

# Mitch Vanagten



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## Entry details

Entry Name: Honoring Indigenous Foodways: A Fireside Chat with Chef Sean Sherman

Institution Name: University of California Merced

Entry Completed By (*name and position*): Mitchell Vanagten, Executive Chef

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## Essay:

On October 8, 2025, UC Merced Dining hosted a remarkable evening of food, music, and conversation in celebration of Indigenous People's Day. The event, Honoring Indigenous Foodways: A Fireside Chat with Chef Sean Sherman, brought together students, faculty, staff, and community members for an exploration of culture, sustainability, and resilience through food. Chef Sherman, founder of The Sioux Chef, James Beard Award recipient, and one of Time Magazine's 100 Most Influential People, has become a leading national voice for Indigenous food sovereignty. His life's work centers on reclaiming ancestral foodways and honoring traditional ecological knowledge as a path toward both cultural and environmental healing. The program welcomed over 150 guests, including UC Merced students, faculty, staff, and community members from across the Central Valley. The strong attendance reflected the campus community's enthusiasm for learning about Indigenous foodways and sustainable food systems.

The idea for the program began months earlier when Executive Chef Mitchell Vanagten reached out to Chef Sherman after following his work on Indigenous food systems and community empowerment and meeting him at Terra Madres. They talked about how the Central Valley's agricultural heartland where Indigenous, immigrant, and farming histories intertwine, could serve as a meaningful backdrop for a discussion about land, sustainability, and food justice. From these conversations, the theme Honoring Indigenous Foodways was born, designed to celebrate the enduring wisdom of Indigenous food traditions and their lessons for a more sustainable future.

The evening opened with a wonderful performance from Medicine for My Sisters, an Indigenous women's singing group from California's Central Valley, who offered a song that filled the UC Merced Conference Center ballroom with emotion. Their harmonies created a stillness in the room. A collective moment of gratitude was had by all guests. Guests gave the group a standing ovation.

The Fireside Chat was moderated by Anthony Pangelina, UC Merced's Interim Director for Residential Dining, who is Navajo on his paternal grandfather's side. His presence added depth and authenticity to the dialogue. In conversation with Chef Sherman, he guided the audience through topics that spanned the history of food colonization, the process of cultural reclamation, and the power of Indigenous food systems to heal both people and planet. Chef Sherman shared that his current work extends far beyond his acclaimed Minneapolis restaurant, Owamni. He is developing a commissary kitchen that will source ingredients directly from Native American farmers and food makers, using them to prepare meals for members of eleven tribal nations across Minnesota. The initiative aims to strengthen Indigenous food economies while providing nourishment rooted in cultural identity. His goal, he explained, is to create a model that can be replicated nationwide, ensuring that Indigenous producers, chefs, and communities thrive together in a sustainable network.

In addition to his culinary work, Chef Sherman shared the mission of his nonprofit, NATIFS, North American Traditional Indigenous Food Systems, which he founded to create a more equitable and sustainable food landscape for Indigenous communities. Through NATIFS, Sherman and his team train Indigenous chefs, connect tribal producers with institutional buyers, and advocate for food sovereignty rooted in traditional ecological knowledge. His organization's work has become a model for how sustainability, equity, and cultural revitalization can coexist within modern food systems. Chef Sherman even offered to host some of UC Merced's culinary team for a three-week apprenticeship to learn more about Indigenous foods at his restaurant.

Menu development was inspired by recipes from The Sioux Chef's Indigenous Kitchen cookbook, along with institutional recipes provided through the NATIFS website, which features culinary resources designed to help chefs incorporate Indigenous ingredients into larger-scale food service operations.

Chef Sherman also shared his excitement about his forthcoming cookbook, *Turtle Island: Foods and Traditions of the Indigenous Peoples of North America*. The book, which explores more than 150 ancestral and modern recipes, uncovers the stories that link the natural environments, traditions, and histories of Indigenous peoples across the continent. He described the project as a continuation of his mission through NATIFS, to preserve Indigenous foodways, support sustainable land practices, and ensure that the wisdom of Native farmers, gatherers, and cooks continues to nourish future generations.

