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Restoring the California Dream



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By Joe Barks, Editor

Paul Barr is taking a visitor to San Luis Obispo (Calif.) Country Club (SLOCC) on a golf-cart tour of the course, while answering questions about his duties as the club’s Golf Course Superintendent. After previously discussing bunker and turf issues, Barr is now sharing how he deals with irrigation and water-management challenges. Then he suddenly stops the cart in the middle of a fairway during the quiet, sun-splashed afternoon, and sweeps his arm to take in the mountains, farmland and vineyards that surround him on all sides.

“But hey—what problems do you really have, when you’re in the middle of paradise?” Barr asks with a smile.

At the end of the last decade, however, there was trouble even in this paradise. “Very serious trouble,” in fact, as de-



scribed by Mike Stanton, SLOCC’s General Manager/COO.

“Our membership was declining quickly, finances were in very poor condition, and service to the members was underwhelming—in short, things were bleak, and the remaining members were looking for a reason to stay,” recalls Stanton.

After going through college on a golf scholarship, Stanton eventually went into the restaurant/deli business with his wife in San Luis Obispo. And despite exposure to clubs through his golf experiences, he says, “I really didn’t have a grasp of what the whole profession of club management was all about.”

But after getting a call from an SLOCC member to see if he might be interested in applying his restaurant and business management skills to try to help steer the club out of its trou-



bles, Stanton took the GM position in 2009—and developed that grasp in a hurry.

“Beginning in early 2009,” he says, “we put together a plan to raise our service levels to where they should be, and put together programs that the whole family would want to participate in.”

As implemented by a team that includes some key managers who have been at SLOCC for 25 years, and others who were brought in both from within and outside of the club business to provide new expertise and energy where needed, that plan has now taken firm enough hold that five years later, these forms of club-management paradise can be found again in San Luis Obispo:

- membership levels are at cap in all categories, and waiting lists have been renewed;
- a series of major improvement projects has been completed for the golf course, clubhouse and other parts of the property, including a new 5,000-sq. ft. fitness center;
- the capital fund has been rebuilt to unprecedented levels;
- operating profits have been registered for four straight years.

“By rededicating ourselves to the things that are important parts of being a forward-thinking country club, and being able to attract today’s families, we’ve gotten our feet solidly on the ground again,” says Dr. Luke Faber, a club

member since 1993 who served as its President in 2012-2013. “Actually, we’re running at a pretty good pace again, and I think you could even say there are many areas where we’re now setting the bar, when we used to just be chasing it—and that’s kind of fun.”

Full Team Ahead

Momentum for SLOCC’s new service and programming strategies was first fueled by success from a trial-membership initiative in early 2010 that “worked perfectly and far exceeded” expectations, Stanton says.

“Ninety percent of those who signed up for the trial stayed—and many of them were younger families,” he says. “That showed us that if we gave people the proper experiences, we could be OK again.”

The success of the membership drive also provided an influx of dues and activities revenues that, along with prudent belt-tightening, would help produce a steady stream of funds for facilities and program improvements, while avoiding the need to assess the delicate membership mix that was now being rebuilt.

More momentum was gained as it was made clear that SLOCC would take a well-balanced, full-team approach to implementing needed change—all departments would have an equal stake in the future success of the club and be provided with opportunities to improve their facilities and programs, and none would be viewed as either rising stars or out-of-favor also-rans.

San Luis Obispo CC AT A GLANCE

- Location: San Luis Obispo, Calif.
- Opened: 1959
- No. of Members: 469 golf; 100 tennis; 75 fitness; 46 clubhouse
- Clubhouse Size: 20,000 sq. ft.
- Annual Golf Rounds: 24,000
- General Manager/COO: **Mike Stanton**
- Head Golf Professional: **Rick Ventura, PGA**
- Golf Course Superintendent: **Paul Barr**
- Food & Beverage Manager: **John Mundell**
- Executive Chef: **Troy Tolbert**
- Fitness Director: **Darren Howey**
- Tennis Director: **Bill Dunkle, USTA**
- Aquatics Director: **Myki Keffury**
- Catering/Events Coordinator: **Bill Mortimer**
- Controller: **Andrew Cook**
- Head of Maintenance/Housekeeping: **Rick Railsback**



