



RANCHO CIELO

Spring 2026



At the 2026 CRU, chefs from Roy's at Pebble Beach and the Sardine Factory to Cultiva and Woody's at the Airport worked side by side with Rancho Cielo's Drummond Culinary Academy students (pictured), presenting a strolling dinner that felt less like a menu and more like a map of possibility. PHOTO: BILL COX

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2026 Culinary Round Up And A Look Ahead

Our 16th annual Culinary Round Up (CRU) fundraiser—the Peninsula's premier food and wine event of the year—once again exceeded the previous year's attendance, size and funds raised. It was our largest yet, made even more special by the expanded live auction space at the Monterey Conference Center, graciously provided by the City of Monterey.

Events like Culinary Round Up don't succeed through momentum alone. They flourish because of the people involved. I want to sincerely thank the Portola Hotel & Spa; our generous sponsors, attendees and donors; our dedicated volunteers; the talented chefs, restaurants and wineries; our event committee; Rancho Cielo staff; and, most importantly, our culinary students. Each of you helps make this event meaningful and memorable.

That spirit of growth is also alive on our campus. The Drummond Culinary Academy is entering an exciting new era, with expansion plans underway, starting with the construction of a courtyard with permeable pavers (these provide an eco-friendly and sustainable surface that can also help recharge groundwater).

The current restaurant and learning lab will be redesigned with a more functional layout, upgraded industry-standard equipment and modern touches to the patio for year-round gatherings. Additionally, we are planning a new teaching kitchen that will allow us to introduce a specialized pastry pathway within a state-of-the-art facility.

The plan also includes an outdoor BBQ pavilion, offering a space where students can learn live-fire cooking while interacting with our gardens and farm-to-table programs, all amid the natural beauty of our campus.

Meanwhile, our Classic Car Restoration program continues to expand and provide students with unique educational opportunities, including learning and preparing a presentation about a historically significant, rare Rolls-Royce, which Board member Bill Hayward is entering into this year's Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance. That's not something you see every day!

We are not just expanding buildings; we are expanding opportunities.

Chris Devers, CEO



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Culinary Round Up Serves Up Hope and Opportunity

Rancho Cielo's 16th annual Culinary Round Up (CRU) at the Portola Hotel & Spa drew 900 guests for an evening that combined fine dining with a purpose. What began years ago as a modest showcase for Drummond Culinary Academy (DCA) students has grown into a major community event, this year supported by expanded space at the Monterey Conference Center.

More than 30 local restaurants, along with wineries, breweries and nearly 100 sponsors, worked together with students to craft a lively strolling dinner. Each dish—from pork belly bao to Moroccan lamb stew—showcased the discipline and skill students are developing, both in the kitchen and in their lives.



From top left: This year's student speaker Efrain Villa-Valdez; DCA students prepped, plated, served and learned from Monterey County's best chefs, including The Meatery's Chef Todd Fisher (pictured bottom right, second from the right).

PHOTOS: TIFFANY VELASQUEZ-WALKER



Chef Bert Cutino, a longtime supporter, highlighted the event's deeper purpose: creating opportunities for students who might not have them otherwise. That mission goes beyond culinary arts to include programs like Classic Car Restoration, launched in 2023, which aims to fill a growing skills gap in a changing workforce.

The evening's most impactful moment came from student speaker Efrain Villa-Valdez, who shared his journey from a childhood filled with instability and homelessness to a future driven by purpose. Through Rancho Cielo, he gained structure, confidence and hope. Now employed at Cutino's Sardine Factory and looking ahead, he described a life no longer defined by survival but by possibility.

CRU is more than just a fundraiser—it's a living example of transformation, where community support and active training work together to change lives, one student at a time.

BY THE NUMBERS

\$638,037

Raised

900

Attendees

90

Sponsors

31

Restaurants

18

Wineries/Breweries/Libations

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Ranch News

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Joining Together for Big Ideas

More than **325** individual donations, totaling over **\$381,000**, will help continue to fund **100%** of students' academic and vocational education, preparing them for higher education and full-time employment.

The key to a good life is making an impact, big or small.



Nico Hernandez Rises to Culinary Excellence

At the 2026 Jeunes Chefs Rôtisseurs Nationaux at Rancho Cielo, Drummond Culinary Academy alumnus Nico Hernandez faced two tough opponents with only three hours to prepare a three-course meal using a mystery basket of ingredients. He crafted a daring menu: scallop aguachile, seared sablefish with sunchoke purée and bacon-pecan praline, and a beignet dessert with Earl Grey crème anglaise—despite never having made beignets before. Judges assessed not just taste, but also technique, organization and sanitation, and Hernandez excelled in all areas.

“It’s like watching a sensei in the kitchen,” DCA GM Wanda Straw says.

