

Sacramento-area chef competing on 'Hell's Kitchen' dishes on Gordon Ramsay, 'crazy experience'

BY SARAH LINN

Sacramento-area chef Anthony Vo was 16 when he took on his first culinary challenge: cooking Thanksgiving dinner for his grandparents.

"The last Thanksgiving dinner, Grandpa overcooked the turkey and burnt the stuffing. You can't do much worse than that," Vo recalled with a chuckle. "It gave me a little boost of confidence."

Fortunately, dinner was a success, Vo said. "That was when it hit me that I got something going on."

Now, the executive chef of [Sonrisa Senior Living](#) in Roseville, Vo is ready to conquer his next challenge.

He's competing against 17 other chefs on the latest season of the popular reality show "[Hell's Kitchen](#)."

Hosted by celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay, "Hell's Kitchen" features teams of professional chefs competing for a job as head chef at one of Ramsay's flagship restaurants. Contestants are eliminated over the course of the episodes until



Sacramento-area chef Anthony Vo appears in the season premiere of "Hell's Kitchen: Head Chefs Only," which aired on Sept. 26 on Fox.

only one winner remains.

Season 23 of "Hell's Kitchen" — called "Hell's Kitchen: Head Chefs Only" — premiered on Sept. 26 on Fox.

"It was a crazy experience," Vo, 29, said.

Who is Sacramento-area chef Anthony Vo?

Growing up in Little Saigon in South Sacramento, Vo said he was immersed in the capital region's renowned farm-to-table culture.

"The Vietnamese food cul-

ture is so rich" in Little Saigon, he said, crediting part of that to access to fresh ingredients.

"Just being in Sac, the abundance of produce you get nothing can beat."

Vo got some of his culinary training from his grandmother. "Grandma was a monster in the kitchen," he said.

While attending [San Juan High School](#) in Citrus Heights, he participated in the school's culinary arts program. That meant preparing meals for students and staff, cooking in



Sacramento-area chef Anthony Vo is one of 18 chefs competing on “Hell’s Kitchen: Head Chefs Only” on Fox.

culinary competitions and even meeting celebrity chef Guy Fieri.

“At 17, I knew I wanted to be a chef. I just knew,” Vo said.

However, it took him a few years to accomplish that dream. When he graduated from San Juan High in 2014, he was working at a Subway sandwich shop.

Vo spent 10 years working in senior living facilities in various kitchen staff positions before landing his current position.

He’s been at Sonrisa Senior Living, owned by Watermark Retirement Communities, “since opening day,” he said.

Cooking gourmet food at Roseville senior living community

Vo is the first to acknowledge that “senior living has never been known for food.”

However, he’s setting out to change that with gourmet meals catered toward his clients’ spe-

cial dietary needs.

“We will put out a restaurant(-quality) fine dining meal for you,” Vo said.

Right now, Vo and his team are “really working on fermentations,” he said. “It’s something that Asian culture has done for centuries. It’s really beneficial for blood pressure, diabetics ...”

Vo uses miso, a fermented soybean paste that’s common in Japanese cuisine, to tenderize meat.

“Sometimes the budget isn’t there, or sometimes you have to work with tougher cuts of meat,” Vo explained, so chefs need to get creative with their marinades. “That’s probably the softest beef you’ll ever have.”

Vo and his staff cook three meals a day for a total of 101 people: breakfast, lunch and dinner. Desserts are made in-house by pastry chef Cristy Claypool, who doubles as Vo’s

sous chef.

What was filming ‘Hell’s Kitchen’ like?

When Vo got a call from the casting director for “Hell’s Kitchen” in March, he jumped at the chance to go on the show.

“I’m here to compete against the best (chefs) the United States have to offer,” he said.

In May, Vo headed to the East Coast. Although previous seasons of “Hell’s Kitchen” were shot in California and Las Vegas, filming for “Hell’s Kitchen: Head Chefs Only” took place at Foxwoods Resort Casino in Mashantucket, Connecticut.

“I spent three weeks without talking to any family. I couldn’t get any Red Bull (energy drinks),” he said.

He described filming “Hell’s Kitchen: Head Chefs Only” as a “culinary bootcamp” with long hours and relentless scrutiny.

“Staying up for 16 hours a day wasn’t really a challenge for me,” he said, “I never really sleep.”

However, he said, he sometimes struggled to maintain focus — and keep his cool.

“When there’s 50 cameras right in front of your face, (it’s) a challenge staying locked in and knowing what I’m going to cook,” Vo said, and he had no way to vent his frustration. “I have a (microphone on). I can’t say how I really feel.”

“That was the challenge for me,” he said, “staying composed the whole time.”

Is Gordon Ramsay intimidating in person?

“Chef Gordon is such an intimidating person,” said Vo, who holds the multi-Michelin star chef and restaurateur in high regard.

“He can ask me if the ice cube is right and I’ll go, ‘I have to change my water recipe,’ ” Vo added.

Although Ramsay is known for his **fiery temper** and profanity-laden outbursts, “I felt he was on my case a little more just because of my background,” Vo said, explaining that he had to contend with many of the stereotypes faced by chefs at senior living facilities.

“I’m really here to change that stigma, that we can’t cook on a line or we can’t do fine dining,” Vo said.

To make matters worse, Vo was “literally the shortest kid there,” he said, and one of the youngest competitors. He was 28 at the time of filming.

Despite those challenges, Vo said, “My energy was confident.”

“I just knew I was going to be one of the more resilient competitors,” he said. “I’ve been through too much in my life to let anything stand in my way.”

Although Vo can’t talk in detail about his time on “Hell’s Kitchen” or the show’s outcome, he said television viewers will be impressed.

“I did ‘Hell’s Kitchen’ ... to



“Hell’s Kitchen” host Gordon Ramsay appears with the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in the season premiere of “Hell’s Kitchen: Head Chefs Only,” which aired Sept. 26 on Fox.

show people (that) it does get better. Stay true to your dream,” he said. “I was 17, saying, ‘I’m going to be on TV one day as a star chef,’ and here I am 10 years later.”

How to watch ‘Hell’s Kitchen’

“Hell’s Kitchen” airs at 8 p.m. Thursday on Fox. Episodes are also available to watch via various streaming services.