai cuisine broadening his palate.

"I don't know if students here take this approach anymore. Most seem more focused than I was, and things used to be a bit looser," he said.

Even so, Dozier put his degree to work first in the field, obtaining and studying snow samples, then in a paid position crunching data in front of a computer. The latter pushed him back to the “creative and changeable tasks moving about a busy kitchen.” So he accepted a friend’s offer to help out catering for the entertainment industry – feeding the crews who were

working on feature films, television commercials and music videos — even though it meant relocating to Los Angeles.

“I met some very talented chefs and learned an immense amount about the art of food,” he said of that six-year stint as a production caterer, with its 12-16 hour days. “We made meals for some of the biggest names in Hollywood, creating magic out of shiny 30-foot kitchens on wheels ... from the backlots of the major studios to picturesque far flung corners of California.”

By then he was married and Santa Barbara beckoned him and his wife. They returned and he enrolled in Santa Barbara City College’s culinary program while working at Fess Parker’s Doubletree Hotel, where he gained experience in fine dining, events and volume cooking in the central dining room. An executive sous chef role at La Cumbre Country Club was his next stop, and though Dozier fantasized about opening a restaurant of his own, the costs and failure rate deterred him.

Instead, he and his wife Sudathip, who is originally from Thailand, bought a used FedEx truck in 2009 and spent \$100,000 turning it into the mobile “Thai on a Truck” food truck, serving classic street food and curries. They parked on the beachfront downtown, in the Funk Zone, and frequented the parking lots of several Goleta companies during lunch hour.

“It was a labor of love” said Dozier, but it was also exhausting, with long days that stretched into evenings. One night, as they prepped for the next day, they watched their daughter fall asleep to a movie in the truck’s front seat. They knew it was time to move on.

Two weeks later he was in Portola Dining Commons with the title of Chef 2.

“I had sold my truck in Los Angeles, the dream was over. But the pain was assuaged by the fact that I suddenly had two days off a week and got to spend time with my

family again,” he said.

Putting his creative stamp on a dining hall menu, Dozier was soon doing a ramen line, smoking ribs, and even making pad thai, all while keeping the quality and variety high. He relished the change.

“It was like a small army would descend on us each night and we would nourish and recharge them, then send them happily on their way to continue their studies,” he said.

Still, Dozier daydreamed about making more elaborate dishes. And then he got his chance. When he learned that the chef at the Club & Guest House was stepping down he stepped up, taking advantage of the opportunity to stay at UCSB (where his wife also now works as an accountant) and also return to “more complex culinary endeavors.”

The Club & Guest House was closed during the pandemic, and in 2022 Dozier, newly hired, helped reopen it. Bringing in some Asian influence, he reimaged the menu, working to bring patrons back, including the departmental events, conferences, wine dinners and gala affairs that make up 75% of its business.

Beyond planning and executing menus with his small staff, Dozier does all the ordering and receiving plus a lot of the less creative tasks, including billing and other paperwork. Managing staff and washing the occasional pot rounds out his days.

From his vantage point in the kitchen, he can see the wall that lists the various assignments for upcoming events and watch the computer in his office for incoming requests.

None of that gets in the way of the pear tart dough, which he relishes making by scratch.

“I still love making the food, so I make sure that I assign myself enough of those things that I love to do,” he said.

Senior Executive Chef Brian Smith called Dozier “an accomplished culinarian” but also noted that he excels at developing his staff’s culinary skills patiently and kindly. “It’s also an asset to us that he is so well traveled and brings his broad experience back to his kitchen,” said Smith.

Out in the dining room, the vibe is serene. Large and small groups fill the tables, most of which have an unobstructed view of the lagoon through large windows. The building opened as a faculty club in 1968. It was renovated in 2014 and though the accommodations are reserved for those with a university affiliation, the dining room is open to anyone.

“We’d like to reach a wider group of people and let them know that we’re here. I’m a bit surprised some people on campus don’t know where we are. I always say, ‘come on by for lunch. We have the best view in town,’” said Dozier.

And he is intent on making the food to match. That may mean you’re not likely to see him in the dining room chatting with patrons, as some chefs do. “I’m one of those back-of-the-house guys... I prefer to send my food out and let it do the talking.”

[The Club & Guest House](#) has accommodations for university affiliates and lunchtime service for faculty, staff, students and the public during the week. Click here to see [the menu](#) or inquire about booking an event or conference.

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## **About UC Santa Barbara**

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