His victory marked a significant improvement from the previous year, when his performance was solid but straightforward. His creativity and confidence have grown.

That progress carried into the regional finals in Seattle, where he finished third despite competing in an unfamiliar kitchen against advanced students. The experience encouraged him to adapt quickly.

After graduating from DCA in 2025, Hernandez chose Monterey Peninsula College’s student cafe over the fine dining of Bernardus, gaining experience in menu creation, ordering and mentoring others. Focused and fearless, he now plans to return to Seattle—this time aiming for first place, with mentors confident he’s ready to win it all. “[DCA’s] Chef EJ [Jimenez] and Chef Efren [Diaz] gave me the confidence to know that the food I put out is going to be good,” Hernandez says.



Nico Hernandez during the Northwestern Division Finals in Seattle, March 7, at the Seattle Culinary Academy, with one of the judge’s watching his every move.



SCAN TO READ MORE AND
VIEW MORE PHOTOS

Rancho Cielo’s Ranch Cast is Teaching the Art of Conversation

The first thing you notice about Michael Jacobi isn’t his resume—though it’s extensive—nor the voice shaped by decades behind a microphone. It’s how carefully he listens, picking up on small cues and building from them. That instinct defines both his career and his work today.

A lifelong broadcaster, Jacobi has spent more than 50 years in radio and television, earning recognition as an award-winning journalist and respected educator. He has taught performance and personal branding to aspiring and experienced broadcasters alike. Now, on a high school campus in Salinas, he’s channeling that expertise into something more personal: helping students find their own voices.

Last fall, Jacobi launched Ranch Cast, a weekly podcast produced through Rancho Cielo’s After School Program. For him, the move into podcasting felt natural—an evolution of storytelling and a chance to give back. But the focus isn’t just on producing content. It’s on teaching communication at its core.

“We teach the art of conversation, the art of interviewing and most importantly, the art of listening,” Jacobi explains.

In a world filled with distractions, that kind of focus is rare. Students learn to stay present, anticipate questions and follow conversations as they unfold.

The skills extend far beyond the microphone. As students gain confidence, they become more engaged in classrooms, interviews and everyday interactions. Hesitation gives way to curiosity, and sometimes, breakthrough moments emerge.

Jacobi recalls one such instance during a podcast episode featuring Chef Estevan Jimenez and his student, Kadden Bennett. Afterward, Jimenez shared that he had never heard Kadden speak so openly. For Jacobi, those moments are the true reward.

At Rancho Cielo, Ranch Cast is more than a podcast—it’s a platform for confidence, connection and the power of being heard. Ranch Cast is just one part of Rancho Cielo’s After School Program, which offers tutoring, career support, enrichment activities and emotional guidance in a safe, structured environment. Since its expansion, students can explore subjects ranging from 3D printing to personal finance and access college courses through dual enrollment. Together, these experiences create more than academic progress; they build confidence, connection and direction. At Rancho Cielo, even something as unexpected as a podcast becomes a powerful tool. On a campus filled with untold stories, students are learning not just how to speak, but how to be heard.



From left: Garrett Beleu (Ranch Cast engineer), Michael Jacobi (Ranch Cast host), Rick Allen (Def Leppard drummer and Raven Drum Foundation treasurer/co-founder), Lauren Monroe (Raven Drum Foundation president/co-founder) and Salinas Chief of Police Carlos Acosta.

Student Spotlight: Marlene Ysarraraz

Sixteen-year-old Marlene Ysarraraz, a junior in the Classic Car Restoration program, comes from a family already connected to Rancho Cielo—her brother, Jesus, graduated from the Welding & Fabrication program in 2025.

About a year ago, Marlene decided to leave her traditional public high school in search of something more engaging. She wanted “hands-on learning, instead of just book-study.”

“The hallways at [my previous high school] were always so crowded,” she says. “I didn’t like going to school.”

Now, she finds a very different atmosphere. Sitting on a bench outside the Ted Taylor Vocational Center, she pauses in the sun, taking in the quiet—broken only by birds chirping in the distance.

Although she admits she hasn’t always been a “car person,” Marlene’s curiosity was sparked while browsing the Rancho Cielo website. The Auto & Diesel Repair program—especially Classic Car Restoration—caught her attention. That interest quickly grew into something more meaningful after her first hands-on project: painting a car hood.

“I saw [my work] in the sunlight, and I was so proud of myself,” Marlene glows.

She describes the process with the precision of an artist, carefully explaining techniques such as controlling the spray gun speed and maintaining the proper distance to avoid drips—skills that transform simple paint into a polished finish.

Outside of school, Marlene stays just as busy caring for her pets: her bearded dragon, Stoney; her bunny, Flash; and her French Bulldog, Chapel. While she once considered a future in veterinary medicine, her interests have recently shifted.

