

Flavor to Taste

Service members use the variety of condiments available in mess halls to customize the taste of daily menu options. (PHOTO COURTESY: MASS COMMUNICATION SPECIALIST 2ND CLASS CHAD A. BASCOM, U.S. NAVY)

Marines Use Condiments to Personalize Menu Options

Marine Corps garrison mess halls have come a long way in just the past few years when it comes to meeting customer expectations, especially considering that the target constantly changes with the arrival of each generation.

“Each new generation of Marines brings a different set of culinary expectations, which prompts the foodservices community to seek new ways of improving the mess halls,” said Patrick Grosso, food service director, Marine Corps Installations-West, MCB Camp Pendleton, Calif. “To meet these constantly evolving tastes we conduct numerous customer surveys at all of our installation mess halls. We also host focus groups with the Marines and our foodservice contractor, Sodexo.”

Naturally, this customer research is mined for information about the type of cuisine Marines enjoy, and clues that might lead to the introduction of new menu options or dining strategies.

“We even get a sense of the type of setting, and have discovered that Marines see the mess hall as a place where they can enjoy a break from their daily routine to do something more than just eating; it has become a place to relax and reenergize,” Grosso said.

Marines represent a diverse population, with each segment having a preference for familiar flavors. A sign of that diversity is the variety of condiments available in mess halls that allow Marines to customize the taste of daily menu options.

“The point is that food and cooking are integrally intertwined with our personal food desires, and a meal just isn’t the same without a nearby selection of condiments,” Grosso said.

Standard condiments, including ketchup, mustard and relish are always conveniently available. Also nearby are a variety of ethnic flavors that are popular with Marines, and this is a clear sign of changes associated with shifting expectations of the population.

“What may surprise you is that popular condiments like ketchup and mustard are not necessarily what the Marines are immediately reaching for anymore,” he said. “Condiment usage, customer surveys and



Lance Cpl. Bradley A. Boyd, a food service specialist with III MHG, III MEF, prepares food at the III Marine Expeditionary Force Headquarters Group Mess Hall. (PHOTO COURTESY: LANCE CPL. RYAN C. MAINS, U.S. MARINE CORPS)

focus groups frequently show a majority of troops asking for spicy salsa to put on their food rather than plain old ketchup.”

Grosso considers condiments a finishing touch the Marines use to personalize food. “They are intended to add zip and zing for an additive flavor to the meal,” he said.

Some traditional expectations are changing, or are adapted for certain food or recipes. “Let’s take bacon, for example,” he said. “I’m a big bacon fan and for me almost everything is better with bacon. Yet who hasn’t eaten bacon as a separate dish? But recently bacon has become a powerhouse condiment. It’s even added to ice cream these days, which would have had a different reaction a few years ago.”

Cheeseburgers, hot dogs and French fries remain core menu favorites among civilians, as well as Marines. In fact, Grosso ranks burgers and hot dogs as the most popular fast-food items eaten at the mess hall.

Another influence on the menu is the balance the Marine mess halls must maintain between Marines’ desires and healthy, nutritious options that drive the menus.

“The challenge is for the mess halls to prepare healthy and nutritious food that the Marines will eat, or we risk becoming irrelevant by making food no one wants to eat, and wasting a lot of time, money and food in the process,” he said.

Using clues and information gained through customer research led the mess halls to make useful and successful changes that improved consumption.

“By listening to the customer, we stopped the old practice of over-boiling the taste from vegetables,” he said. “Now we do a lot more steaming or roasting of vegetables, and then combine them with a variety of spices and dressings like balsamic vinegar for a hearty side dish Marines want to eat.”

Brand recognition is another factor. Marines develop loyalty to certain condiment brands or other mess hall options and look forward to finding those familiar names.

The brand loyalty of Marines varies among types of foods. Marines may have a stronger preference for national brands with breakfast cereals than, for example, with pickle relish.

He concedes that some brand name products can affect the overall quality, taste and texture of food, but



Cpl. Maria G. Solis, a food service specialist with III MHG, III MEF, prepares a meal at the III Marine Expeditionary Force Headquarters Group Mess Hall. (PHOTO COURTESY: LANCE CPL. RYAN C. MAINS, U.S. MARINE CORPS)

maintains that the quality of other subsistence items, such as white vinegar, flour, sugar, salt and pepper, are largely unchanged regardless of the name of the supplier.

“The true mark of culinary art and expertise is in the details,” he said, “and the key to quality food-service operations is to pay close attention to the opinions and requests of the Marines and sailors dining at the mess halls.”

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