



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

College of Letters & Science

UCSB

Alumni Spotlight

This month's Spotlight features Nicholas, a former Cultural Anthropology major who started his own specialty bakehouse, bringing a taste of New Zealand to the San Francisco Bay Area.



Nicholas Lee:
Owner
Sage Bakehouse

What are you up to now, post-graduation?

I started a specialty bakery that makes savory pies. It's an old concept, just one that isn't too familiar here in the States. The Australians and the Kiwis eat them like we eat hotdogs and hamburgers. I do ones with egg and sausage and bacon for breakfast, and ones filled with BBQ pulled pork, seasonal veggies, mac and cheese, minced beef and cheddar, and more. I describe it to Americans as a sort of chicken pot pie you can eat with your hands.

Currently, I sell in farmers markets with some local delivery options around San Francisco and mail delivery throughout California. For now, I use a shared, commercially-certified kitchen where you pay by the hour. But the business is growing and eventually the plan is to

open my own savory pie café. I also hope to expand into more farmers markets and into the Bay Area's "Off the Grid," where anyone who has an up and coming food product idea can reach foodies who are looking for the best of what the Bay Area has to offer.

The biggest challenge of owning my own business is doing everything myself while I get started. Not to sound like an old man, but it's a very physical job compared to my old desk job. I spend Wednesday through Friday making every part of the pie from scratch, then spend the weekend selling them at the farmers market. I also spend my time at the farmers market shopping for ingredients. I talk to people, learning about their food supply—I don't mind pay-

"...there are times when you need to pivot..."



ing a little more for produce and proteins to make sure farmers are fairly treated and my customers are getting quality food. Then, I start the cycle again.

Also, with a new product, you have the challenge of getting people to find value in something they're not familiar with. Every week, I'm face-to-face with my customers and I get the chance to tell them about my product and my story. When you own your own business, you need to be enthusiastic about telling that same story for the thousandth time. You need to bring that same passion, the same drive, as you did the first time you told it because it's the first time hearing it for every new customer.

The best part, though, is that I get to make something tangible. I came from the world of tech and sales, where I was selling services and tools created by a company, but with the bakehouse, I make every part of the pie, from the fillings to

the pastry. I watch people walk away eating a pie and then, five seconds later, they're coming back for a second one. There's something uniquely fulfilling about seeing people enjoy something I created with my own hands.

How did you get to where you are?

I really did stumble upon my major, Cultural Anthropology. I actually started out as a Biochem major. With that major, you take a ton of chemistry, you take a lot of bio, a lot of math, and it's not until your fourth year that you really get to the core of the major. Once I got to that stage, it really lined up that this wasn't the right fit. It's funny because I was a peer advisor for two years in the Chemistry Department, you'd think I would have figured that out earlier. As soon as I switched, though, I saw what it was like to be in a major that fit me. I went from being an average (sometimes below) student to getting really strong

grades and engaging with the material at a deeper level. By studying people, I learned a lot about myself and how to go through this world.

A year or two after graduation, after some traveling, I went into sales in insurance for small businesses. Knowing how to study people and being a people-person by nature, it wasn't hard for me to make cold calls. Cold calling is one of the hardest forms of sales, but at UCSB and living in Isla Vista, I was always striking up conversations with new people in different contexts. My friends in undergrad used to say I could talk to anybody about anything. That skill made me able to pick up the phone, call small business owners, and put them at ease enough to talk about their insurance.

My sales career led me to a tech company called Trulia. At Trulia, I was employee number 200-something and I got to see it grow to about 1000 employees in four

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and a half years. It was truly a team effort to build Trulia into what it was and it was an awesome ride. But when you start a tech company, the goal is to either make it really big or to sell the company. Trulia was bought out by Zillow and in that transition, they let go of the entire salesforce. It was a lot of mixed emotions. All my hard work had contributed to the company reaching this point of success, but the cost was my position. I realized that for my next career step, I wanted to have control over my own future.

I'd been introduced to savory pies in New Zealand two years previously and I also had experience working at farmers markets. My mother actually had four to five different booths down in the San Diego area and in Palm Springs, and I'd helped her grow her business of selling olive oil, specialty vinegars, and local honey. The farmers market experience, having this product idea, and realizing I wanted to be my own boss came together at this pivotal moment. I realized I could test my concept in this particular market and see what the reception was. Lucky for me, it's been a great reception. The demand is always much more than I can supply right now. So every

week I'm thinking about how I can take it to the next level.

What was the best thing you did as an undergrad to help you get to where you are?

I made sure to take advantage of the whole breadth of the UCSB experience. I took every single class the rec center provided, got certified for scuba diving, did Toastmasters, took classes I had any interest in. I looked at myself as being more of an all-around type of player rather than a position player. That open-minded approach to new experiences and taking risks ended up playing a much greater role in my career path than any one experience could have.

What do you wish you had known while you were in undergrad?

To make sure you're doing something for the right reasons. I picked Biochemistry because I figured it would make good money, but that's literally the only reason I picked it. Considering that, it's not surprising I ended up not liking it. Also, there are times when you need to give a difficult challenge your all, but there are times when you need to pivot. Where

you say, this is the game plan as it is now, but if I get to this stage, I need to be to be flexible enough go in a new direction that still fits with who I want to be.

I think my younger self would have been surprised to hear that I doubt any company I've applied to looked at my major other than making sure I had my degree. They wanted people who were educated, but they weren't worried what the degree was. They looked for initiative, drive, and really, personality. The role Cul-



“When you hit a bump, believe in yourself.”



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tural Anthropology played was in terms of my perspective. It's easy to only consider things right in front of you, from your own point of view. But businesses want people who can take what they sometimes call the 30,000-foot view—the ability to look at an issue from outside of your own bubble, from a big picture vantage point, or from the perspective of someone with a different background than you. I brought that ability to think beyond my own experience from job to job. And of course, without my interest in other cultures, without having travelled to New Zealand, I never would have had the idea for this business.

What was the best thing about being a Gaucho?

The friendships. I made lifelong friends in Santa Barbara—a lot of them were my groomsmen in my wedding. The people you're friends

with give you a great support network, and sometimes a business network. I think that at other schools, that usually comes from the fraternities and sororities, but at UCSB, there are so many opportunities to develop relationships that will help you throughout the rest of your life.

Any final words of wisdom for the current Gaucho generation?

When you hit a bump, believe in yourself. When people feel like they're losing control over their lives, it's easy to feel anxious and afraid, but I've learned through experience both with my major and career that just because your first plan didn't work out, doesn't mean you can't come up with a new plan. An even better plan. There's that saying, "When one door closes, ten open." That's really true. You just have to be ready to open those other doors.



Nicholas welcomes UCSB students to contact him via email for mentorship and with questions about his experience starting a business.

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To learn more about Sage Bakehouse and to get your hands on some delicious savory pies, visit:

www.sagebakehousesf.com



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