



bawVoYoo

Mitchell Vanagten

Entry details

Nominee Name	Chef Mitchell "Mitch" Vanagten
Nominee Organization	University of California, Merced

Impact Story: Describe the effort or initiative led by the nominee and the impact it had on your campus or community.

Chef Mitchell "Mitch" Vanagten has transformed UC Merced's Dining department with his commitment to educate students in all aspects of food, sustainability, and community building using innovative programs that reflect the values of service. Chef Mitch's most prominent contribution has been to create the Food for Thought Guest Speaker Series at UC Merced—the newest and most remote campus in the University of California system—which allows him to invite nationally recognized chefs, authors, and thought leaders to speak at UC Merced. Although the campus has limited resources, Chef Mitch has invited multiple New York Times Best Selling Authors, Winemakers, CEOs, and Nationally Recognized Figures in Food, Culture, and Sustainability to talk to the students at the Central Valley and surrounding areas who would normally never be able to meet them.

The Food for Thought speaker series has opened the door for student engagement and experiential education. When the guest speakers come to UC Merced, students assist with meal preparations, develop advertising materials, take photos, and engage in community outreach while the guest speakers are present. Students gain confidence and acquire professional experience by participating in hands-on activities while making connections between their academic studies and the real world.

Chef Mitch intentionally extends the educational impact of the Food for Thought Guest Speaker Series beyond the live event by pairing each visit with book access and community learning opportunities. When applicable, he has organized book giveaways to ensure students can engage deeply with the ideas shared by visiting authors and chefs. These efforts have included distributing 40 copies of We Are Each Other's Harvest by Natalie Baszile, 50 copies of Be Water, My Friend by Shannon Lee, and hosting a raffle to give away five copies of Chef Sean Sherman's book during his visit. For each author engagement, Chef Mitch also ensured that copies of the books were donated to both the UC Merced Library and the Merced Public Library, expanding access for students and community members long after the events concluded. This thoughtful approach reinforces his belief that education through food should be inclusive, accessible, and lasting.

Each Food for Thought Guest Speaker Series event is intentionally followed by a free networking reception, designed to foster connection, learning, and inclusion. These receptions give students, faculty, staff, and community members the opportunity to engage directly with guest speakers and with one another in an informal, welcoming setting. Chef Mitch also uses these moments as an extension of education through food—curating menus that introduce guests to cuisines they may not have previously experienced. Past receptions have featured Ohlone cuisine, Indonesian

dishes, and Indigenous recipes inspired by Chef Sean Sherman's work, allowing food to serve as a shared language for cultural understanding. By removing financial barriers and centering hospitality, these gatherings transform lectures into meaningful community experiences rooted in curiosity, respect, and connection.

Chef Mitch's commitment to service also extends into formal education and workforce development. He recently began teaching as an adjunct faculty member at Merced College, instructing an Introduction to Hospitality and Dietary Careers course that helps students explore pathways into foodservice, nutrition, and institutional dining careers. In addition, for more than five years, Chef Mitch and the UC Merced Dining team have hosted interns from local culinary schools and Merced College's Dietary Supervisor Program, providing students with meaningful, real-world experience in a collegiate dining environment. These internships offer hands-on learning, mentorship, and exposure to a broad professional network of chefs and foodservice managers—giving students the confidence, skills, and connections needed to succeed as they move forward in their careers. Through teaching and mentorship, Chef Mitch continues to invest in the next generation of hospitality professionals beyond the walls of UC Merced. Outside of the campus, Chef Mitch uses his creative Zero-Cost Fundraising Model to raise funds for organizations and causes in Merced County. In the last year alone, he has raised over \$14,000. Some of his notable accomplishments include an auctioned culinary experience at Corbin Cash Distillery where two individuals each paid \$3000 for the experience; a beer pairing dinner fundraiser where Chef Mitch coordinated with local businesses to donate food, beer, and a venue to host the event and raised an additional \$4000; and a Zero-Cost Community Event Honoring Shannon Lee's Visit to UC Merced, which raised over \$1500 for the Bruce Lee Foundation and started a discussion to bring a Bruce Lee Summer Camp to the Merced area.

Prior to the recognition of his leadership in sustainability, Chef Mitch received a CHESC Energy & Sustainability Award for Sustainable Food Service (2020), for the Ugly Produce Rescue and Donation Program. The program resulted in more than 800,000 pounds of "ugly" produce being diverted from landfills and donated to UC Merced and other UC and CSU food pantries across the state during the height of the pandemic providing food assistance to thousands of food insecure students.

In addition, Chef Mitch has obtained grants for the UC Merced's Bobcat Pantry, the Monterey Bay ACF Healthy Eating Initiative, and has aided local businesses such as Bella Luna Restaurant and The Ugly Company in acquiring outside funding to address staff support during the pandemic, food insecurity and food waste.

