

# How Nico Hernandez Found Himself in the Kitchen

by Adam Joseph



From left: Judges Philippe Striffeler, Jay Marshall and Jerome Viel pose with Nico Hernandez, the first-place winner of the *Jeunes Chefs Rôtisseurs Nationaux* competition at Rancho Cielo (second from right).

When Rancho Cielo alumnus Nico Hernandez was announced as the first-place winner of the *Jeunes Chefs Rôtisseurs Nationaux* competition—a significant opportunity for young chefs to showcase their abilities—he broke down in tears.

“I just saw how much I had grown, and everyone was proud of me for what I did,” Hernandez says during his break at the Peninsula Café at Monterey Peninsula College’s Student Center. “It was something so different from when I worked at Taylor Farms and Tesla. You don’t get a pat on the back for doing something good. After being at Rancho with all of the teachers, Chef EJ [Jimenez] and Chef Efren [Diaz], who gave me the confidence to put the food out that I do and the confidence to know it’s going to be good, it makes me feel even better when I see someone take their first bite, and I can see their enjoyment.”

The statement feels simple until you consider what it suggests: that pride must be learned. It develops over time, shaped by repetition, encouragement, and the ability to see your own progress.

## Path to Victory

To secure that first win, Hernandez had to work within a strict framework: three hours, three courses and 30 minutes to study a mystery basket and plan. *Mise en place* had to be written out in advance. A secret ingredient—assigned and unchangeable—had to be incorporated into the main dish. At least half the basket contents needed to be used, whether it made sense at first glance or not.

The competition, organized by the *Chaîne des Rôtisseurs*, blends tradition with pressure. With participation spanning 75 countries, it demands precision, discipline and an understanding of fine dining that goes

beyond the plate. It’s less about winning than about demonstrating control, knowing the rules well enough to work within them.

Hernandez’s assigned ingredient was bacon. He folded it into a sunchoke purée and a bacon-and-pecan praline sauce for a seared sablefish entrée, paired with spinach and mushroom chips. The first course—a sea scallop aguachile—was sharp and immediate. Dessert pushed further: a beignet with Earl Grey crème anglaise, chocolate ganache and macerated berries, a dish he had never made before.

That decision reflects a willingness to take risks, to attempt something unfamiliar with the understanding that failure, if it comes, is part of the process.

## The Criteria

Judging extended beyond taste. Sanitation, organization and even spelling on the menu were evaluated. Judges watched not only what competitors made but also how they worked. Hernandez performed strongly across all categories—something that would not have been true a year earlier.

Last year, only four months into his time at Rancho Cielo, the 24-year-old competed and fell short. His dishes—stuffed bell pepper, steak with asparagus, chocolate mousse—now feel elementary, the work of someone still learning.

“Everything I did was basic,” Hernandez admits. “From the rest of the time I was in culinary school to my graduation, then to the next competition, my growth was huge.

Rancho’s Drummond Culinary Center General Manager Wanda Straw describes it simply: “Nico cooks from the heart. I respect him so much because he trusts his instincts, and he’s always observant. He’s been so focused for the last year.”

His only mistake this time—leaving his knife bag on the table instead of storing it beneath—was minor. The kind of detail

that stands out only because everything else went right. He treats it as part of the process; something learned in time for what came next. Seattle.

### Cooking in Seattle

The Northwestern Division Finals at the Seattle Culinary Academy brought a new set of challenges. A new kitchen. New competitors. Hernandez had only flown once before and had never been to Seattle.

“I learned that I would be competing against three students from their own school in Seattle, who had worked in that kitchen before,” Hernandez explains. “I had no clue where anything was, so I visited the kitchen

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### “Nico cooks from the heart...”

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the day before and took pictures and went back to my hotel room and watched videos to see where all the pots, plates and pans were. The kitchen was huge—like three Pebble Beach kitchens all in one. But it was amazing

to see another type of kitchen and another group of kids who wanted to be there, learning and going into something they’re passionate about.”

Even in an unfamiliar space, he relied on preparation. Studying the kitchen in advance, trying to reduce uncertainty before the competition began.

“I felt like the outcast because it was their home field,” the Salinas native says. “They knew this kitchen and where everything was and had everything you can think of, like a blast chiller, which I used to make a granita.”

Still, he moved forward the only way he could: by cooking. His menu reflected both control and creativity, from citrus-iced crudo to seared hanger steak with kabocha purée and bacon-praline glaze, finishing with a dark chocolate and ginger ganache tart.

“My mentors EJ and Efen always tell me, ‘You’ll never know if your food’s good unless someone critiques it,’” Hernandez explains. “So, I just stuck with making comfort flavors for myself.”

He placed third. In context—a new city, an unfamiliar kitchen, experienced competitors—it reads less as a loss and



Over 600 feet above Seattle, Nico Hernandez observes the city from atop the iconic Space Needle.

more as progress. Since then, his direction has become clearer. He’s going to continue working at the café at Monterey Peninsula College alongside Chef Efen Diaz and expand his role beyond the line.

“It gives me more flexibility to work around everything,” Hernandez explains. “I’m not just on the line. I’m creating specials. I’m placing vendor orders. I’m putting away the orders when they get here. I’m learning how to cost out orders and everything else from being in the kitchen. Also, it gives me opportunities to be a mentor for everyone else in the kitchen.”

### Mentor in the Making

That final piece, mentorship, marks another shift. The point where learning turns outward. He plans to return to Seattle next year. This time, not as an outsider. He believes he can win. Straw believes it, too. “There’s a clarity he didn’t have before,” she says. “Something just clicked. It’s like watching a sensei in the kitchen.”

And maybe that is what this is really about. Not the competition, not even the food, but the moment when something internal becomes visible—when the work and the person doing it finally align.

Rancho Cielo’s 11th annual Veggie Box & BBQ Fundraiser happens August 24-28. For more information and veggie box & BBQ lunch sales, visit: [ranchocieloyc.org/VBB2026](http://ranchocieloyc.org/VBB2026). ☪



Rancho Cielo Drummond Culinary Academy alum Nico Hernandez competing in the Northwestern Division Finals at the Seattle Culinary Academy.