

# Long Beach

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### 15 Minutes With . . . Utopia's Kamran Assadi Is A Strong Advocate For The Arts



Kamran Assadi is co-owner of Utopia restaurant in the East Village Arts District. Opened nearly 11 years ago, the restaurant's mission states: "Utopia's good food feeds your body. Its fine art feeds your soul." (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

**A**s both a business owner and a leader in the Long Beach arts community, Kamran Assadi is driven to connect the local community to the arts and to engage the development of the International City as a cultural arts destination.

Assadi, who was born and raised in Iran, recently celebrated his 50th birthday in his hometown Long Beach. He moved here in 1984 and attended California State University, Long Beach to study fine arts. While in school, Assadi worked in restaurants and learned the trade. He ended up staying in Long Beach, working part time and making paintings he never sold. He met his business partner, Amir Zee, through mutual friends, and together opened up Utopia Restaurant on the corner of Atlantic Avenue and 1st Street in 1999.

The restaurant has doubled as an art gallery since day one, and Assadi describes the venue as relaxing, homey and not pretentious, with a menu full of quality food. "No matter how nice your walls are, if the food is bad, people won't come," he said. One rea-

son the duo chose the location was because in the mid-1990s, the area was being promoted as an arts district.

That appealed to Assadi because of his art background. "The idea and the whole concept of an arts district was very intriguing to us, and we figured we could make something very unique – a restaurant with a gallery theme that showcases art works, gatherings, events and so on," he said. Utopia hosts six art shows a year and Assadi utilizes the eatery as a gathering place to connect the arts community with residents of the greater community.

In an interview with Staff Writer Tiffany Rider, Assadi talked about the validity of calling his business district a "true arts district," as well as the role of arts and culture in the future of Long Beach tourism, business and jobs.

**LBBJ:** How's business?

**Assadi:** Business is good. The restaurant business is, as I'm sure you've heard, tough. Food prices for the past year or two have gone



Kamran Assadi, left, and Amir Zee own Utopia restaurant, which they opened in 1999 at 445 E. 1st Street. The popular restaurant – marketed as a destination for “good food and fine art,” hosts six art shows a year and last month hosted a successful comedy night. On July 21, it is hosting a summer wine tasting dinner. For more information, call 562/432-6888. (Photograph by the Business Journal’s Thomas McConville)

up drastically, depending on the item. But, we are blessed with friends and others who live in the neighborhood who like us, so we do have a base. . . . We still have room to grow, but I’m happy with the way things are.

**LBBJ:** Would you consider Utopia to be “green” or a “sustainable restaurant”?

**Assadi:** We would like to think so. We started eliminating plastic bags a couple of years ago. I’m in support of the ordinance banning plastic bags. It’s definitely more expensive for us. We don’t use Styrofoam. We stopped using that a while ago. And we do recycle to the best of our ability. I hate plastic bags.

**LBBJ:** We noticed you’ve started having comedy nights at the restaurant. Are you trying different ways to market Utopia?

**Assadi:** It’s somewhat experimental for us. A friend of ours approached us, a comedian, and she has friends looking for a venue. We are receptive to new, fresh ideas, so we decided to give it a shot. The first one was very successful. It was better than what we expected. We are doing another one in July and we’ll see how it goes. If people are receptive, we may continue it on a regular basis. With marketing, we do print advertising, direct mail occasionally, but we are focusing on e-mail. We do social media like any other place, but our best form of advertising is word of mouth.

**LBBJ:** Since you’ve been in Long Beach for more than 10 years, do you consider yourself one of the pioneers of the East Village Arts District?

**Assadi:** It kind of goes back to whether this is an arts district. Going back, I said the concept was there, but whether we have a true arts district is open to interpretation. But, yes, I think we’ve been here longer than any other business. We’ve been here day in and day out, and, up to two years ago, seven days a week. Now we are closed on Sunday. So we have put more hours into this area than any other business.

I would like to think we are one of the oldest businesses in the area and a cornerstone of this district. It’s a very unique district. It has flair. It has its own identity comprised of small, individualized shops and boutiques. There is no big business here. It’s all local, community driven. It definitely has more character than a lot of other places. It’s a wonderful area, and we are very happy to be here.

**LBBJ:** Are you pleased with the progress of the East Village? If not, why?

**Assadi:** Yes and no. The place is 10 times better than what it was. It’s a night and day comparison. But has it reached its potential? No. Does it

have potential? Of course. Are we on the right track to make it a real destination? I don’t know.

**LBBJ:** What would you recommend?

**Assadi:** As I said, the area was designated and promoted as an arts district. A lot of businesses, a lot of individuals and a lot of groups really tried to make that happen – my business partner and myself included. But when things are not happening, we need to reevaluate our approach . . . to think outside the box. This area is very unique. It’s one block to the beach, a beautiful neighborhood, old buildings – but we need to actually think outside the box.

To me, something that we need to do is create connectivity. Long Beach is, and especially downtown, full of so many neigh-

borhoods in the area. Connectivity can be useful for all neighborhoods. We can connect this area to Pine Avenue, and Pine Avenue to 4th Street and, from there, to the waterfront, instead of having these isolated pockets. . . .