PHOTOS COURTESY SAN LUIS OBISPO CC

C&RB CLUB FEATURE

This was particularly noteworthy because golf has always enjoyed special prominence at SLOCC, highlighted each year by the “Straight Down Fall Classic” that is sponsored by a sportswear/apparel firm based in San Luis Obispo and owned by a club member. The event is unique in attracting many professional tour players, particularly from the Champions Tour, for a best-ball competition during which many of the pros choose to play with lifelong friends. Throughout the three-day event, the emphasis is on casual enjoyment of the game amid SLOCC’s serene surroundings, and spectators (the tournament is open to the public) are afforded unusually “up close and personal” access to the players.

Other departments don’t have to have their arms twisted to pitch in and help ensure maximum success for the Straight Down event, because they recognize the value of the overall exposure it provides for the club (as one example, see the last question-and-answer exchange in the “Chef to Chef” interview with SLOCC Executive Chef Troy Tolbert on pg. 40 of this issue).

By the same token, Head Golf Professional Rick Ventura, PGA—who came to SLOCC four years ago to return to the private side after a successful tenure at high-end public courses—says he’s learned the value of having himself, and his staff, make their presence known at activities, and in areas, where golf is not the primary focus.

“The biggest benefit that can come from working at a private club is familiarity with the members,” says Ventura. “And that doesn’t just come from seeing them on the golf course or in the pro shop. In fact, some of the best ways for those of us from golf to make connections may come when we’re seen in the fitness center, or at the Halloween Haunted House.”



The Straight Down Fall Classic at SLOCC attracts tour pros like Fred Couples (above right) who enjoy the event’s laid-back and intimate setting. The event also provides an opportunity for the public to experience the “paradise” of a golf course surrounded by vineyards, farms and mountains.



Payoffs from simultaneous initiatives in every part of SLOCC’s operation have the management team smiling over the club’s now-sunny outlook again. Seated, left to right: Darren Howey, Fitness Director; Bill Dunkle, Tennis Director; Rick Railsback, Head of Maintenance/Housekeeping; Troy Tolbert, Executive Chef; Paul Barr, Golf Course Superintendent. Standing, left to right: John Mundell, Food & Beverage Manager; Rick Ventura, Head Golf Professional; Myki Keffury, Aquatics Director; Bill Mortimer, Catering/Events Coordinator; Mike Stanton, General Manager/COO; Andrew Cook, Controller.

Full Slates

It’s certainly not hard to find opportunities to make those connections, no matter where you might be on the SLOCC property. The clubhouse alone is the site of over 300 events a year, with nearly a fifth of them coming in December. Catering/Events Coordinator Bill Mortimer relies on his musical and theatrical background, along with journal notes he has kept throughout his 25 years in the position, to ensure that even annual events always “have enough of a new twist to make people want to come back each year.”

The SLOCC pool and tennis facilities are also the site of frequent, and often frenzied, event activity, ranging from spirited cardboard boat races to a high-profile tennis exhibition that was held this past fall for the benefit of the Vijay Amritraj Foundation.

Maintaining a vibrant and diversified event schedule—and making sure all staff members continued to focus on how it



SLOCC's emphasis on providing, and supporting, all aspects of a well-rounded club is reflected in steady activity at its pool, tennis complex and new fitness center.



could be enhanced and expanded within their areas, even during the most austere periods for the club—proved as critical as other measures that were taken to help pull SLOCC out of the quicksand brought by the downturn.

“We’ve certainly been through some very tough times here,” says Mortimer. “To make it through them, it would have been easy to do things like shut down the pool [which stays open year-round, with a full slate of instructional and activity programming under Myki Keffury, who has been the club’s popular Aquatics Director since 2000].”

“It also would have been easy to stop doing a lot of other fun things until things got better,” Mortimer adds. “But Mike [Stanton] and the Board were very forward-thinking; they saw those are the reasons many people come here in the first place. And actually, they saw that adding *more* events, along with new things like the fitness center, were important to make sure the club would be more family-friendly than ever.”

