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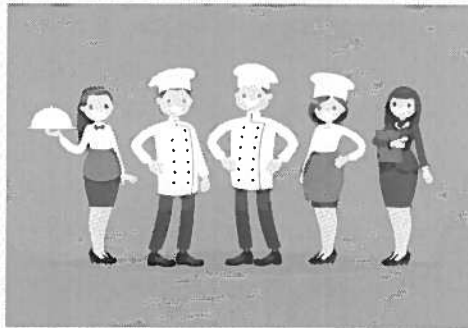
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PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

David J. Vakil has been appointed dean of the Division of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at Santiago Canyon College in Orange. He has 17 years experience as an instructor and administrator within the California Community College system; four years of experience as the dean of instruction at Moreno Valley College and three years as the associate dean of academic affairs at El Camino College. Vakil is working toward earning his doctorate in educational leadership from UCLA and has a master's of science in astronomy from Cal Tech.

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**HOT OPPORTUNITIES
IN FOOD SERVICE**

BY BILL QUINNAN
FOR O.C. REGISTER SPECIAL SECTIONS

The food-services industry should continue to be a hot source of career opportunities, according to the National Restaurant Association. The association reports that restaurant-industry employment is now 14.7 million employees strong and is expected to increase to 16.3 million by 2027. Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that the food-services sector employs nearly 7 percent of the U.S. workforce, and the National Restaurant Association reports that one in three adults in the nation got their first job experience in a restaurant.

The Los Angeles Designated Marketing Area, which comprises the counties of Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside San Bernardino and Ventura, is no exception to this trend. Employment in accommodations and food services in the LA DMA averaged approximately 782,700 workers in May, accounting for 10 percent of total employment in the region, according to the California Employment Development

Department. Adding approximately 21,200 jobs since May 2016, the sector accounted for 20 percent of the county's net job growth over the last year.

Based on data from a report released earlier this year by the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corp., the LA DMA's leisure and hospitality sector – in which 72 percent of jobs are in food services – added 157,300 jobs from 2012 through 2016, about 25 percent of the region's net job growth during those five years. With a projected gain of 41,000 jobs in 2017 and 2018, the sector is expected to generate about 15 percent of the region's job growth between this year and next.

Nationally, food-services job growth is expected to keep pace with the overall job-growth rate over the next decade – a 6.1 percent increase from 2014 through 2024, according to the BLS. In the LA DMA, however, food-service employment is expected to increase by about 25 percent over the same time period, substantially outpacing

the overall projected job-growth rate of 14 percent.

In response to industry demand, high-school and college-level programs have been implemented throughout the region prepare students for successful careers in food-service and hospitality. Educators from such programs dialogued with working professionals in these fields at an advisory board meeting last spring to discuss trends in the sector. The meeting was hosted by Vital Link, a non-profit organization based in Irvine that focuses on linking students and educators to local businesses.

Here are a few of the insights offered by expert panelists at the meeting:

Customizable cuisine

Naila Aquil, who manages both a Togo's Eatery and a Baskin Robbins franchise, observed that today's restaurant patrons want options that fit their individual nutritional goals and dietary goals.

"People are looking for items that

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are healthier for them,” she said. “Vegan food is becoming very popular, so we must understand what is vegan food and the nutrition in vegan foods – these are some of the trends I see.”

Kathy Kramer, Chief Executive Officer of the OC Fair & Event Center, noted that while the fair may be infamous for its not-so-healthy food items, many food vendors are now incorporating healthier options into their menus.

Even catering companies and banquet facilities are feeling the impact of diners desiring personalized options, according to Jessica Rienecker of Visit Anaheim.

“It’s not just a family that’s coming to town and they want to have a different option for everyone sitting at the table,” she said. “Now we have a conference of 50,000, 75,000 people, and they want to have that same opportunity to sit family style, have something different, have an experience while they’re eating. So, it’s become a lot more challenging for venues to do a traditional sit-down banquet.”

Think outside the building

Restaurateur Marc Vergel de Dios noted that food-service opportunities are growing in areas outside of traditional restaurants. He opened Ninjas With Appetite as a food truck in 2012, later converting it to a brick-and-mortar establishment in Santa Ana.

“Traditional brick-and-mortars are actually expensive – finding real estate, overhead,” Vergel de Dios explained. “Before, if you were an aspiring chef or (wanted to start your own business), a food truck was the easiest thing you could get into. You’re not limited to location – just rent or purchase a truck and you’re in business.”

Earlier this year, he launched Portside Fish Co., offering fast-casual seafood delicacies within the recently opened Trade Food Hall in Irvine. He believes food halls, which he describes as “modern food courts” offering a variety of dining options in a more limited space, are providing similar opportunities to those entering the food-service business.

“I think because of the initial capital investment, (food halls are) a lot cheaper to get into, and food halls are opening across the country now ... it’s the new food truck.”

International experience

According to the National Restaurant Association, authentic international cuisine, including ethnic spices, ethnic-inspired breakfast items, African flavors and more, is a leading trend in 2017.

Andy Costa, owner of Gina’s Pizza, noted that while many Italians bemoan the cultural appropriation of pizza throughout the world, he sees the issue differently.

“Go anywhere in the world and pizza’s been made a part of each culture,” he said. “I think it’s the most awesome verification that we as humans are always looking to have something excite our taste buds – every culture wants to do that. We’re in that pursuit.”

Costa has found that guests not only want to enjoy the taste of their food but want to be informed about how and where it originated.

“Kids today are asking, ‘Where’s this from?’ because they’re watching The Food Network; they know way more about food than kids did 20 or 30 years ago. I think it’s an exciting time to be in the food business,” he said.

Bill Quinnan is a freelance writer who lives in Orange County. Readers can send e-mail to him at bill@billquinnan.com. Bill cannot provide job leads.