What is happening in Bixby Knolls with the Expo Building as an anchor is, that area is much more vibrant as far as arts and activity. It's amazing what one anchor can do, but we don't have an anchor here. We have the small little galleries that come in, and after a year or two they, unfortunately, have to close and leave. Perhaps our approach is not the right approach.

**LBBJ:** Do you and the other businesses in the East Village feel you have had enough support promoting business in Downtown Long Beach?

**Assadi:** I think we do, not only from the businesses but also from the other entities such as the DLBA [Downtown Long Beach Associates]. We have a good relationship with the organization and I actually commend what they are trying to do. They have several programs, such as the "Clean and Safe" program. I had customers here on my patio stunned to see people sweeping the sidewalk and picking up cigarette butts. They provide information as well, so yes, the DLBA does a good job promoting the downtown as one destination. As far as the city [of Long Beach], they can do more, but I think there's plenty of support.

**LBBJ:** Since day one, you've had art hanging in the restaurant. Why are you involved in art?

**Assadi:** I am an artist by trade. People do what they know, and when I started into [the restaurant business], I knew about arts. I had contacts through my friends and at the university, so it was a natural fit. I am involved with the Arts Council [for Long Beach] as well, and have been for the past 10 years. I've sat on their advisory board for public art for several years, and I've been involved as a boardmember and am the president at this time.

It makes sense to me [to be involved in the arts]. For instance, [Utopia] hosts salons, for lack of a better word. What we do is we invite arts organizations to come in and we try to connect them with the neighborhood, have them to talk about their programs and plans. It's sort of like glue to connect the arts organizations with constituents. People actually don't know about these important organizations in town. Long Beach Opera is a great organization and internationally known. We had an event for Long Beach Opera a couple of months ago, and some of our guests didn't know that we have an opera. It's a small step, and it's good for us, too, in terms of quality clientele who think the same as we do; they care about arts and culture as an economic engine. We really believe in it. To me, arts and culture are extremely important to revitalize the community. Unfortunately, in Long Beach, I don't think we actually utilize what we have as much as we should.

**LBBJ:** So, do you feel the city is doing enough to promote arts?

**Assadi:** I understand the strains and difficulties, especially in the last few years, of budget cuts and what the city is trying to do balancing the budget. But what I have been trying to convey is that shouldn't affect the quality of life – taking the money away from arts and culture, and dedicating it to the so-called core services. It might remedy the problem in the short run, but in the long run it has devastating effect for the city. If an arts organization, small or large, moves or closes their door, they're irreplaceable.

The arts council released a document, which was the recommendation to form a blue ribbon committee . . . Let me backtrack here. The mayor appointed a group of people to look for different sources of funding for the arts so the city could take the funding out of the general fund to be used for other sources. We do have a recommendation from the blue ribbon committee, which is being circulated as of right now. I think there are some recommendations

that are definitely worthy of contemplation. It's a great opportunity right now to make this happen. I know this sounds overly optimistic because this is not the first time the city has put together a committee. I think this is the third time and, unfortunately, nothing really came out of it [before]. But I think we have a golden opportunity to take these recommendations and study them and find some sort of sustainable funding for the arts. That way, we can increase the amount of money that is spent per capita.

Right now, we are very low compared to other cities with the same population. We don't spend as much money on arts and culture, and we should increase that. It will be good for the city. It would actually set up Long Beach as an arts-friendly city and it will create jobs. Right now, we don't have a major industry in the city. Why not come up with the city as a magnet for arts-related jobs. But, to your question, has the city spent enough money on the arts? No. It could be a lot more.

**LBBJ:** As a small business owner, do you feel the city has done a good job promoting Long Beach to residents and visitors?

**Assadi:** The CVB [Long Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau] is doing a great job to promote the city as a destination. And the DLBA also, they're doing a great job. I don't know if the city is, though. The CVB is pretty much in charge of promoting the city. But, I guess it goes back to what are we promoting? There is no focal point. . . . Arts and culture should play a bigger role in promoting the city. What do you do when you go to a different city? You want to learn about the culture. Yes, obviously people go and eat, but you don't travel to a city to go to a bar. You travel to a city to go see arts, to see museums, you see an opera, you see a play and have an experience. The food and drinks and everything come with it. But I don't think we're doing that here in Long Beach. We are not using our asset the way we should to attract more visitors to the city.

**LBBJ:** Is there anything else you would like to add?

**Assadi:** I love this city. I really do. I have lived most of my life in Long Beach, and this is my home. People take things for granted, but for someone who came from another country, settled and went to school, started a business, I love this city. I see it's potential. It just bothers me that things are not happening the way they should. But, I'm not planning to go anywhere. I'll keep saying what I'm saying. I'm an optimist by nature, and I think this is our time. This is our opportunity. I think this city council is capable of making things happen. We have younger councilmembers. They're technology-savvy, they're young, they're energetic and they like to think outside the box. They are starting something, and I cross my fingers that the blue ribbon committee report might be the salvation to sustainable funding for the arts. If that happens, it's a beginning that will have a snowball effect. ■