Throughout his talk, Chef Sherman reminded the audience that Indigenous foods are inherently sustainable. Every element of an ingredient is used, waste is minimized, and most dishes are plant-forward by nature. Crops such as corn, beans, and squash, the "Three Sisters" are cultivated through traditional methods that promote soil health and biodiversity. He spoke of sustainability not as a trend, but as an ancestral practice that has guided Indigenous people for centuries. "Our recipes are stories of survival," he shared, "and they remind us how to live in balance with the earth."

As guests listened, they were invited to taste these stories come to life. Following the discussion, a networking reception showcased small plates inspired by The Sioux Chef's Indigenous Kitchen, prepared by UC Merced's culinary team using locally grown produce and sustainable proteins. The dishes, including Braised Bison with Wild Sage and Three Sisters Mash, were a tribute to the land and the resilience of the people who cultivated it. A tasty Cedar Tea with a unique flavor and calming effect became an unexpected favorite of guests. To keep things inclusive, we served two dishes that were both vegan and allergen-free.

Chef Sherman himself offered an approving thumbs-up to the UC Merced chefs for their care in preparing his recipes. Guests and sponsors shared enthusiastic praise for the food, many expressing that it was one of the most meaningful meals they had ever experienced on campus. For the dining team, it was a proud moment. For the culinary team, it was a recognition not just of their culinary expertise, but of their role as ambassadors for cultural connection.

In the days following the Fireside Chat, UC Merced's Residential Dining team extended the event's impact by honoring Indigenous people's day with some Indigenous Food Specials at the Pavilion dining center, which averages 2,500-3,000 students during dinner service. To authentically reflect the spirit of Chef Sean Sherman's work and the mission of NATIFS, UC Merced Dining intentionally sourced ingredients that supported Indigenous producers and regional farmers for the menu specials. Turkey and bison were purchased through Cream Co Meats, a mission-driven supplier known for supporting sustainable ranchers, while beans and wild rice were purchased directly through the NATIFS online store, ensuring that the program supported Indigenous food producers connected to the organization's network.

In keeping with UC Merced Dining's commitment to local sourcing, seasonal vegetables were procured from Anna's Organics and Burroughs Family Farms, two family farms located less than twenty minutes from the UC Merced campus in California's Central Valley.

Menu development for the reception and dining specials was inspired by recipes from The Sioux Chef's Indigenous Kitchen cookbook, along with institutional recipes provided through the NATIFS website, which features culinary resources designed to help chefs incorporate Indigenous ingredients into larger-scale food service operations. Using these resources, the culinary team prepared dishes including Quinoa with Sumac, Three Sisters Bison Chili, and Fried Wild Rice, allowing students to experience Indigenous ingredients and culinary traditions through a campus dining setting. Student culinary team members gained exposure to Indigenous ingredients and sustainable sourcing practices, connecting culinary technique with cultural history.

The program was made possible through the collaboration of multiple campus and community partners, including the Division of Equity, Justice & Inclusive Excellence (EJIE), Residential Dining, Housing & Residence Life, the El Capitan Hotel, the Central Valley Opportunity Fund, and the Monterey Bay Chapter of the American Culinary Federation. Each contributed resources and support that allowed the event to take shape at minimal cost, demonstrating how collective purpose can achieve powerful results even with limited budgets. The return on investment was not financial but transformational: a full event space, heartfelt messages of gratitude, and strengthened relationships across departments and the broader community.

The impact of the Chef Sherman event was deeply personal. Guests described the evening as "eye opening" "I learned so much" "We want to go to Minnesota to eat at his restaurant". Many spoke of gaining new understanding of Indigenous foodways, not just as historical traditions but as living examples of sustainability and self-determination. The event also inspired UC Merced's chefs and student workers, who took pride in knowing their work contributed to cultural learning and environmental stewardship.

From a sustainability perspective, the event advanced UC Merced Dining's ongoing efforts to build a regional food system rooted in regenerative agriculture and ethical sourcing. Dining hosted a zero-waste service model, with reusable glasses and plateware for the reception. The ingredients for the reception were sourced from Central Valley farms known for their organic and soil-friendly practices (Anna's Organics and Burrough's Family Farms). The lone animal protein that was on the menu, bison, was sourced from CreamCo Meats, whose mission is to provide transparent marketplace that can support sustainable and regenerative ranches through an aggregate and direct marketing model. The conversations and connections forged that evening reinforced the university's commitment to aligning dining operations with sustainability education and social equity.

