



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

College of Letters & Science

UCSB

# Alumni Spotlight

This month's Spotlight features Irene, a former Film and Media Studies major who's now a Certified Sommelier for a Forbes Five-Star restaurant, responsible for matching patrons with over 3,500 different wines.



## **Irene Phakeovilay: Floor Sommelier**

### **What are you up to now, post-graduation?**

I am the Floor Sommelier at Addison at the Grand Del Mar in San Diego. Addison is a fine dining contemporary French restaurant directed by the acclaimed Relais & Châteaux Grand Chef William Bradley with restaurant accolades such as Forbes Five-Star, AAA Five-Diamond, and a Wine Spectator's Grand Award wine list. That said, the stakes are exceptionally high. Our wine list includes over 3,500 selection from around the world. I assist the Wine Director in overseeing the daily organization and sales of these wines by pairing them with the ten-course Chef's menu or simply recommending bottles to best accommodate the preferences of our guests. While the position requires a great amount of memorization and years of building an expertise

on the wine itself, people might not guess that a big part of being successful in my position is the ability to read people. Some people are very wine and beverage savvy and others are occasional enthusiasts. It's my responsibility to use wine rhetoric that is informative and approachable for the comfort level of the patron I'm assisting. We have the perfect wine for every guest who dines at Addison and I make sure they find it, whether they know what to ask for or not.

### **How did you get to where you are?**

I majored in Film and Media Studies with interest in screenwriting and thought I would eventually take

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the brilliant yellow brick road for Hollywood. During the humble beginnings of my post-graduate job hunt, I needed to find a side job that would allow me time to write. I hit the books on wine basics and landed a paid position in a tasting room at a winery. At that time, wine was a casual hobby that helped my introverted personality become more sociable. When you can't be the naturally suave person who sings and plays guitar at any given social gathering, start a conversation on the food and beverage. Guaranteed to break the ice!

At first, the wine job was just a paycheck to support my writing. With screenwriting, I had a specific goal, I had "The Plan," and that was a comfort. In school, everyone always talked like they knew exactly what they were doing—I'm going to be a doctor, I'm going into marketing—so being able to say, "I'm going to be a screenwriter," made me feel like I had things together. But at some point, I realized that even outside of work, I was spending my free time on food and wine, and writing was feeling like more and more of a chore. With wine, it was

suddenly real people, real characters coming to life, instead of fictional players on paper. I was enjoying it in the moment and people were enjoying my role in it. But not having a goal was unsettling.

When doors started opening for my career in wine, I finally reached a point where I recognized that I had to let go of the safety of "The Plan." Wine was what I was enjoying, not screenwriting. I had earned my Certified Sommelier title through the Court of Master Sommeliers and was in demand. While not what I

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expected, these doors were opening for a reason, and I'd always lived my life with the philosophy that when a door opens, you go through it. I eventually realized that my career in wine wasn't a meaningless detour on the way to Hollywood. I had never left the yellow brick road. My Emerald City was just different than I'd imagined.

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

Film and Media Studies and the wine industry might not seem to have much in common (or maybe it does if you drink wine while watching movies!), but my life now and my life then had common elements.

Film Studies drew together very different people with different backgrounds and personalities--the only thing they have in common was that they liked movies. Now I work in an environment where different people come together because of a love for food and wine. I developed an intuitive flexibility in quickly finding common ground with new peo-



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ple, the value of which is obvious now that I serve patrons from all over the world.

Also, in Film and Media Studies, I learned the ropes of working in a team built of different strengths. Some people are really good at being on camera, others at writing music, lighting, stage design...the collaboration has the potential to become a nightmare, but it’s an amazing feeling when the team clicks and makes something bigger happen. I use the ability to see how a team can fit together and adapt accordingly every day as my team operates in a fast-paced, challenging environment.

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

I wish I would have taken more classes outside my major. Honestly, I just took the classes I needed to make sure I graduated on time, and now I feel like there were things I missed out on—classes, clubs I could have joined, events I could have gone to. My biggest regret that pertains to my current position is not having taken more language classes. Addison at-

tracts guests from all over the world, and many of the wines I work with are international. I have to pronounce words, vineyards, producers’ names accurately, in their native languages. I’m learning now, but I think a foreign language background would have been a really good start—both with my pronunciation and as an introduction to different cultures. We live in a very global world and the more you can be connected with that, the better off you’ll be.

Similarly, in a career setting, when an employer sees a B.A. on your resume, they will assume you have strong, professional written communication skills, so be sure to take whatever writing courses you need to live up to that assumption. But you need to be more than that, too. You need to stand out. I wish someone had told me that I didn’t have to try so hard to be like everyone else. Those things you feel weird for knowing how to do...build on that, because they might not be so weird in the end. They might be the ticket you need later on to do something great.

### **What was the best thing about being a Gaucha?**

One evening, my friends and I went on a walk and ended up at the bluffs, right across the lagoon from the University Center. We watched people walking around campus, trying to yell across the water to them, and laughing together when they’d look around, confused. It was one of those small, silly moments that I look back on now and



“...when a door opens, you go through it.”



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feel incredible fondness for that period of my life. At UCSB, there was so much around all the time, I didn't have to dig for things to do—we could just walk out into the world and let a day take us where it would. And I guess that's how I've been living my life since—keeping a genuinely open mind about the opportunities life lays in front of me.

**Any final words of wisdom for the current Gaucho generation?**

There are so many careers people don't tell you about in undergrad. I never knew that being a food stylist is a job. That's crazy! Your job

is making food look nice for a photograph. I always liked wine, but I never thought of it as something to master and turn into a career.

So how do you prepare for that world of unknowns? Understand that just because you study a certain subject, doesn't mean you have to get a career doing that exact thing—I wish someone had said that to me back then. What you should leave UCSB with is a good grounding in how to be flexible with the skills you've developed. Life is about adapting, changing, growing, learning—if you can be ready, you'll always get through.



*Irene welcomes UCSB students to contact her via email with questions about the field. Requests to look over student resumes or inquiries about open positions will not be responded to.*

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