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Photograph by George Sakkestad

Executive chef Simon Hernandez shows off the new 'bento a go-go' box for children at California Café, but his story goes beyond the kitchen.

There's a real success story in the California Café kitchen

By Suzanne Cristallo

Jaded Californians who think the American dream is outmoded should meet chef Simon Hernandez. He embodies all that it takes to achieve the dream: hard work, persistence, focus, self-education.

On this day, during a routine interview on the subject of his employer--the California Café in Los Gatos--a dream was fulfilled thanks to a phone call saying he had won a bid for his first home in the Santa Teresa area. Six previous attempts to purchase a home had failed. His grin after he hung up said it all.

The American dream of owning a home in California was now possible.

Hernandez is executive chef at the California Café bar and grill in Old Town. The interview was supposed to be about the café's new "bento a go-go" menu for children, but it quickly became apparent that this 34-year-old chef was the real story. His employer gets credit for playing an important supporting role.

Hernandez was 16 when he left home for the promise of something better in San Jose. A brother there steered him to the Kings Table, an all-you-can-eat restaurant, where he lied about his age to get a \$4.40 -an-hour job as dishwasher. "I was amazed," he recalls, "at the wasted food I scraped into the garbage." People piled it on, he says, because they simply didn't want to be bothered getting up for seconds. In the evening, after washing dishes all day, he worked in a 40-degree cold room cutting up chickens for a poultry company. Then, until 4 a.m., his third job was sweeping floors in the downtown San Jose train station.

In later years, a colleague commented that this job must have been "really terrible." His reply was, "But I was really good at it." For a year, he worked the three jobs, but only four hours of sleep at night took its toll. "I had two car accidents falling asleep at the wheel."

Limiting himself to two jobs, he moved on, eventually washing dishes for California Café during lunches in Los Gatos and dinners in a Palo Alto location. He learned English from the kitchen and from the street. In his spare time, he boxed as a featherweight in a local gym and returned to the kitchens to volunteer at various cooking stations. He simply wanted to learn how it was done. His boss took note.

"He told me I had more potential and put me to work in the pantry making salads for \$1.50 more an hour," he says. Next came the grill, making hamburgers and steaks, and another \$1.50 raise. The raises came every three months after that, along with more opportunities at other kitchen stations: saute cook, expeditor, sous chef (second in command) and finally lead cook.

"At every station I learned timing," he says. He also experienced cooking in many flavors: Asian, Mexican, Thai, French and Italian. Today, those styles and the use of seasonal foods permeate his menu. His signature is to please as broad a group of

diners as he can. "This company gives good chances to move up," he says, reflecting on his 18 years with California Café. "They give on the basis of skills, not formal education."

Today, Hernandez oversees the entire kitchen operation, producing up to 300 dinners each night. A bento a go-go menu is taped to his office wall. Across the bottom, a child has written: "Dear Cook, How do you cook so good? Love, Ashlyn."

California Café is located at 50 University Ave. in Old Town of Los Gatos. Lunch and dinner are served daily from 11:30 a.m. until 10 p.m. with brunch on Saturday and Sunday. Call 408.354.8118.

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