

# FSD OF THE MONTH

## WHEN THE WORLD COMES TO DINE

The International House at UC Berkeley fosters authentic food experiences for students and residents from around the globe.

BY JULIANNE PEPITONE

If the International House at UC Berkeley had a beating heart, it would be the high-ceilinged, chandelier-festooned Dining Commons—specifically, the communal tables where residents from 76 countries converse in dozens of languages and try foods from one another’s homelands.

“It’s a vibrant, energetic, special place,” says Maureen Spolidoro, foodservice manager at International House. “It’s not just dining but a learning area, too, where the students find out about other customs and traditions.”

“I-House,” as it’s fondly known, is a unique part of UC Berkeley, a bustling community of 600 residents who range from upperclassmen and postdocs to visiting scholars from dozens of countries, including Senegal, Serbia, Rwanda, Laos, Myanmar, Cyprus and Ecuador.

All of these home countries present a delicious opportunity—and a great challenge—for I-House’s foodservice staff.

### Crafting comfort

“These students are a long way from home, and food is comfort,” says Cedric Martin, I-House’s

director of hospitality services. “But the key is really connecting with those students whose home cuisine you’re trying to emulate. There’s nothing worse than trying to make their favorite recipe and missing the flavor profile.”

That means Martin, Spolidoro and their team must go directly to the source, asking students about the most popular dishes in their home countries and which meals they miss most. They’ve video chatted overseas with parents, grandparents and any other keepers of beloved recipes.

“Gotta go to the mom,” as Martin says.

I-House’s team makes frequent trips for new spices, utensils and anything else needed for an

  
**FOODSERVICE  
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### INTERNATIONAL HOUSE AT UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

Berkeley, Calif.



Above: For its annual Global Homecoming, I-House staff highlights cuisines that may not be represented frequently on the menu.



Left: I-House hosts a special dinner for Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights that coincides with the Hindu New Year in November.

authentic experience. They also invite students to help serve and explain dishes to fellow residents.

“We go to extremes, because if we’re going to do it, we want to do it right,” Martin says. “In Berkeley, we have the benefit of specialty shops for all kinds of cuisines, so we take advantage. We go to great lengths to get the right spice, the right pan, because we want their buy-in.”

A wide variety of entrees appears on both the weekly menu

and as part of special events. The Dining Commons’ standard menu includes a mix of Americanized classics such as spaghetti with meatballs and grilled trout, alongside international options such as Indian aloo gobi, Thai coconut curry and Peruvian tacu-tacu beans and rice.

But international dishes really shine as the showpieces for special events. I-House’s 2019-2020 theme dinner list includes Oktoberfest, Diwali, Native American

Thanksgiving, African-American Heritage, Lunar New Year and Persian New Year.

And for the annual Global Homecoming in October, staff selects a few countries with cuisines that may not be represented frequently in the weekly menu or during special events. This year's menu included Danish apple glog, Nigerian plantain sausage, Malaysian chicken satay and Turkish pistachio baklava.

**Communication is key**

Because I-House functions as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, with its own operating budget apart from the university, Martin says it has more latitude to create meals that are \$5 or more, as opposed to the typical \$2 a plate in a C&U setting.

Still, Martin says it can be a challenge to ensure all residents are represented by the menu.

"We try to splash a lot of variety around, but with 76 countries, that can be tough," he says. "The key is actively seeking out that communication and keeping it going as much as possible. We don't claim to be perfect, so if something doesn't taste right, we want students to feel comfortable telling us right away."

That open dialogue is perhaps the most important part of the I-House spirit at large, Spolidoro says: "Everybody really promotes the idea of intercultural respect; we have people from nations at war who are living alongside each other here. They can do that without any worry or



Malaysian chicken satay (above) and Turkish kofte kebab (below) were on the menu for I-House's Global Homecoming event.



fear because they know it's a safe environment for everyone."

I-House's atmosphere, including the foodservice, has evolved over decades, Martin says. So for operators looking to cycle in more international dishes, he recommends starting slowly with what's familiar.

"Pick one style of cooking someone in your kitchen is familiar with: Japanese, Vietnamese, whatever it may be," he says.

**76**

Home countries represented

**\$3M**

Annual sales volume

**1,200-1,500**

Average meals served daily

"We have a couple of cooks from China in our kitchen, and our Lunar New Year celebration started with the dishes they were most comfortable with—and it grew from there."

For C&U operations, another smart place to start can be the campus' cultural student organizations, Martin says: "They're always looking to put their heritage forward, and you'll get great, authentic inspiration in return."



**CEDRIC MARTIN**

**DIRECTOR OF HOSPITALITY SERVICES, INTERNATIONAL HOUSE AT UC BERKELEY**

**What are your goals for the coming year?**

I want us to spend a little more time doing some of the nontraditional dishes from our various nations and to engage even more with our "one-off" students, who are the only residents from their countries, so we can build programming around these folks.

**What makes your operation excel?**

As a staff, we are diverse ourselves. We all have those certain things we excel at, and when we put them together, we can do great things. When we plan an event, we have someone who's great at research and marketing, someone else doing excellent cooking, someone else building platters—it all comes together. We recognize the person next to you might complement your weaknesses, and that helps us all achieve the mission.



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