No “SLOing” Down

While profits and full rosters are now part of the fun again at SLOCC, the club doesn’t plan to ease up on its drive to continue to increase its value for existing and future members. Recovering from the recession also didn’t slow its plans to provide on-site child care; a Club Care service, staffed with care providers who are background-checked through the same process as the pool’s lifeguards (and also managed by Keffury), was opened two years ago. The service has gained further appeal with the opening of the new fitness center, to the point where plans are now being considered for its expansion, both in terms of hours and space.

All of this promises to help SLOCC continue to solidify its status as a preferred social and recreational option for families and retirees in the town of 46,000 that may be one of California’s best-kept secrets. San Luis Obispo’s laid-back, rural character often prompts others in the state to condescendingly refer to it as “SLOtown.” But that suits those who know it best just fine; they would prefer to remain largely undiscovered by those from Los Angeles (several hours to the south) or San Francisco (the same distance to the north), for fear of losing the charm of a college town (Cal Poly) of manageable size with absolutely no suburban sprawl—roads leading out of the center of town (and to SLOCC) quickly blend back into the surrounding hills, vineyards and farms.

San Luis Obispo, Ventura notes, has become more of a desirable retirement or second-home destination for many from Fresno, Bakersfield and other parts of California’s Central Valley (a couple of hours east) who are drawn to its milder

climate and recreational appeal, which includes easy access to the Pacific Ocean. “We probably have more than 100 members now with some ties to the Valley,” Ventura says.

At the same time, more of those who have come to know the town through its connection to Cal Poly appear to be finding it desirable for post-school life as well. “Our average age has come down drastically [with the influx of new members gained in the past five years],” Stanton reports.

These and other groups that now make up the SLOCC membership appear to be enjoying their club life as well. Stanton has always encouraged members to submit suggestions for improving their club experience—and of late, he reports, feedback has been largely confined to benign requests to “bring back the Southwestern chicken salad” or “get the Pac-12 network” on the clubhouse TV.

Sounds like paradise may have been found again. **C&RB**

CHEF TO CHEF



Harvesting the Bounty

By Jerry Schreck, Executive Chef, Merion Golf Club, Ardmore, Pa.

Troy Tolbert

CHEF PROFILE

Current Position:

Executive Chef, San Luis Obispo (Calif.) Country Club (2009-Present)

Previous Experience:

- Executive Chef, Bachus Restaurant, Solvang, Calif.
- Executive Chef, Wine Cask, Los Olivos, Calif.
- Executive Chef, Mission Grill, San Luis Obispo, Calif.
- Opening Chef for Bradley Ogden, Lark Creek Group
 - Yankee Piers
 - Parcel 104
 - Events: Meals on Wheels, Rockefeller Center
- Owner-Operator, Country Kitchen, Templeton, Calif.
- Banquet Staff, Rolling Hills Golf Club, Longwood, Fla.
- Banquet Staff, Carolina Club, Margate, Fla.

Education:

- Santa Barbara City College, Hotel & Restaurant Management
- Florida International University, Hospitality Management
- Culinary Institute of America, Culinary Arts, Hyde Park, N.Y.



As the cover story in this issue details (“Restoring the California Dream,” pg. 18), the turnaround at San Luis Obispo (Calif.) Country Club (SLOCC) was brought about through new approaches in all aspects of the club’s operation. On the food-and-beverage side, taking a successful new direction coincided with the arrival of Executive Chef Troy Tolbert in 2009.

Almost immediately, Chef Tolbert began to make an impact with his fresh, contemporary cooking style, which he developed under the tutelage of top restaurant chefs such as Bradley Ogden and Alice Waters. Once at SLOCC, Tolbert enhanced his experience and expertise by taking full advantage of the bounty of locally harvested food and wine available to him in central California.

We thank Chef Tolbert for being kind enough to take time during his extremely busy holiday season (56 parties in 22 days) to shed further light on how his culinary operation has contributed to SLOCC’s revival.

