

# These Sherman Oaks restaurant owners started a training kitchen to inspire the next generation

Restaurateurs Emily and Tom Kaplan want to give the next generation the confidence to succeed.

So they've cooked up a culinary education program in partnership with El Nido Family Centers.

Over the summer, the Sherman Oaks couple, who co-own three Hugo's restaurants and two taco stands, celebrated the opening of a training kitchen in what had been a classroom at El Nido FamilySource Center in Pacoima.



Tom and Emily Kaplan, co-owners of Hugo's Restaurants, talk about the culinary training kitchen in the Pacoima El Nido Family Center for vulnerable and at-risk youth and parents, Thursday, Sept. 20, 2018. (Photo by Hans Gutknecht, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)



Before construction, the space that now occupies El Nido's training kitchen was a classroom space. (Courtesy of El Nido)



Budding young chefs learn to cook healthy meals in El Nido's new culinary training kitchen. (Courtesy of El Nido)



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The after-school classes, free to underserved youth enrolled in El Nido's programs and based on income, train budding young chefs on everything from knife skills to how to prepare mostly plant-based meals on a budget while mastering culinary arts, food safety and sanitation, and job skills.

"These kids are interested and curious and want to learn," Emily Kaplan said. "And they are going to be so much better prepared to walk in for a job interview."

The new program is one of a handful across Southern California that give underserved youth a chance through culinary training and mentorship, including [Smooth Transition](#), Hatch CulinaryLab in Orange County, and L.A. Kitchen in Los Angeles as well as Homeboy Industries.

For the Kaplans, the latter program, founded by Father Greg Boyle, was their biggest inspiration.

"My husband and I have been following them for many years," said Emily Kaplan. "When they first opened Homegirl Cafe, we were there. In my eyes, Father Boyle is a total saint."

Like Homeboy Industries, El Nido hopes to start small and then grow and expand.

Students catered El Nido Family Centers' Garden Gala in Beverly Hills during which the Kaplans were presented with the 2018 Visionary Award for creating the training kitchen on Saturday, Sept. 22. The menu included cauliflower tacos, chicken tostadas, and ceviche.

The Kaplans, including their son and daughter, came to El Nido as volunteers more than 6 years ago. They spearheaded the installation of a community garden and provided expertise in the areas of hospitality and beyond.

But Tom Kaplan said the idea for the kitchen started with El Nido's vision of having a food truck that would serve as a job preparation program.

"You couldn't train enough people in a food truck so that's when El Nido asked us, 'Well, what about doing a kitchen somewhere?' And then they got this property," he said. "We thought, 'Well, what about right here? We have enough room. This is bigger than our taco stands.'"

Next on the horizon is turning the training kitchen into an open cafe, complete with a barista bar, for the community.

But Tom Kaplan said "our goal isn't to filter kids into the restaurant business, but really so that if they go off to college they can get a job easily.

"And if they don't want to go to college, they can see that we've created something out of nothing and that they can do the same," he said. "Maybe they want to be entrepreneurs right out of high school. I think it's a really good microclimate for education and skills."