

Sitting at long dark-wood tables under enormous Spanish-inspired chandeliers and digging into a steaming plate of polenta with spicy black bean sauce, few Berkeley students would guess that this pleasant dining venue was once at the vortex of a scandal. But in 1928, when International House, a coeducational residence and dining facility for about 600 students and visiting scholars of all ethnic backgrounds, was proposed, and again when it opened on August 18, 1930, there were outcries in the then not-so-liberal city of Berkeley.

Men and women would live in the same building? White Anglo Saxons would share meals with Asians and Africans, Mexicans and American "colored people"? Eight-hundred residents -- mostly property owners -- thronged one meeting protesting these devious designs which -- mercy be -- might even lead to interracial pairings.

Those '30s bigots were right on the last count: Over the years, quite a few romances and marriages had their start at I-House dining tables. And those protesters, predicting inevitable failure of the venture, would have been shocked to hear that the institution -- the first of its kind west of the Mississippi -- is thriving 69 years later.

What's more, residents not only share living arrangements and tables with peers from around the globe, they are often treated to the foods of these areas.

CELEBRATING DIVERSITY

Along with the predictable Chinese New Year, Bastille Day and Cinco de Mayo dinners, the food staff tries to bring some of the more unusual foods of its residents' homelands to the table. Gary Beitch, a 23-year veteran of I-House and now its director of dining services, points to Indian dinners, a Turkish meal, a Norwegian smorgasbord and an annual native American feast.

Students get involved with these events, providing ideas and recipes and helping in the attractive kitchen that produces 1,400 meals a weekday, plus food for special events and catered meetings.

In the old days -- even when Beitch arrived on the scene in the '70s -- menus featured standard American cafeteria food, he admits. "You know, beef stew one night a week . . ."

In those days, students' complaints tended to be of a general nature, Beitch says. "They would just say the food wasn't very good." Now, they get specific. A couple of years ago, for instance, a student from Spain implored him to never let the cooks make paella again ("I thought they'd done a pretty good job," Beitch says). In Spain, the young man explained, paella isn't just food -- it's a way of life -- which, apparently the I-House version didn't capture. (The student didn't respond to an invitation to come teach the kitchen staff how to make a more soulful paella.)

SPECIAL APPEARANCES

Sometimes guest chefs lend authenticity to I-House menus. Rhoda Wing of Oakland's Chinatown was one, another was Paola Bagnatori. Bagnatori, a noted San Francisco Italian cook, said in a Chronicle interview in 1993 that she started cooking in self-defense when, just arrived from Italy, she lived at I-House and found the food "just awful." The I-House people, far from being offended, invited her back, "and she cooked us this fantastic Italian chicken dinner."

Beitch and staff cater to the tastes of the time as much as possible. The facility is not state-subsidized but, guided by its own board, exists on fees, grants and gifts. Beitch finds it hard to put an exact price on meals, since, consistent with the institution's goal to let students and scholars from different racial, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds study, live and eat together, room and board are a package and fees are lumped together. But he quotes a ballpark cost of just under \$3 a meal.

On that kind of budget, filet mignon is not an option, but lots of fresh fruit and vegetables are, as are pasta and legumes. This neatly dove-tails with an increased request for vegetarian food. Everything is clearly labeled, including the few items that contain pork or pork-derived products. That's about as far as the staff can go in accommodating individual preferences, Beitch says. "We can't do special diets -- vegan or kosher, for instance." In addition to individual requests' complaints, a student committee helps direct the menu. Somewhat surprisingly, there have been no demands for organic or against bioengineered or irradiated food.

There have been concerns about fried food, but, Beitch laughs, when most fried foods were temporarily dropped there was vociferous opposition: "We didn't mean fish and chips." They have returned to the menu.

INTERNATIONAL HOUSE DINING ROOM

Second floor, 2299 Piedmont Ave. (at the top of Bancroft Way), Berkeley; (510) 642-9477. Open for breakfast, lunch and dinner weekdays; brunch and dinner on weekends except on Thanksgiving Day and during the four-week winter vacation.

HISTORY: After the success of an International House that opened in 1924 in New York City, philanthropist John D. Rockefeller Jr. decided that as a gateway to the Far East the San Francisco Bay Area would be the ideal setting for a second such venture. His gift in 1928 of \$1.8 million started the International House at University of California at Berkeley. From the outset, it was a community; shared meals were an integral part of residency. Today the majority of residents are graduate students, plus a few visiting scholars. Socio-economic diversity is supported by room-and-board scholarships. A cafe on the ground floor of the building is run by a concessionaire and is not part of the I-House operation.

SPECIALTIES: Wholesome food on an all-you-can-eat basis always includes several vegetarian options. Except for the majority of baked goods, all food is prepared on site by a permanent staff of 17, assisted by 45 part-time workers. The public can eat in the dining room for \$4 for breakfast, \$5.50 for lunch, \$6.50 for dinner and \$8 for special theme dinners.

THE LOOK: With irregular red-tile floors and intricate tile detail on stair risers and other parts of the building, plus lots of wood, the Spanish-Moorish-themed, domed International House has been a UC Berkeley landmark since its opening in 1930.

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