Q Chef, can you explain your philosophy of menu engineering and how you utilized your background to integrate a “public restaurant” feel to the offerings at San Luis Obispo CC?

A Our club is smack dab in the very popular Edna Valley wine region, with most of our dining views looking down or across vineyards. Driving to the club, you’ll always pass by vineyards and farms. During the spring as you’re turning into the club, you’ll see a field with waves of squash blossoms, and in the early fall that same field will have sweet red peppers or pablanos.

My whole career has been based on developing dishes from local produce, so it was a “no brainer” that I would engineer the menu here at the club around wine-friendly cuisine that utilizes the best our area has to offer.

PHOTOS COURTESY SAN LUIS OBISPO CC

A new patio space is just one of many venues where San Luis Obispo CC members can now enjoy the fresh, contemporary cuisine made possible by the abundance of central California produce and wine available to Executive Chef Troy Tolbert and the club's F&B staff.

I have to admit, the central coast of California can spoil the most creative chefs. A few minutes up the road, Shanley Farms grows finger limes; down the road, Finley Farms has awesome heirloom tomatoes and Padron peppers; and from the Mt. Olive Organic Farm in Paso Robles, I can get Turkish orange eggplant. The farms, and unique produce, go on and on, so I can just write from our *terroir*.

Q Your desire from the start of coming to SLOCC was to get members as relaxed as possible when dining at your club. How have you been successful at getting them to eat different dishes than was the norm before you came in?

A There was a bit of a struggle at first getting members to order out of their comfort zone. One of my philosophies has always been to create menu items you could identify without having to look them up in the “food lover’s companion,” yet in the presentation there would still be a wow factor, accompanied by “yummy!”

As a big part of creating that comfort level, I believe that “less is more.” For example, a two-day, *sous vide* short rib would be described as a 48-hour short rib, or an olive oil powder would just be described as an “essence.”

Getting our members to try new items and experiences on a daily basis was achieved through wine dinners and other functions that did not require circulating a menu before the event. An item such as wild boar or duck would be extremely well-received, and then *voila*—it was now included on our regular menu! We educated and impressed all at once.

Q You’ve said that your training with some of the best chefs in the U.S., including Alice Waters and Bradley Ogden, has taught you some special approaches regarding farm-to-table menus. Can you explain how this philosophy has molded your cooking style?

A Training through the years with well-known farm-to-table gurus has taught me to “respect your ingredients” and “preserve their integrity.” I love going to our local farmers market and “interviewing” all the flavors. By respecting the ingredients from start to finish with the utmost thought and care, and respecting the flavors of those products for what they are, this is another area where less can be more. By balancing a dish with the products in the way they were meant to be, they will shine brightest.

Q Can you describe your “BYO Wine” program and how it has been a hit with the membership and become profitable for the F&B bottom line?

C&RB CLUB RECIPE

Strawberry Ahi Salad

(serves 6)

Amt	Ingredient
8 cups	spinach
½ cup	jicama
½ cup	cucumber—peeled, seeded and diced
1 cup	pea sprouts
½ cup	radish, watermelon julienne
1 cup	strawberries, sliced
12 ozs.	#1 ahi (Honolulu Fish Co.)

For the vinaigrette:

Amt	Ingredient
1 tbsp.	pink peppercorn
to taste	salt and pepper
1 tsp.	fennel pollen
1/3 cup	white balsamic vinegar
1 cup	grape seed oil
1 tbsp.	lemon zest
2 tbsp.	chives
2 tbsp.	Italian parsley



Procedure:

- Heat 2 ozs. olive oil in cast-iron skillet; sear seasoned ahi evenly on all sides. Chill immediately and set aside.
- Mix together all vinaigrette ingredients (except chives and parsley) with immersion hand blender, and set aside.
- Mix together all salad ingredients in large bowl; season with salt and pepper.
- Add herbs to vinaigrette and mix well.
- Dress the side of the bowl of salad; mix and gently fold together.
- Place a portion of salad on a plate.
- Slice chilled ahi and place on salad.