The ultimate indicator of the success of Chef Mitch's work is the advancement and progress of the people he mentors. Many students and staff who began their career working with Chef Mitch have transitioned into positions of leadership within UC Merced Dining and the university. An example of this is a former local restaurant vendor who was encouraged by Chef Mitch to apply for a position with the campus and eventually rose from Senior Cook to Sous Chef, Executive Chef, and now works in a specialized leadership role focused on food allergies, food safety, and dietary needs — ensuring inclusive dining for students. This path reflects Chef Mitch's intentional mentoring and belief in developing people for future opportunity.

Chef Mitch's influence also goes beyond the professional development of his team members. He frequently provides guidance to team members regarding long-term financial stability and well-being and encourages homeownership whenever possible. As a direct result, many of the employees of UC Merced Dining have reached milestones contributing to the long-term financial stability and confidence of these individuals.

Using compassion, creativity, and collaboration, Chef Mitch has increased the visibility of UC Merced Dining, fostered strong community partnerships, and developed meaningful pathways for students and staff to learn, lead, and give back to their community. His quiet, service-oriented leadership embodies the values that Paul Fairbrook promoted.

Leadership & Collaboration: How did this person lead, collaborate, or inspire others?

Chef Mitchell "Mitch" Vanagten fosters a spirit of humility, collaboration and a true dedication to uplifting others. He uses the principles of servant leadership to inspire and enable his team to excel. As a servant leader, Chef Mitch puts himself last allowing the students, colleagues, farmers and guest speakers to be the stars of the show. Using a quiet yet incredibly effective approach to create an atmosphere of gratitude, teamwork and a common purpose among the people working in UC Merced Dining.

Chef Mitch creates a team of leaders and prepares his culinary team members to take on new challenges and new opportunities by mentoring them intentionally. He not only develops their skills to move upward within UC Merced Dining but also to lead throughout the entire campus and food system. Many of the leaders within the culinary department of UC Merced's dining services started as cooks or sous chefs, however, Chef Mitch mentored many of these team members to grow from being cooks or sous chefs to be able to lead in an executive role or management position. By providing his team members with the foundation to be excellent technically as well as having a strong sense of responsibility to others, Chef Mitch has helped to create a culture of success.

Teamwork is at the core of how Chef Mitch leads. Chef Mitch brings together students, dining staff, faculty, local farmers and national thought leaders through programs like the Food for Thought Guest Speaker Series. Through these partnerships, Chef Mitch provides students the opportunity to cook side-by-side with visiting chefs, build professional relationships, develop marketing campaigns and participate in volunteering at local community fundraiser events. These experiences build confidence for students and create opportunities for students to meet potential mentors and employers in the industry.

In addition to the Food for Thought Guest Speaker Series, Chef Mitch developed the Salvage Social Hour fundraising series, a partnership-based model that teams local restaurants, chefs and businesses to raise funds for UC Merced's Bobcat Food Pantry. Each event in the Salvage Social Hour series is a low-cost event and allows 90-95% of all funds raised to go directly to supporting food insecure students. Over the past three years, the Salvage Social Hour fundraising series has held three successful events, built relationships between the University and the local culinary community and demonstrates how collaboration and strategic planning can produce results.

The leadership demonstrated by Chef Mitch extends beyond the walls of UC Merced. In addition to serving as the Vice President and Membership Chair of the Monterey Bay Chapter of the American Culinary Federation (ACF), Chef Mitch serves on the board of the ACF to support youth focused healthy eating initiatives, fundraising efforts and workforce development programming through grants, sponsorships, and mentorship. Additionally, Chef Mitch serves on the F3 Innovate Advisory Board and works to identify new ways for small farmers to develop value added products that will allow them to enter and sustainably maintain new markets.

Chef Mitch also encourages his own team members to be servant leaders in the community. With Chef Mitch as a model of servant leadership, several of his team members have taken the initiative to support the organizations that they are most passionate about, including CARE for Foster Youth and ReStore Merced. Team members have volunteered as chefs for fundraising events, participated in mock interviews to help unemployed individuals prepare to re-enter the workforce, and have inspired other team members and non-team members to join in and volunteer whenever there is a need.

Through the practice of mentorship, collaboration and leading by example, Chef Mitch has created a work environment where students and staff feel valued, empowered and motivated to serve others – ultimately multiplying his influence and establishing a lasting culture of service that extends beyond UC Merced Dining.

Personal Qualities: Share how this person embodies the spirit of Paul Fairbrook through compassion and service.

