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San Dimas High School Culinary Team Makes History as 2025 ProStart National Champions

SAN DIMAS/LA VERNE – The San Dimas High School ProStart culinary team saw their long nights of prepping and months of hard work creating a world-class menu pay off in spectacular fashion as the five-member team was crowned the 2025 National ProStart Invitational champion, capping off the culinary program’s most successful year ever, and making District history in the process.

San Dimas student chefs Kaila Khoury, Emma Johns, Emily Robertson, Kyle Yamate, and Renata Marcillo captured Bonita Unified’s first national championship, a goal that husband-and-wife duo Nick and Laurie Brandler, ProStart instructors at San Dimas and Bonita high schools, respectively, established when they first started bringing their student chefs to competition more than a decade ago.

“This is a dream come true. Laurie and I are so proud of our students. They are a part of our family,” Nick Brandler said. “Team captain Kaila Khoury and I have been discussing the menu since last summer. The dedication of this team is incredible. They put in the hours, they applied all their technical and creative skills, and they came together beautifully as a team. To experience them win it all is a moment we will always cherish.”

Representing ProStart programs across the state as Team California, San Dimas’ emerging culinary savants dazzled the ProStart judges with their menu of Chilean sea bass appetizer, lamb strip loin with truffle pomme puree entrée, and coconut mousse encased in a tempered chocolate shell dessert.

“In past years we’ve concentrated a lot on appearance and plating the food,” Brandler said. “This is a critical step but the most points awarded in the competition are for taste, so this year we focused more on flavor, making the dishes taste as good as they could possibly get, and it paid off.”

San Dimas triumphed despite a series of scheduling mishaps and equipment malfunctions that threatened to sink their chances before they even had an opportunity to start cooking. Led by Khoury, the San Dimas team managed to keep their cool, even as their stovetop burners failed to ignite, forcing the team to improvise after losing precious minutes waiting for replacement equipment.

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"I am so proud of what we have accomplished; it's been a long journey," Khoury said. "We overcame an early disadvantage by believing in ourselves and by improvising. We were very confident in our menu but we also knew what our competitors were doing and it was all amazing, so going into the awards ceremony, we were just hoping to be in the top five."

It was the award ceremony that provided the most drama for Team California, with the young chefs nervously awaiting each announcement and, when other states were called up to the podium, feeling more certain this was not their year – until National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation CEO Michelle Korsmo and president Rob Gifford announced the winner, precipitating a wild celebration with shouts, hugs, and tears.

"We went up to the stage and I think we all blacked out," Khoury said. "We have to go back and look at the video because no one remembers what happened after we were announced as winners. I just know we were in the winner's circle. It was unreal."

This was the third year in a row that a Bonita Unified ProStart team has represented California in the national competition. Bonita High School's ProStart culinary team went to Nationals in 2024, finishing in the top 10, while San Dimas' ProStart management team went to Nationals in 2023, taking third place.

"What Nick and Laurie Brandler have done with the ProStart culinary program at Bonita Unified is nothing short of incredible. The training and encouragement our students are receiving in this program have turned them into more than chefs, they are also scholars and champions," Bonita Unified Superintendent Matt Wien said. "Congratulations to the San Dimas ProStart culinary team and the Bonita Unified program for their hard work and dedication."

PHOTOS:

BUSD_SANDIMASPROSTART1: Flanked by ProStart teachers Nick and Laurie Brandler, San Dimas High School's culinary team celebrates their first-place win at the 2025 National ProStart Invitational.

BUSD_SANDIMASPROSTART2: San Dimas High School senior Kaila Khoury plates an entrée in the final seconds of the 2025 National ProStart Invitational as supporters cheer her on.

BUSD_SANDIMASPROSTART3: Representing ProStart programs across the state as Team California, San Dimas High School's emerging culinary savants dazzled ProStart National Invitational judges, being crowned the 2025 national ProStart champions for the first time in school history. From left to right: junior Kyle Yamate, seniors Renata Marcillo, Emma Johns, captain Kaily Khoury, and Emily Roberston.

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