SUBMITTED BY TROY TOLBERT, EXECUTIVE CHEF, SAN LUIS OBISPO (CALIF.) CC

A The BYOB night was my way of bringing together the club. We have extremely nice, down-to-earth and friendly members who have the San Luis Obispo vibe of “the happiest place to live in the USA.”

Besides the common holiday events, buffets and golf mixers, I wanted to insert a once-a-month wine dinner. I select the wine theme, such as cool-climate Syrah. We serve a three-course dinner at an extremely low price, and the members bring their own wine, with no corkage fee for the evening. We picked a night that was typically slow for the week, and boom—120 reservations! This event is sold out every month. Even better, the laughs and conversation that are going on during the event are



Virtually every dining venue at SLOCC offers views of nearby vineyards and farms, enhancing the special appeal of local food and wine that is featured on the club's menus.

addictive and heart-warming as you pass through the rooms.

As a chef, it is not hard to create a profitable menu when an event such as BYOB is executed virtually like a banquet, which elicits profit and good numbers to the bottom line. This is also the one event that has promoted confidence with our members in ordering new menu items. They trust that the food will be phenomenal, and therefore don't inquire as to the menu for the event.

Q Your fall golf tournament draws over 1,000 spectators a day. What is the biggest challenge you've faced, and what opportunities have you taken advantage of with the locals who have never been to your club?

A Our "Straight Down" fall classic is put on by Mike Rowley, a member who is also the owner of Straight Down sportswear. It's a unique event that attracts many spectators who want to watch pro players such as Freddy Couples and Loren Roberts up close, and at the same time experience SLOCC, which would normally be open to members only. This is the very point I use and share with the staff in preparing for the event—this is your chance to "show off your abilities to the community."

My biggest challenge is forecasting the numbers correctly, which have only come from my previous years with this tournament. There is some juggling between satellite stations the last day. My team is fairly small, but they work hard and with passion. We all get excited and look forward to the extreme push of this event.

C&RB

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Jerry Schreck is a member of the *Club & Resort Business* Advisory Board. Know someone you'd like to have Jerry interview for a future "Chef to Chef" conversation? Send your suggestions to editor@clubandresortbusiness.com

C&RB CLUB RECIPE

Crisp Dungeness Crab Cakes

with Corn, Tomato and Frissee Salad, Bay Scallop Ceviche and Lavender Corn Sauce

Yield: 4 servings



For the Bay Scallops:

Amt	Ingredient
1 cup	Bay scallops
	lime juice
	lemon juice
to taste	salt and pepper

Procedure:

- Marinate scallops, citrus juice, salt and pepper for approximately 45 minutes. Strain and keep cold.

For the Crab Cakes:

Amt	Ingredient
12 ozs.	Dungeness crab
¼ cup	pablano, brunoise
2 tbsp.	shallots, brunoise
4 tbsp.	lemon aioli
2 tbsp.	chives
2 tbsp.	Italian parsley
1 tbsp.	Thai basil
to taste	salt and pepper

Procedure:

- Fold all ingredients together and let sit for 30 minutes.
- Portion into four cakes.
- Sear on medium heat for a couple of minutes on each side.

For the Corn Sauce:

Amt	Ingredient
1 ear	corn, roasted and shucked
1 tsp.	lavender
½ ea.	shallot
1 cup	cream
½ cup	white wine
2 tbsp.	butter

Procedure:

- Sweat onion in butter, add white wine and reduce by half.
- Add corn, cream and sachet of lavender. Simmer for about 10 minutes, remove from heat, remove sachet and steep for another 10 minutes.
- Puree mixture and pass through fine mesh strainer; set in warm place.

For the salad:

Amt	Ingredient
2 ears	corn, roasted and shucked
12 ozs. ea.	yellow and red teardrop tomatoes
2 heads	frissee, cleaned
2 tbsp.	lemon vinaigrette

- Toss corn, tomato and frissee together with vinaigrette and season.

Final Assembly:

- Place small amount of corn sauce on plate.
- Arrange frissee on sauce.
- Place warm crab cake on salad.
- Garnish with scallop ceviche.

SUBMITTED BY TROY TOLBERT, EXECUTIVE CHEF, SAN LUIS OBISPO (CALIF) CC