The qualities of compassion, humility, and a strong commitment to serving others exhibited by Chef Mitchell "Mitch" Vanagten demonstrate the values of Paul Fairbrook. Unlike many other professionals, Chef Mitch does not focus on his own success and development; instead, he focuses on providing opportunity for his colleagues, students and partners in the community. Like Paul Fairbrook, who saw that collegiate dining is a service profession based on human relationships, Chef Mitch sees the world from a similar perspective and uses the same qualities of compassion, generosity and high moral character in all aspects of his career.

A characteristic quality of Chef Mitch is the desire to keep himself out of the spotlight, while making sure that others receive the recognition they deserve. Chef Mitch has submitted numerous awards for nomination for colleagues across the University of California (UC) system, including the award-winning IFPA Chef of the Year nominations for UC Davis Health Chef Santana Diaz and UC Merced Chef Jonathan Gutierrez. Additionally, Chef Mitch has submitted nominations on behalf of UC Merced colleagues for Staff Assembly and Campus Awards because he believes their hard work and dedication should be recognized. To date, 5 of his nominees have been recognized for awards at UC Merced.

Chef Mitch is also extremely generous with both his time and personal finances. Often, he will go above his duties as a chef to assist in planning, preparing and participating in fundraising events for the Merced County Food Bank, Merced Boys & Girls Club, and UC Merced's Food Pantry. If funds are not available for sponsorship, he has provided

financial assistance (using his own money), to make the events successful. He also organizes food and beverage sponsorships for these events to ensure a larger percentage of proceeds can go towards the fundraising efforts. He also finds free venues to host these events, partnering with local Merced businesses. These selfless acts demonstrates Chef Mitch's philosophy that, "Service can mean stepping forward, being present in every moment, even when it involves sacrificing your own needs."

As a result of Chef Mitch's constant demonstration of service through leading by example, he has inspired a culture of volunteerism within the UC Merced Dining Program. Many team members now voluntarily participate in community events with Chef Mitch, take initiative to volunteer in areas they are passionate about, and help out wherever there is a need. His influence has extended outside of the dining area as well - non-dining staff have started to participate with him in fundraising events and assist with food preparation, service, washing dishes, etc. This common commitment to service has improved relationships and teamwork between departments and reinforced the idea that everyone contributes to the good of the community.

He has shown special compassion towards students. Chef Mitch continually seeks to provide opportunities for student employees to gain hands-on learning experiences and build connections. For example, through programs such as the Food for Thought Series, volunteer-run fundraisers, and collaborative projects with guest chefs, student employees gain valuable experience and establish their professional network beyond the confines of UC Merced. His establishment of the the upcoming Dining Student Emergency Fund illustrates Chef Mitch's conviction that supporting students' overall wellness is an integral part of service.

Chef Mitch has demonstrated compassion to the community through his concern for animals in distress. Chef Mitch frequently volunteers time and resources to support animal welfare, by fostering animals, locating lost dogs and cats for their owners, locating permanent homes for animals, and baking treats to sell at fundraising bake sales for nonprofit animal rescue groups. A particularly noteworthy example of his compassionate actions occurred when a campus event took place near the previous Chancellor's residence. Chef Mitch assisted in locating a lost dog, arranged transportation to a no-kill shelter, and ensured the dog was safe and being properly cared for. Within one week, the dog was adopted. These unpublicized acts of kindness illustrate Chef Mitch's perception that service is not simply a reaction to situations - rather it is a lifestyle characterized by accountability, sympathy and follow-through. Regardless of whether Chef Mitch is promoting food security, increasing the impact of local nonprofits, mentoring young chefs, or encouraging others to join him in service, Chef Mitch demonstrates his commitment to service with kindness, humility and a sincere interest in improving the lives of those around him. His service is not only personal, but also inspires others to do the same, embodying the values that Paul Fairbrook advocated for his entire lifetime.

Please submit a short video (1-3 minutes) featuring the nominee and/or their work. Videos may be used in conference presentations and marketing to celebrate all nominees. The content may be edited by NACUFS staff to create a broader video celebrating the winners.

- **Testimonials (colleagues, supervisors, or students)**
- **Social media highlights**
- **Photos of the nominee in action**
- **Survey results or other metrics**
- **Letters of appreciation**
- **Newsletters or articles featuring their work**

Log in to nacufs.awardsplatform.com to see complete entry attachments.

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Action Photos f... 1.7 MiB

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More Collateral ... 437 KiB

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Paul Fairbrook_... 14 KiB

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Letter of Appre... 15 KiB

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Chef Mitch Lett... 188 KiB

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Merced Sun-Star

<https://www.mercedsun...>



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Top honor from peers

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Attachment name
Shannon Lee

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Chef Sean Sherman

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VISTAS Magazine

<https://issuu.com/vistas...>



Attachment name
Overview of collaboration

<https://drive.google.co...>