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She's the first deaf student at her culinary school. And her dream is to be 'Top Chef'



She wants to be the first deaf 'Top Chef' 3:02



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Joselyn Escobar stands over a pork loin in a searing hot pan, her attention divided.

"When the bottom has color, do exactly this," her chef instructor at Miami Dade College's Miami Culinary Institute, Bernardo Espinel, says.

Her eyes dart between the loin she is pan-basting with sizzling oil and *jus*, to her instructor on her right and the interpreter on her left who is translating the chef's instructions into American Sign Language.

Escobar whips her head left, right and center, all the while spooning pan-popping juice over the meat.

"Hot, behind! Hot, behind!"

Another culinary student at Miami Culinary Institute passes behind the trio with a sizzling pan she slips into an oven blasting heat just to Escobar's left. Her interpreter, Joe Riley, gently rests his hand on Escobar's shoulder to let her know not to back up.

Escobar, 22, is the Miami Culinary Institute's first deaf student. She, like many of her classmates, is in a working kitchen for the first time. And she faces a unique set of challenges as she hopes to become a chef.

"I want to be the first deaf 'Top Chef,' " Escobar said. "I want to try to be an inspiring chef."

Staff members at Miami Dade College's culinary program are working to make that happen. On any given day, Escobar has access to two interpreters who switch off every 20 minutes to an hour to turn a teacher's instructions into signs Escobar can understand.

In classroom settings, that means interpreters finger-spelling a host of new vocabulary and phrases, from French terms to cooking techniques, into sign language. She takes copious notes and fills page after page of loose leaf with instructions and recipes in pencil that she can work on and edit.

But it is here, in the teaching kitchen on the sixth floor of the culinary school in downtown Miami, where Escobar is learning the greatest lessons: what it will take to make her career come to fruition.



Four groups of four students in their white chef's coats huddle in separate sections of an ice-box-cold kitchen where, on this day, Escobar and the others begin to learn to cook meat. They disagree on who will chop which vegetables for side dishes.

"We've got to make a decision together, guys," Escobar signs as one of her two translators, Brenda Adkinson, vocalizes for her group. "Let's have a plan."

One of her kitchen classmates makes a salty joke, and Adkinson translates down to the four-letter word.

"If other students hear some cursing, why shouldn't she hear it?" Adkinson said. "I want her to have the same experience."

Escobar begins chopping vegetables then turns to ask team member Brian, "Can you show me what you mean by a rough cut?" She watches him chop several carrots and leans down so she can see his face and look at his lips as he tells her to cut the vegetables into larger, one-inch pieces.

"It's cool to work with her because she's teaching us some signs and she's fun. Has a good sense of humor," said Brian, who preferred not to give his last name.

She leans in to begin cutting onions. Her other team member, Janise Guyot-Cabada, taps her on the shoulder. She makes a chopping motion with her right hand, as if holding it over an onion in her left and says, "a little smaller." She uses the ASL sign for small, a bit she picked up since she also, by coincidence, has slight hearing loss.

Escobar dices the onions smaller and stops for a moment to wipe her eyes when they begin to sting.

"Chef says we just have to get used to it. There's no tip," Escobar signs.

She looks comfortable, despite this being only her third month in a working kitchen. The way she slips behind and between the other students and professors, she is beginning to pick up an intuition that chefs and their staff develop.

"She's a really good student, really committed," instructor Espinel said. "She prepares for class, does her homework. She wants to learn more than the material. That's the sign of a good student."

So much in a kitchen is nonverbal. Watching Brian chop. Learning to tie a pork loin with butcher's twine alongside Espinel. Squeezing against a wall when someone with a smoke-billowing pan hurries through the four-foot-wide walkways around the stove.

This is not by accident. She may be new to a kitchen. But Escobar has been learning to navigate her world deaf since the day she was born.

EARLY LIFE IN COLOMBIA

Cleiver Escobar returned to his family's home in Cali, Colombia, one afternoon and could hear the television blaring from the driveway. Inside, his father, Sigifredo, sat next to the television with Cleiver's 13-month-old daughter, Joselyn.

"I raised the volume and she wouldn't even move her eyes," Sigifredo told his son. "I don't think she can hear anything."

It was true. Doctors determined Joselyn had no hearing in her right ear and the ability to pick up only loud noises with her left. At 4, she underwent surgery to receive a cochlear implant that enabled her to hear.

