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Culinary School Gives Latinos a Taste of the Top

By Lee Gardner, The Chronicle of Higher Education



Photo Credit: Ben Sklar for The Chronicle of Higher Education

Priscilla Lee Sandoval had not expected to be where she is now, stripping tiny rosemary leaves from their stalks in the bustling kitchen of the Culinary Institute of America's San Antonio campus, a chef's toque on her head.

Ms. Sandoval graduated from high school in South Texas' Rio Grande Valley with plans to attend college to study photography and no plans to get married or start a family. A few years later she was the married mother of two sets of twin boys, living on a modest income and facing limited opportunities to pursue further education, much less a professional career "I thought, well, I'm going to be a housewife," she says.

But today she's preparing herbs for a spread of dishes from Spain as part of her second year at CIA, the most august culinary school in the United States. She is on course to be part of the first class to earn associate degrees from the four-year-old campus this April, thanks in part to a special scholarship program that was "baked into the design" of CIA San Antonio, says David P. Kellaway, its managing director.

The program is called El Sueño—in Spanish, "the dream." The term also applies to a larger mission at CIA San Antonio, including the campus's Latin-cuisines certificate program and educational directives designed to explore and spread understanding of the food traditions of Latin America. But the El Sueño scholarships stick closest to the growing popular resonance of

the term "dream" by assisting Latino students in getting a top culinary education, in spite of cultural resistance to leaving family and concerns about incurring debt. The hope is that more of the many Latinos who work in the food industry will see opportunities beyond the kitchen.

The scholarships are need-based and not limited to Latinos, but about 43 percent of CIA San Antonio's current enrollment of 115 students is Latino, many of them from lower-income backgrounds. The scholarships generally go to "more than half of incoming students," says April Goess, director of education at the campus. El Sueño scholarships often amount to 50 percent or more of the \$25,000 a year cost of attending CIA San Antonio, according to Mr. Kellaway.

Ms. Sandoval still has children to raise and bills to pay, but the tuition break she receives, plus a Pell Grant, a few smaller scholarships, and about \$14,000 in student loans annually are allowing her to learn the skills and amass the connections she believes will allow her to pursue her own dream of "changing the way schools feed young children," she says.

"I would not have been able to do this, not with two sets of twins," she says. The El Sueño scholarship "was essential to my decision to come here."

'Gateway to Latin America'

El Sueño, and the CIA campus in San Antonio itself, arose from conversations a decade ago between L. Timothy Ryan, CIA's president, and Christopher (Kit) Goldsbury, a San Antonio native who built a billion-dollar fortune popularizing salsa in North America through Pace Foods, his former company.

Mr. Ryan says that he and Mr. Goldsbury discussed the fact that restaurant kitchens in the United States were increasingly staffed by Latino workers; often they held the majority of "back of the house" positions. "But what we were seeing, mostly for a variety of socioeconomic reasons, is that these talented, hard-working people weren't rising through the ranks of the industry to positions of leadership or ownership," Mr. Ryan says.

Mr. Goldsbury, who now owns an investment company called Silver Ventures Inc., "really wanted to give back to the food industry, and really give back to that community of people and honor the culture" of Latin America, says Kenneth J. Halliday, chief executive of Silver Ventures, who spoke to *The Chronicle* on Mr. Goldsbury's behalf.

The discussions with Mr. Ryan eventually bore fruit for CIA in a \$35-million donation to establish and support a San Antonio campus. The new campus would offer the same classical culinary training as the CIA campuses in Hyde Park, N.Y., and Saint Helena, in California's Napa Valley, but its mission would also be guided by two key goals folded together under the rubric of El Sueño. "One was elevating Latin American cuisine, and two was giving opportunity, particularly to aspiring Latinos, as it relates to leadership in the kitchen," Mr. Halliday says.

The presence of a wealthy backer aside, San Antonio may have seemed to some like a curious choice for a CIA expansion, given its relatively low profile as a foodie town.

Talk to San Antonians, however, and you will hear a chorus of references to the city's status as "the gateway to Latin America." Located 150 miles north of the Mexican border, it is the seventh-largest city in the country, with 1.3 million residents, about 60 percent of them Latino. And one in eight San Antonians is employed in its booming tourism industry, including its restaurants.

Considering that the Hispanic population of the United States is growing rapidly, affecting the voting patterns of its electorate and the types of restaurants in its shopping centers, San Antonio starts to make more sense for a branch of the nation's premier culinary school.

As Mr. Halliday puts it, "If you look at the demographics of the region, the state, and the city, it really represents the demographics of tomorrow's America."

Cooking Close to Home

CIA San Antonio dispatches chefs to study and document traditional cuisines throughout Latin America for its Center for Foods of the Americas research arm, and it brings in renowned chefs for extended visits to demonstrate their Latin American specialties for students and visiting professionals. But its chief contribution to advancing Latin cuisine and Latino chefs may come from the simple fact that the campus is in San Antonio, not a thousand miles away in New York.

Johnny Hernandez, a CIA graduate and the owner of a mini-empire of restaurants and catering businesses around San Antonio, earned his associate degree in culinary arts at CIA's main campus in Hyde Park in the late 1980s, although he jokes that he nearly didn't make it out of the house.

