

Jail culinary program creates yummy food, future cooks

By Kathryn Reed

When El Dorado County Sheriff Fred Kollar worked in Lake Tahoe the jail was serving TV dinners. Last week he made a special effort to commend the inmate, yes the inmate, who made the cream puffs.

Kollar has a thing for cream puffs and he told inmate Jimmy Beechler these were as good as the ones his mom made.



Sheriff Fred Kollar raves about the cream puffs made by inmates at the Tahoe jail. Photos/Kathryn Reed

As the high bidder of the “lunch with the sheriff at the jail” during Soroptimist International of Tahoe Sierra’s Elegant Evening earlier this year, I finally redeemed my voucher on Monday. Joining us was jail commander Lt. Randy Peshon.

It’s under Peshon’s leadership that the culinary program in the jail has taken off in the last three years. In cooperation

with Lake Tahoe Community College, three adjunct faculty members (Hugo Lizaola, Bob Grijalva and Trish McGrath) work in the jail kitchen under the supervision of head jail chef Jeanette Shippee.

The inmates who qualify for worker status, are not behind bars for a violent crime and show an interest in the program may apply to be in the culinary arts program that has the same curriculum as LTCC. It means working 12-hour days.

“They come out of here with a GED, culinary arts certificate and resume. Jeanette and I work our contacts to get them a job. The recidivism is almost non-existent,” Peshon explained. “They are out and not coming back. That is where the huge savings to the county comes from.”

It takes eight months for an inmate to complete the program. Their final is serving a complete meal to a public panel.

Peshon was needled by Shippee to take the serve safe class. This class is a necessity for anyone working in a commercial kitchen. Now the inmates are challenged to beat his score.

He’s even learning a thing or two about cooking, which is paying off for his wife.

With state mandated nutritional guidelines as well as the presentation of the food, the inmates are eating well-balanced meals. They can also get meals if they have special diets or for religious reasons.

Bad food equals bad behavior, Peshon said. No slop, like what is sometimes depicted in the movies, is served here.



Lt. Randy Peshon has learned cooking skills as part of his work in the jail.

“In the early '80s every meal was a TV dinner. It took 20 to 30 minute to heat up,” Kollar said. “It would be expensive today and it wouldn't meet nutritional requirements.”

Baking is what Shippee likes to focus on. She teaches at LTCC on occasion, so it's not just inmates who benefit from her culinary skills.

For several years she has had her charges enter the El Dorado County Fair. And each year several ribbons are awarded to the inmates. Oftentimes this is the first time any of them has won anything.

Carlos Gonzalez, still dressed in his inmate white cooking uniform, is a little shy about talking about his blue first place ribbon for his dinner rolls. Having had one of the light, fluffy rolls with my lunch that day, I'd say they are a definite runner-up to my mom's dinner rolls.

Gonzalez said he and Shippee came up with the recipe.



Inmates Carlos Gonzalez and Eric Malone show-off their ribbons from the county fair.

Eric Malone has ribbons from the past two county fairs. For this summer's fair he entered a chocolate raspberry bar (second place) and a chocolate raspberry cream cake (first place).

"It was kind of nerve wracking trying to prepare everything. You think you have more time than you really do," Malone said.

In the past he won for an almond kiss cookie and a triple layer brownie.

It was Malone who had a strong influence in what was served to the sheriff. He admitted to being a little nervous cooking for the sheriff.

"You worry if it's going to turn out," Malone said.

For the July 19 lunch, Malone said, "Me and Jeanette threw it together." The idea was coming up with one dish that could be served three ways to accommodate the three of us. I skipped the chicken, Peshon wanted just the chicken and Kollar could eat everything.

Malone came up with the name of the pasta dish at the last minute while back in the kitchen after everything was cleaned

up.

Our lunches were served in the same plastic trays the inmates get, along with a carton of milk. Individual slots in the tray hold the food, so no worries about items touching one another.

A green salad with a side of ranch dressing occupies two slots, the yummy dinner roll, a decadent cream puff, and pasta primavera as the entrée fill the other areas.

Per meal costs are \$1.10-\$1.15, according to Peshon. This does not include labor. When you serve more than 100 people three meals a day, shopping in bulk pays off.

Inmates have a minimum of 15 minutes to eat a meal. Luckily, no one was watching the clock while I was there.

Considering my voucher said I could bring a guest and I didn't, I'm thinking I may call the sheriff up again for another lunch or maybe wait until the new guy gets in office. I wouldn't say the food is a reason to commit a crime, but I would suggest bidding on this item or the lunch with the jail commander at the next Elegant Evening.

Sheriff in the Jail Meal

1 purple onion, julienne

2 zucchini, quartered

2 yellow squash, quartered

1½ red bell peppers, julienne

8-10 mushrooms

2 tomatoes

1 C basil, chiffonade

1 full bowl broccoli

Cook all of the vegetables, toss with cooked pasta. Serves five.

Publisher's note: *Lake Tahoe News will feature an interview with Sheriff Fred Kollar on June 26.*