But when Cleiver and his parents came to the United States with Joselyn when she was 6, he was told she could not be mainstreamed even with the cochlear implant because she couldn't speak English, Cleiver Escobar said.

She was placed in a deaf program where she began learning American Sign Language, even though she could hear. Her father was heartbroken that she would have to go from oral learning to visual learning. Throughout her schooling, she would bounce between mainstream classroom learning and deaf schooling.

In between cleaning offices at night and going to school during the day, he learned basic sign language. He and his daughter communicated through a mix of English, Spanish and ASL, she sometimes reading his lips. At 18, she asked that her cochlear implant be turned off because she says the noise was disorienting.

Joselyn preferred to face the world deaf.

She watched as her father balanced life in this new country, eventually owning an office cleaning company while completing a master's degree in hospitality.

"I tell her, 'Even though we clean offices, we want to do better. We have to try to do better for ourselves,' " her father said.

He saw that same spirit in his daughter. He remembers waking up one night at 1 a.m. to find her studying her recipes.

"I see a real passion in her. Nothing holds her back," he said. "She's going to be something great."

It was her grandmother, Elvia, who taught Joselyn to cook the basics: rice, meat, beans. Elvia made a Colombian soup nearly every day. Joselyn would complain, "Ay, *mami*, soup, again?"

But now, it's Joselyn sharing her kitchen skills. She brings home leftovers from the dishes she makes at school, even a sweet and sour Chinese soup and a lip-smacking French onion soup that had Elvia teasing her, "What, Joseyln, soup again?"

"The first time I tasted [French onion soup], I was spoiled forever," Joselyn said. "It inspires you to want to cook more."

"Keep bringing things home!" Elvia told her.

"Do you really like it? You *sure* you like it?" she asked her father.

"Yes, yes, I really do!" he told her.

"She is so smart, so quick," he said. "She's more capable than a lot of people I know who don't have a disability. I'll probably end up working for her one day."

For her part, Joselyn could cook pasta every day.

"It's the best. I love pasta, but I need to stop eating pasta," she says, patting her stomach. "I could eat pasta all the time. I could eat it right now."

But it's one thing to work at a stove at home by yourself. In a professional kitchen, there are often too many people in too tight a space. There are hot pans and hot stoves and bodies moving quickly.

And most kitchens aren't designed with the deaf in mind.

CHALLENGES IN THE KITCHEN

Back in the culinary kitchen, she is standing between another student and the chef at the stove. There is no place for her translator to stand. Joselyn watches the chef's face and his hands.

"It's not a deaf-friendly space," Adkinson said.

But these are the challenges she's going to have to overcome in a professional kitchen. Watching to learn by example. Joselyn doesn't miss a beat or an instruction. Yet some will judge her for her deafness before they ever seen her work.

"It'll happen. It'll happen a lot. It'll happen 100 times if she applies to 120 places," said Adkinson, who also works as a legal translator in court and as a deaf advocate. "They're sometimes not given the opportunity to shine."

That's why the focus on those with disabilities is entrepreneurship: "Don't wait for anybody to give you a job. That's the new movement in deaf education," Adkinson said.

Escobar is way ahead of her. She is already talking about owning a food truck one day, so she can be her own boss and travel the United States like in her favorite movie, "Chef," which was filmed in Miami.

But that's still a long way away from this culinary school kitchen, where now Escobar has moved on to scalloped potatoes.

"I don't want to see this," her instructor, Espinel, says as he layers the scalloped potatoes unevenly. He wags his finger: No. He starts over with the disks evenly spaced. She says nothing and watches his hands intently.

She decides later she'll make these for her family at Thanksgiving.

Escobar turns her attention back to the pork loin. It is finished cooking beneath springs of sage, and the scent billows from her pan. She plates it on a simple white dish. She turns to a pan in which she has caramelized quarter-inch thick slices of Granny Smith apples.

"Is this how it's served? With the apples right on top?" she says through Adkinson to her instructor.

She layers the apple slices on top of the pork loin and snaps a photo with her iPhone. Espinel checks it for doneness with a finger poke and gives her the OK sign.

Now, it's time to taste it.

She cuts a sliver of meat, sure to get a piece of the apple. The juices from the savory pork swirl together with the tart, caramelized apples in a glistening gravy on her plate.

Escobar takes a bite. Her eyes go wide and roll back in delight. She nods and slices off another morsel.

Some things are beyond words.

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