

Rancho Cielo Hosts Annual Culinary Round Up

On Sunday, February 23, Rancho Cielo hosted its **15th Annual Culinary Round Up (CRU)** at the **Portola Hotel & Spa**. The event highlighted a collaboration between **Drummond Culinary Academy (DCA)** students and Monterey County’s most esteemed chefs from treasured local restaurants.

Thanks to the support of our community, volunteers, donors, constituents, 72 sponsors, 25 restaurants and 16 wineries/breweries/libations, 2025 marked Rancho Cielo’s largest and most successful CRU yet, with more than 760 attendees.

Since its inception in 2010, CRU has evolved into a one-of-a-kind event that brings guests, chefs and students together for a night of delicious food, drinks, raffles, and silent and live auctions.

Chefs from over two dozen restaurants—including **Lucia Restaurant and Bar, Roy’s at Pebble Beach, and the Sardine Factory**—worked side by side with Rancho Cielo students to present a “strolling dinner” featuring nearly two dozen delectable small plates for guests to savor. Each offering was both unique and flavorful, from shrimp and lobster meatballs with chorizo emulsion and jalapeño powder to ahi and salmon poke bowls with sushi rice and seaweed salad, not to mention an array of desserts, including truffles, cookies, individual miniature parfaits and more.

But this epicurean event is more than just gourmet eats, it’s a celebratory opportunity for the public to see Rancho Cielo’s vocational training in action, meet the students, hear their stories, and see the impact opportunities like these are making on their academic, professional and personal growth.

“The Culinary Round Up is special because it’s all about the students and building them up,” said Laura Nicola, DCA Dining Room Manager and Front-of-House Instructor. “[Students] get to see how important and supported they really are. Watching them interact with guests and work alongside talented local chefs is my favorite part. It is a great showcase of their dedication, hard work, and newfound self-confidence.”

Local celebrity chef, longtime Rancho Cielo supporter and co-chair of the Culinary Round Up committee Bert Cutino reflected on the event’s growth over the years.

- 1.) 18-year-old student *Catalina Perez* is on track to graduate this Spring.
- 2.) Chef *Efren Diaz Ortigoza* (middle) of Rancho Cielo’s Drummond Culinary Academy, along with students.
- 3.) *Emcee Dan Green* (KSBW Action News 8) introduced the talented Drummond Culinary Academy students.



“The key to the event is bringing our local professional chefs together with the young students from the Drummond Culinary Academy to execute the dishes being served,” Cutino said. “We always hope that the chefs get attached to the students and might hire them when they graduate. Since [CRU] began, that’s what we look forward to.” Eighteen-year-old DCA student Catalina “Cat” Perez delivered a moving speech to several hundred attendees, sharing her struggles before finding Rancho Cielo. She credited her baby daughter as the inspiration that helped her push through hardship. “Rancho Cielo has given me confidence and strength,” Cat said.

She was inspired in the culinary arts by her father, who cooked for her family in their challenging home situation (at one point while they all lived in a one-room garage) and yet always made everything “taste amazing” and with love.

Among other highlights of the evening’s program was a moving speech by Founder and Board Member Judge John Phillips, who talked about Rancho Cielo’s new RIDE (Rancho Invests in Driving Equity) Scholarship Program, encouraging guests to support this great initiative for the students. In addition to celebrating 15 years of CRU, the event kicked off Rancho Cielo’s 25th year of service to youth in our community. A special celebration will take place on campus on October 25 and will feature music, merriment and much more food and collaboration with area chefs, restaurants, wineries and breweries in support of our students and organization.



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