

From gang member to pastry chef, he finds sweet salvation

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[Edward Martinez](#) gently places a chocolate orb in the center of a white bowl. To the touch, this confection is hard and impeccably smooth, like a small eight ball.

His right hand, emblazoned with a skull tattoo, holds a small ladle of warmed chocolate-infused milk. He drizzles the liquid over the orb, accompanied by chocolate streusel and toasted hazelnuts. It soon breaks open, revealing a sumptuous filling of hazelnut and milk chocolate pudding, mixed with more crispy bits of chocolate and hazelnut.

"I like making pretty food," Martinez said. "The first thing you do is eat with your eyes. You want it to be beautiful. If the flavors work, it brings that whole dish together."

Martinez serves as executive pastry chef of Hawks in Granite Bay, which specializes in seasonal ingredients and is among the region's finest restaurants. Even in a chocolate-stained apron, Martinez doesn't look like a guy you'd want to mess with. He stands over 6 feet tall with a [shaved head](#) and a black widow spider on the back of his neck. His body is an evolving canvas of tattoos, some of which hark back to a past that he's since left behind: membership in one of [California's](#) most notorious street gangs.

Learning to make pastries may have saved Martinez's life, or at least spared him a stretch in the state penitentiary. In 2005, facing three felony charges, Martinez promised to enroll in a pastry-making program, leading to a reduced sentence – and perhaps a last chance at an honest life.

Martinez's Facebook photos show a collage of the sweet and a bitter taste of his past. There's a shot of his moelloux of white chocolate, compressed mandarins, pistachio macaron and mandarin sorbet; an "I heart foie gras" T-shirt sported by his baby son; and the casket of one of Martinez's homeboys from his [Fresno](#) gang days being lowered into the earth.

"I never expected to get this far," said Martinez, who recently turned 27. "I expected ... (to be) in jail, or dead."

Now, Martinez surrounds himself with sugars, ripe seasonal fruits and delicate desserts. He's devouring "[Modernist Cuisine](#)," the six-volume book of cutting-edge cooking techniques. His

repertoire at Hawks includes nitrogen-frozen [chocolate mousse](#) with gianduja crémeux and hazelnut pudding.

"He's the best working pastry chef I've seen," said [Pajo Bruich](#), midtown's Lounge ON20 executive chef, known for his complex cooking techniques. "Hands down, nobody in the [Sacramento](#) market is doing the creative elements he's doing."

The rise of Baby Gangster

Baby Gangster was always ready to fight.

That's what the Bulldogs gang members called Martinez, after he was "jumped into" the gang at age 13.

"I was at the homeboy's house, in the backyard," Martinez recalled, between sips of coffee at a midtown [Sacramento](#) cafe. "I'm telling them, 'I want to be in. This is what I want. I want to be a Bulldog.' And they said, 'OK, let's do it.' They beat me up for about 30 seconds. It's weird. You're beating up your friend so they can hang out with you. I got "[FRESNO](#)" tattooed across my chest about six months after that."

The Bulldogs have few friends, except for those also inked with the dog paws and "BD" tattoos. Bulldogs are recognized as a violent [California](#) gang, based primarily in [Fresno](#). [Law enforcement](#) estimates the gang has more than 6,000 members. The Bulldogs, who take the name and logo from the mascot at [California State University, Fresno](#), have no allies and no leadership structure. Crips, Bloods, Norteño and Sureño gangs are all sworn Bulldogs enemies.

Both of Martinez's older brothers were Bulldogs; so were other close family members. One cousin was nicknamed "[Big Gangster](#)," while an older brother was "Lil Gangster." Baby [Gangster Martinez](#) was "Baby G" for short – and had it tattooed into his left forearm.

He said his turf was on the east side of [Fresno](#), where he claimed "Mariposa Street Gangsters" – or, "MSG" for short. He'd moved there from [San Jose](#) at the age of 9, about two years after his mother, Theodora, died in a [car accident](#). He said he still thinks of her baking in the kitchen, surrounded by the smells of sugar and frosting.

His father, [Joe Martinez](#), said his son didn't cope well after her death. The elder Martinez, who earned an economics degree from [Stanford University](#), had hoped his four children would get educations, but his wife's death fractured the family spirit.

"With Edward, he kept a lot inside and started getting into trouble at school," said [Joe Martinez](#). "Prior to that, he was doing excellent in school."

Baby Gangster developed a taste for stealing. He was charged and later convicted in 2004 with grand theft for stealing \$2,000 worth of [DVD players](#) and other merchandise from a [Blockbuster Video](#).

In April 2005, while at a [Fresno](#) fast food restaurant, Baby Gangster thought someone looked at his girlfriend the wrong way. He attacked, punched the victim and fled. According to documents in [Fresno Superior Court](#), the victim identified his attacker as a gang member because of his tattoos.

The victim and two witnesses picked [Edward Martinez](#) out of a photo lineup. Martinez was already on parole for the second-degree burglary at [Blockbuster](#). Baby Gangster went on the run for more than three weeks.

He knew he couldn't hide forever.

"I finally got tired of running and went to my dad's house," said Martinez. "I knew they were going to get me there. When they came to the door, there were cops everywhere. I was going to jail."

Sweet salvation

Martinez's dad had heard all the talk before about changing for good. So had judges. Martinez was 20 and had served stints in county jail.

Now he faced felony charges of assault and battery, both with gang enhancements, and street terrorism. Facing eight years in state prison, he said he wanted to enroll in a local baking program.

