

Meet the Vegas chef who helped Team USA advance to Pastry World Cup

Writer: Johnathan Wright



The ice man carveth.

In July in steamy New Orleans, Nicholas Forte of Las Vegas, corporate pastry chef for Tao Group Hospitality, fashioned a raptor dinosaur from ice, its body rampant, its tail whipped into an arc, the showpiece helping Team USA win the gold medal at the 2026 Pastry World Cup Americas Selection.

Forte joined chef François Behuet of Los Angeles, the chocolate man, and chef-team captain Jordan Snider of Charleston, South Carolina, the sugar man, to create a Jurassic-themed presentation — ice and chocolate raptors, sugar triceratops, chilled dinosaur egg dessert, dinosaur bones street food and more — to best second place Mexico by more than 400 points. The trio will represent the U.S. and compete against some of the best pastry teams on the planet at the World Cup final in Lyon, France, in January. The big chill was something new for Forte.

“Funnily enough, there is always an ice carver on the team. I had never done ice before,” he said. “I had to train on ice from scratch. I think most ice carvers on the teams have been doing it a long time. I didn’t learn it in pastry school — it wasn’t part of our curriculum.”

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As a prehistoric point of departure, Forte said he turned to his children's dinosaur toys. "I had them in my toolbox as references to see the anatomy and how the body was formed."

Tools of the (ice) trade

Forte and his teammates trained for more than six months for the July contest, with multiple monthly dry runs. Forte found an ice carver to mentor him. He learned to use a saw, a grinder, a drill, a smoother and other tools to carve the dinosaur head, tail and other body parts that were eventually fused to assemble the finished raptor. The chef even used pickle forks to scratch and crack the ice to resemble dinosaur skin.

"We do a ton of ice business in Las Vegas," Forte said. "Even though it's a hot city, it's one of the best cities for ice. Parties order custom displays, but not a lot of people are getting free-form animals made out of ice. This is really a competition-based carve."

Forte also prepared another competition category: a frozen plated dessert for fine dining. The chef sent out a dinosaur egg containing a mango purée yolk nestled atop strata of coconut ice cream, salted dacquoise meringue, mango passion fruit sorbet and mango compote, with chocolate mint and cocoa feather accents.

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“We did reverse spherification on the yolk so it was runny when they broke into it,” Forte said, referring to the technique in which a thin membrane is formed around a liquid to contain it and create a sphere.

Fossils and crowns

Forte also assisted chef Behuet on chocolate and chef Snider on sugar.

The chocolate raptor featured red-and-yellow talons and a red-and-yellow muzzle full of razored teeth emerging from a long exposed spine that curved upward. For the street food presentation, sections of chocolate fossil covered with “dirt” arrived in wooden boxes. Judges had to excavate the fossils that enclosed layers of caramel crème, espresso Chantilly, cocoa sablé cookie, Dominican chocolate mousse and quinoa crunch.

For the sugar triceratops, Forte helped make some of the sections of the display that were later airbrushed. The completed dinosaur sports a black beak, a muzzle and ridged crown in earthy green and gold, front feet and a thick curving tail, all affixed to arcs of clear green sugar that act as scaffolding.

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Ammonites, extinct marine animals with coiled spiral shells, inspired an ammonite-shaped pecan tart with pecan praline coating and pecan praline mousse sheltering a cache of salted pecans, bourbon custard and hazelnut sablé. Cream cheese maple ice cream set with an ammonite tuile accompanied the tart.

A new theme for the final

Forte started out at UNLV studying kinesesthesiology while working as a cake decorator. He dropped out of college to go all-in on cake decorating, later working for a catering company, moving to Chicago to attend pastry school and landing a job at Michelin-starred Joël Robuchon in the MGM Grand. He joined Tao Group about 4½ years ago.

These days, the chef and his teammates are working on a required new theme for the World Cup, one that won't be revealed until the competition. The team, coaches and officials are traveling frequently to Chicago for practice and planning sessions. Everyone also has a full-time job.

"None of us are doing it for any prize. We're all super proud and honored to represent the U.S.," Forte said. "Every country that comes into the Coupe du Monde (Pastry World Cup) is the best at what they do. It's cool to represent pastry recognition for Vegas."