What made Honoring Indigenous Foodways truly unique was its emotional resonance. It was not a lecture or a catered event, it was an experience of gratitude, learning, and shared humanity. The performance by Medicine for My Sisters reminded attendees that food begins with ceremony and connection. Chef Sherman's words reframed sustainability as a cultural inheritance, and his vision for a network of Indigenous commissary kitchens offered hope for what is possible when communities reclaim their power through food.

The ripple effect of that night continues to shape UC Merced Dining's programming. The team is already planning new initiatives that build on the lessons learned, like expanding their Food for Thought series with upcoming events highlighting women in food and agriculture, and cultural heritage programs for AAPI and Latinx Heritage Months. Each effort draws from the same foundation of inclusion, sustainability, and storytelling that defined this event.

Honoring Indigenous Foodways exemplified how food can bridge differences, restore identity, and inspire change. It celebrated the voices and knowledge of Indigenous communities, honored the land that sustains us, and empowered a new generation of students to see sustainability as an act of respect. Through partnership, authenticity, and heart, UC Merced Dining demonstrated that true social justice work is not only about who is served, but also about who is invited to the table.

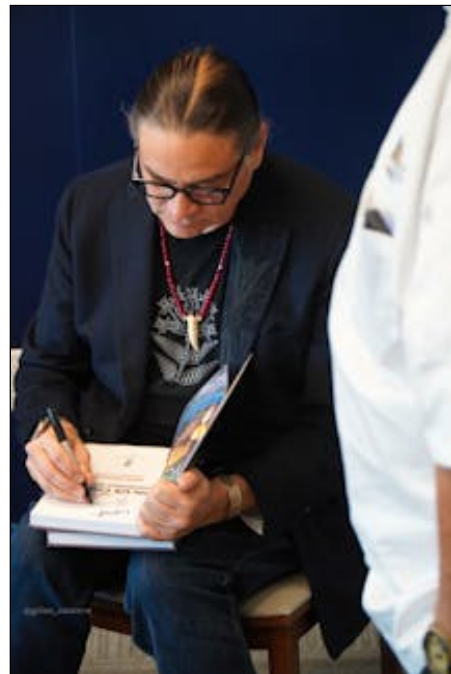
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Spider Guy Trai... 376 KiB



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Spider Guy Trai... 421 KiB



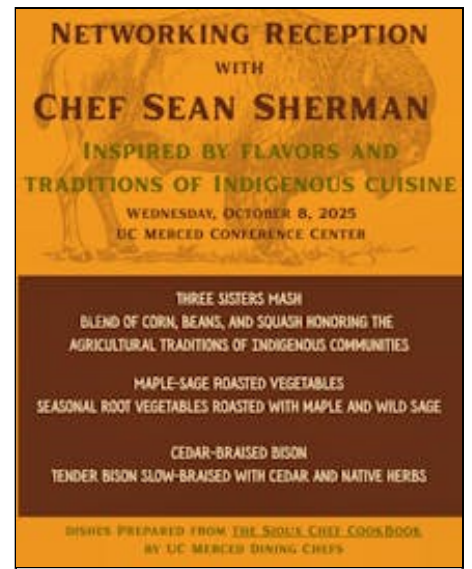
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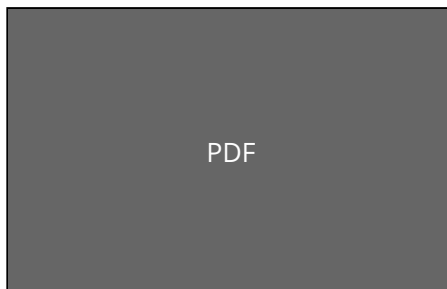
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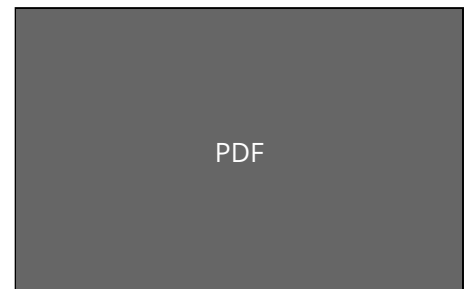
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Fried Wild Rice, ... 1.3 MiB



Three Sisters Bi... 1.3 MiB



Quinoa With Su... 1.2 MiB



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