“I’m fascinated with planes, especially fighter jets,” she says.

That fascination has opened the door to a new possibility—joining the U.S. Air Force. At the same time, her growing passion for cars continues to shape her ambitions. “I might open my own [body] shop in Salinas,” Ysarraraz adds.



Classic Car Restoration Instructor Roy Sosa says student Marlene Ysarraraz’s (above) attention to detail helps ensure her paint jobs are flawless. PHOTO: ADAM JOSEPH



Drummond Culinary Academy Alum Adrian Perez visits with one of his mentors, Rancho Cielo DCA Head Chef/Instructor EJ Jimenez. PHOTO: ADAM JOSEPH

Alumni Spotlight: Adrian Perez

Before finding his own path, Adrian Perez was working six days a week at Woody’s Del Mesa in Carmel Valley under Chef Tim Wood. The recent Drummond Culinary Academy graduate started as a prep cook and quickly earned a promotion to Garde-Manger, where he plated cold dishes. Within a few months, he advanced again—this time to the grill. At the same time, Perez was juggling multiple commitments. He worked part-time at Ellie’s and In-Shape, and on his one day off each week, he attended business classes at Hartnell College. The pace eventually caught up with him.

“I started to have major anxiety attacks,” Perez says. “And a lot of people around me were heavy drinkers and smoked a lot of weed, and I got caught up in it all.”

Barely 21 at the time, Perez realized he couldn’t sustain that lifestyle. He made the difficult decision to step away from the kitchen, parting ami-

cably with Chef Wood, and turned his focus inward. “I started going back to church, and my relationship with God started growing,” he says.

After nearly two years of nonstop work and study, he needed space to reset. He committed to sobriety and began working alongside his father, a masonry contractor.

“I needed to mature—not only as a chef, but as a man. It was a blessing,” Perez reflects. “I missed being in the kitchen.”

He often returns to a quote by renowned chef/restaurateur Marco Pierre White: “A laborer works with his hands, a craftsman works with his hands and brain, but an artist works with hands, brain, and heart.”

Now, with a clearer mind and renewed purpose, Perez is stepping back into the culinary world—this time on his own terms. He is launching a catering business that will feature both fine dining and “Muscle Bowls,” offering hearty, healthy and affordable meals. His approach blends everything he has learned along the way—from his time at Rancho Cielo to guidance from Monterey Peninsula College professor Amy Ferguson and Chef André Adam. This May, Perez will graduate from MPC with certificates in Bakery and Pastry Arts and Sustainable Culinary Arts. He plans to continue his education in Hospitality Management and eventually complete the business degree he began at Hartnell. “It feels like a full-circle moment,” he says. “I found my passion, but everything came too fast. I didn’t have the life skills or stress management to handle it. I had to fall in order to rise again.”

Rancho Cielo Welcomes New Board Members

Introducing Rancho Cielo's four new board members marks an exciting chapter in the organization's leadership, experience and community commitment.

Mark Borman brings deep agricultural roots and industry leadership to the board. Raised on a farm in California's Central Valley, he earned a degree in

International Agriculture from the University of California, Davis. Since starting his career in Salinas' salad industry in 1995, Mark has built an impressive 26-year tenure with Taylor Farms. Most recently, he served as President of the Foodservice Division and has shown strong civic engagement through board service with the Boys & Girls Club of Monterey County and leadership as chairman of the Grower Shipper Association.

Tony Marandos brings over thirty years of financial expertise. As EVP and Regional President at Pinnacle Bank, he has built a strong foundation in commercial and private banking. A graduate of the Middlebury Institute of International Studies, Tony has actively supported local nonprofits, including serving in leadership roles with the Monterey/Salinas Jaycees, SCRAMP and Cal-Coastal. He currently serves as Treasurer of GoKids, Inc., as President of the Gavilan College Educational Foundation and on Rancho Cielo's Finance Committee.

Dale A. Meyer brings over 40 years of engineering and leadership experience. After selling his injection-molding business, he retired but remained passionate about expanding workforce training and education. His career includes key positions at Packaging Corporation of America and Crown Zellerbach, demonstrating a lifelong dedication to innovation and industry growth.

Sarasina Tuchen adds a global perspective shaped by 35 years in advanced aviation and transportation systems. Through leadership roles across the private sector and federal government, she has driven innovation and fostered public-private partnerships. An active philanthropist, she champions initiatives in education, sustainability and workforce development.

Together, these four leaders strengthen Rancho Cielo's mission with expertise and a shared dedication to opportunity.



Rancho Cielo adds four new board members. From left: Mark Borman, Tony Marandos, Dale A. Meyer and Sarasina Tuchen.



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October 2



SCAN FOR UPCOMING EVENTS



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