"I pretty much begged," Martinez said. "I knew if I was going to prison that I would do the whole eight years. It would be me gangbanging harder than ever before, trying to fight with everybody."

Martinez pleaded no contest to misdemeanor battery. The other charges were dropped, but he'd have to honor his parole and enroll in the pastry program as promised.

By this time, Martinez had spent nine months in county jail. He was ready to bid his Baby Gangster persona goodbye.

"I needed to prove I wasn't a (screw) up," said Martinez. "I just had to prove to my dad that this is what I was going to do. Baking and pastries was something I could have fun doing. I remembered being happy doing that."

In the [Fresno](#) suburb of [Clovis](#), Martinez enrolled at the Institute of Technology's baking and pastry specialist program. He felt self-conscious at first, still sporting a nearly bald head with a "BD" tattoo he had inked in county jail.

"When he came into my class he wasn't very talkative, but when he did talk he had a lot of questions," said [Thomas Mendoza](#), a culinary mentor and instructor there. "He was very inquisitive on things that were new, and when he got a basic technique down, he wanted to take it above and beyond, and make it his own."

His older brothers were still in the gang. In many cases, leaving a gang means "blood in, blood out" – you can only leave with your life.

"There were times when I had a friend come over and tell me some stuff happened in the 'hood and we needed to go handle it," said Martinez. "I'm like, 'I can't.' I'd never told anyone that. He kind of gave me a look like, 'Are you serious?' I said, 'I just can't.' "

Martinez dug into his textbooks and other reading, including "The French Laundry Cookbook." He learned a new vocabulary: crème anglaise, mignardises, crème de farine, and velouté of bittersweet chocolate.

"I was loving it," said Martinez. "When I was making breads for the first time, they would look exactly like the stuff in the book. I started showing my dad, 'Look what I made!' "

For his final exam, after the nine-month program, Martinez presented a complex tuile cookie cone with garnishes and the point side down in the center of the plate. His attendance had been perfect, and Martinez made the dean's list.

"He had all the awards you could receive," said Mendoza. "He was one of the leaders in the class. He's one of those students that just gets it."

Martinez applied for a job at Slate's, one of [Fresno's](#) finest restaurants. The interview was the first time he'd ever stepped into a fancy restaurant.

"I took him on because no one would probably hire the kid," said [Roy Harland](#), former executive chef of Slate's. "A lot of the ultraconservative [Fresno](#) clientele would not be comfortable with a former Bulldog gang member walking through the [dining room](#). I immediately knew this guy has talent and could create."

His new persona

Like the chocolate orb, Martinez's "Baby Gangster" persona has melted away. When he's not working at Hawks, Martinez raises four children in Antelope with his wife of seven years, Michelle.

Martinez moved his family to the Sacramento area two years ago from Napa, where he worked at the Michelin-starred Bistro Jeanty. He's had other job opportunities, but lost some after potential employers checked his background. Either way, Martinez says, Hawks and Sacramento are happy homes for him.

"My kids are happy and they're going to a good school," said Martinez. "It's about my wife and my kids now. That's why I do everything I do. If it wasn't for them, I wouldn't be working 14 to 15 hours a day."

Past the restaurant's houndstooth chairs and blue walls, Martinez towers over the kitchen's pastry station. He keeps a tank of liquid nitrogen close to whip up new pastries. One looks like

something from a mad scientist's laboratory: frozen coconut mousse with coconut sorbet and cilantro oil drizzle.

The infusion of liquid nitrogen to the coconut mousse adds a theatrical kind of fog as the dessert freezes, with the final product looking like delicate cauliflower. The dish's coconut flavors are perfectly pronounced, with Martinez's cilantro oil adding a pleasing herbal accompaniment.

"I like to do modern stuff, but with classic techniques," said Martinez. "I can put some liquid nitrogen into a mousse, but I can also knock out some perfect crepes for you. People will say, 'Oh, this is so beautiful, can we speak to the pastry chef? Where is she?' They'll look at me like, 'You made these plates?'"

He visits other restaurants for inspiration. In February, he and his wife traveled to New York City, dining at wd-50, Eleven Madison Park and Per Se. Over 14 courses at Per Se, dressed in a suit with his collar barely concealing his neck tattoos, he thought of how far he'd come.

"When I walked in, they were all, 'Hi, how are you, Mr. Martinez?'" said Martinez. "I'm pretty sure I'm the only one from my neighborhood that's ever going to do anything like this."

Sometimes he feels the shadow of his past. Before St. Patrick's Day this year, Martinez and others in the Hawks crew shaved their heads for charity. Everyone could see the "BD" tattoo. Two days later, he covered it with a giant skull tattoo.

His goal is to ink over all of his gang tattoos.

"I don't want to be somewhere, like at the beach with my wife, and all of a sudden someone's like, 'What's that FRESNO for?'" said Martinez. "I don't give off the same vibe that I used to."

Still, in the rush of a packed night at Hawks, and especially if someone botches one of Martinez's desserts, he can snap. The difference now, Martinez said, is that he'll apologize.

"To some degree, I think he still has some issues there," said Joe Martinez. "But, he's managed to control it quite a bit. ... He's done pretty good, and I'm very proud."

Martinez said that both his older brothers have also left the Bulldogs gang. A younger brother, Matt, lives in Sacramento now and works as a line cook at Lounge ON20.

Martinez dreams of opening his own dessert bar, hoping to be known around the country for his pastries.

"I'm Edward now," said Martinez. "I'm not a gangster. He's gone. He's no longer there. I don't look back."

Editor's note: Slate's restaurant in Fresno remains open. A previous version of this story indicated that it had closed.