"My mom was holding on to my ankle, crying," he says. "Hispanic culture's very close. It's a family unit, and you stay together. It's not normal for kids to go away to college. It's just not normal."

He went anyway, at the urging of his father, a former migrant worker who ran a Tex-Mex restaurant in San Antonio but found his professional horizons limited. "He was a gifted cook, I think, and a hard-working and honest person of great character and values," Mr. Hernandez says. "His lack of education is what kept him from excelling in his industry."

Though many things have changed in the intervening years, Diego Galicia confirms that some remain the same. "In Mexican culture, you're home till you're like 30," he says. Ms. Goess says that 87 percent of CIA San Antonio's students come from Texas. The in-state percentage at the California campus is 43 percent; at the main campus in New York, it's 23 percent.

Now 28, Mr. Galicia earned a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Texas at San Antonio and had planned to become a police officer, but he couldn't shake the love of cooking instilled in him by spending time in his family's kitchen. He enrolled in CIA San Antonio and finished its 30-week Latin-cuisine certificate program with the help of an El Sueño scholarship (he also took out student loans of \$16,000 per year).

Instead of making arrests, he now spends his days in the San Antonio test kitchen of Taco Cabana, a Southwestern restaurant chain. As one of the company's research-and-development chefs, he devises and tests new menu items, from carnitas tacos to flan, crafting recipes that must be delicious and easily replicable at each of Taco Cabana's 160 restaurants. He spends his vacations working free of charge in Michelin-rated kitchens in other cities, learning as much as he can to prepare himself for the fine-dining restaurant he wants to open one day.

His zeal for cooking and learning make his rising trajectory in the industry seem inevitable, but Mr. Galicia gives all the credit to the opportunity to pursue a world-class culinary education in his own backyard, and to the scholarship that made it affordable.

Attending the CIA "was unreachable before the scholarship—I didn't want to be in debt for a million years after I finished school," he says. "I don't think I would have done it without" El Sueño.

Hitting the Ground Running

The CIA's San Antonio campus is young but maturing quickly. After starting out with one kitchen and one classroom in 2008, it added a new, larger building nearby with expanded facilities in 2010. Both buildings sit near the heart of the Pearl, a booming new food-intensive development on the site of the old Pearl Brewery, owned and developed by Mr. Goldsbury's Silver Ventures.

The campus features a cafe, serving student-made breakfast and lunch, and its own fine-dining restaurant, called Nao, that serves as a showcase for visiting chefs and a proving ground for the associate-degree students. CIA San Antonio looks forward to opening a second associate-degree program, in baking and pastry arts, in August 2013.

Administrators say that the campus initially struggled to overcome mistaken perceptions that it taught only Mexican cuisine. In addition to its location and stated focus on Latin American food, some early advertising featured colorful chili peppers, Ms. Goess says, which added to the confusion. But now "our entry dates are full," she says, and the new baking program will raise enrollment to about 135 students.

Asked about the benefits of the El Sueño scholarships for the college, Ms. Goess responds, "Completion rate. A student that can alleviate some of that financial stress, it definitely helps." The school's current annual completion rate, which it must report to the state, is about 79 percent.

The Culinary Institute brand makes the college attractive, but the El Sueño scholarships draw the attention of students "who would have otherwise not considered us," Ms. Goess says.

At 38, Johnny Rodriguez is older than most of his classmates in the associate-degree program. (Their average age is 21.5.) He has also been through more than many. A diagnosis of colon cancer in 2010 made him "reprioritize my life into doing the things I love to do versus doing the things I felt I had to do," he says. One of the things the San Antonio native most loves to do is cook.

Holder of a master's degree in business administration from Texas State University, Mr. Rodriguez left behind a career in manufacturing and sales to hatch a plan for an ambitious series of businesses, progressing from catering to a restaurant and distillery. With his cancer now in remission, Mr. Rodriguez believes his business background, plus the culinary expertise CIA can offer, is the recipe he needs for success.

Staying in San Antonio, "close to family," he says, was attractive, but the El Sueño scholarship helped seal the deal for CIA over other options he was considering.

"It made it a little bit easier for me to keep my house, and not have to make as many sacrifices as I was prepared to make," he says. Instead of attending classes on a semester-by-semester basis, with "breaks to rebuild my finances," he says, the help from El Sueño means he's able to attend full time, in the classroom at 7 a.m. and in the kitchen until the last corner of floor is mopped in the early afternoon.

"At my age, the sooner I can get done and into the industry the better," Mr. Rodriguez says. "I have a tick-tock clock over my head. I've got to hit the ground running if I want to make an impact."

Additional Images embedded in the feature



Caption: Johnny Rodriguez, a San Antonio native and Culinary Institute student, prepares a sweet-and-sour rabbit dish. With a background in business, he plans to open his own restaurant.



Caption: After class, Priscilla Sandoval and two of her sons feed chickens and rabbits at their house. The scholarships she receives allow her to attend the Culinary Institute of America, even while raising two sets of twin boys.