

[Q-241][Keerthi Eraniyan]

“Recipe for Success” contestant found guilty of first-degree murder

MARTINEZ, Calif. (Jan. 27, 2025) - On Tuesday, Haley Fromholz, former contestant on the cooking competition show “Recipe for Success,” was found guilty of the first-degree murder of celebrity chef Morgan Sears by Judge Frank Acuna following a tense trial at the A.F. Bray Courthouse.

Sears, who served as one of three judges on “Recipe for Success,” died of acute liver failure from heartstopper mushroom poisoning on April 10, 2025, the morning after the show’s semifinal challenge when Fromholz served a Mexican mushroom dish.

Both sides focused on the relationship between Fromholz and Sears, former classmates at the same culinary school. Their close friendship ended after Sears used Fromholz’s recipes in a cookbook published during a culinary internship.

The prosecution argued that Fromholz sought revenge for Sears’ mistreatment of her on the show and in culinary school, alleging she poisoned him by serving heartstopper mushrooms. Producer Imari Rodriguez testified about an on-set incident where Sears “slapped Fromholz in the face with a piece of parsley,” prompting Fromholz to respond: “That’s the last time you’ll insult my cooking.”

“The defendant, in the blind pursuit of retribution, poisoned Sears to stop the abuse once and for all,” prosecutor Emma Nibre said in her opening statement as she gestured to the defense table.

Rodriguez was later impeached for claiming that Fromholz did not appear nervous before the semifinal challenge.

The defense argued that Fromholz had forgiven Sears and instead pointed to fellow contestant Alden Mitchell – who had a social media dispute with Sears and also served a mushroom dish in the semifinal – as a more likely suspect. Fromholz testified emotionally that she “still saw Morgan as a friend,” describing any on-show altercations as exaggerated “for the cameras.”

“Unlike Haley, Mitchell held a grudge towards Chef Sears for leaving a negative review on her food truck, which financially hurt her business,” defense attorney Thaleia Karavela said in her closing argument.

Both sides debated Exhibit B, which showed the locations of Fromholz and Mitchell while the two foraged together for wild mushrooms in Artemis Grove. Digital forensics examiner Sam Longo testified that Fromholz accessed a website identifying the “exact location of heartstopper mushrooms in Artemis Grove,” and phone location data placed Fromholz at that site during foraging. In contrast, Fromholz claimed she had simply been in that area to relieve herself, and the defense argued that phone location data is less reliable under areas with dense tree coverage like Artemis Grove.

In a pretrial motion, the defense moved to exclude a deleted computer folder titled “MORGAN SEARS IS A LYING FRAUD!!,” arguing its recovery violated Fromholz’s Fourth Amendment rights because the laptop was password-protected. Prosecutors countered that Fromholz had publicly displayed and shared the password with her roommate, making the search reasonable. The judge ultimately granted the motion, excluding the evidence from trial.

In a post-trial interview, Judge Acuna said the verdict rested on evidence that “all pointed to the defendant,” including witness testimony and trial exhibits. As the verdict was read, Fromholz shook her head and sighed.