



# HACIENDA LA PUENTE

UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## Hacienda La Puente Unified Students Showcase Culinary Creativity at Annual Cookoff

**CITY OF INDUSTRY, CA** – Clad in personalized, royal blue aprons and chef hats, three Lassalette Elementary School Lunch Divas faced off against a trio of ambitious culinary teams from Mesa Robles Middle School in their quest for the tastiest entrées at the Hacienda La Puente Unified School District’s third annual Student Chef Recipe and Cookoff, held March 14 at the Willow Adult School culinary kitchen.

The four teams sliced, stirred, and sautéed their way through the TV cooking show-inspired competition, racing against the clock to diligently plate at least 25 servings. The Lunch Divas came out victorious with their birria tacos, winning over the taste buds of the judges.

“We are incredibly proud of our Lunch Divas for sharing their family recipe for the competition, which set them apart in the cookoff,” Lassalette Elementary Principal Lisa Mannino said. “Winning first place encourages our students to take pride in their cultural cuisine and inspires them to confidently embrace their heritage.”

In addition to having their dish included on HLPUSD’s 2025-26 lunch menu, each Lassalette student chef received a \$150 gift card. For the Mesa Robles teams, animal fries took second place and earned \$100 gift cards; udon stir fry placed third and secured \$75 gift cards; and a Philly cheesesteak sandwich with steak cut fries came in fourth for \$50 gift cards. The three Mesa Robles teams competed in an attempt to extend their school’s winning streak from the last two student cookoffs.

Before the young chefs started prepping and cooking during the competition, the students huddled in their teams to discuss cooking strategies, guided by their Nutrition Services coaches and supervisors. The recipe of the Lunch Divas, whose team members included fourth-graders Janessa Martinez, Aylin Pardo, and Scarlett Esparza, was influenced by their mothers and grandmothers, giving them an edge by carrying over traditional and generational flavors in their dish.

“We have a secret recipe,” said Martinez, who is familiar with navigating a kitchen since she started her culinary journey at three-years old by cooking omelets and scrambled eggs for her family. “We have some tricks up our sleeves.”

In true reality television fashion, a crowd of spectators, including Superintendent Dr. Alfonso Jiménez, Board of Education members, and family members, watched a livestream of the Student Chef Cookoff in an adjoining room and eagerly waited for their samples.

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But the only votes that mattered were from three judges, student Board representatives from William Workman, Los Altos, and La Puente high schools.

“I would like to see something that has uniqueness, something I haven’t tried before,” said Workman Board Representative senior Amanda Cabrera, who judged based on three criteria: overall appeal, appearance, and taste.

To enter the Student Cookoff, student teams submitted a recipe that contained one California agricultural product as a main ingredient. HLPUSD students voted for their favorite recipes in the first week of February, with the top four recipes entering the finals. The student teams were sponsored by their schools’ afterschool programs.

“I wanted to have a culinary event that was unique to Hacienda La Puente Unified and fully driven by students,” HLPUSD Director of Nutrition Services Celeste Calubaquib said. “From developing the recipes to the judging, the entire process is student-led. This event gives them a platform to share their creation and ideas, and ensures we listen to and apply their input.”

Calubaquib brought the Student Chef Cookoff to life with the goal of expanding lunch menus by adding items that were created and approved by students. Previous winners included a baked potato and carne asada fries. Any changes made to the student recipes are to ensure they comply with Child Nutrition Program standards.

“The Student Chef Cookoff offers a unique opportunity to immerse students in our Nutrition Services programs and fosters hands-on learning opportunities that nurture creativity and collaboration,” said Jiménez. “It is inspiring seeing elementary and middle school students work together in a culinary kitchen using applicable skills they can take into high school and beyond. Congratulations to all the culinary winners for their exceptional achievements.”

## PHOTO CAPTIONS

**STUDENTCHEFCOOKOFF1:** Lassalette Elementary School’s Lunch Divas culinary team, posing with their family and HLPUSD Superintendent Dr. Alfonso Jiménez (right), won the grand prize of Hacienda La Puente Unified’s third annual Student Cookoff for their recipe of birria tacos, which will be included in the District’s lunch menu during the 2025-26 school year.

**STUDENTCHEFCOOKOFF2:** Lassalette Elementary School’s Lunch Divas culinary team examines their ingredients during Hacienda La Puente Unified’s third annual Student Cookoff, which invites student teams to create and prepare lunch entrees for a panel of student judges.

**STUDENTCHEFCOOKOFF3:** A Mesa Robles Middle School culinary team double-checks its supplies during Hacienda La Puente Unified’s third annual Student Chef Cookoff. The annual event invites HLPUSD students to create a recipe for a lunch entrée, with the top-four teams earning gift cards.

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