

A Priority to Keep Foodservice Partners Up to Date with the Needs of the Army

Lt. Col. Luis A. Rodriguez, USA, director, Joint Culinary Center of Excellence (JCCoE)

Government Food Service: Tell us a little about yourself and how you became involved in the Army foodservice program.

Lt. Col. Luis A. Rodriguez: I became an Army officer in 1993 after graduating from the Army Reserve Officers' Training Corps. Then, in 1997, after an educational delay, I entered active Army and my first job as a second lieutenant was Food Service Officer of the Headquarters, Headquarters Company (HHC) 20th Area Support Group (ASG) Dining Facility in Camp Henry, Taegu, South Korea. Then, two years later, as a captain and during my very first company command, I became the commander of Company B 266th QM Battalion, Fort Lee, Va. Here, I was in charge of the training of the biggest 92G (Food Service Specialists) company in the battalion. So, as you can see, my initial years as an officer were related to food service; a passion that I maintain up to this date.

Government Food Service: What was your assignment before becoming director of JCCoE?

Rodriguez: I was the Executive Officer of the 51st Quartermaster General (Brig. Gen. Gwen Bingham, USA) and also the Operations Officer of the Quartermaster School.

Government Food Service: Is there any area or areas you are interested in focusing on during your tour?

Rodriguez: Yes! The overall success of our JC-CoE training mission and the enhancement of the Food Service Program worldwide.



Lt. Col. Luis A. Rodriguez, USA

Government Food Service: Do you have any changes in mind for food service that you would like to bring about?

Rodriguez: Yes. A better collaboration and education on how to do business with the Army in the area of the Food Service Program. Also, I want to promote our reach-back capabilities with our foodservice partners via our great Web site. A one-stop source where people can become acquainted with who we are and what we do, and also, how can we help our foodservice partners.

Government Food Service: Are these a response to or a reflection of foodservice trends happening in the military or civilian world? If so, explain.

Rodriguez: In a certain way, yes, and related to both military and civilian.

The Food Service Program is an Army enterprise that is very complex, dynamic and fluid. Keeping our foodservice partners up-to-date with the needs of the



Soldiers from the 338th Engineer Company are served a hot meal at Contingency Operating Location Freedom, Fort McCoy, Wis., as part of a food-tasting test. (PHOTO COURTESY: U.S. ARMY)

Army is a priority for me. I want to make sure that our soldiers receive the best training and food service possible at all times.

Government Food Service: *Look back and tell us what it has been like since becoming director of Joint Culinary Center of Excellence.*

Rodriguez: An incredible opportunity for professional growth thanks to a devoted staff of magnificent professionals who have only one mission in mind: to be the very best in the Food Service Program. Every day is a challenge. My mission is very complex and big. But, my staff is my best asset. I have a team of highly dedicated professionals that make my job and mission very rewarding, and for that I am more than thankful.

Government Food Service: *Training gradually evolves. Recently, Army Food Service implemented the guidance provided in the Army Learning Model. It reduced the amount of time spent on lectures, slide presentations and discussion, while increasing hands-on and performance-based instruction. How is this turning out?*

Rodriguez: The implementation of the Army Learning Model in JCCoE enhanced the overall training provided as students spend more time training on the preparation of products, and less time sitting in the classroom. The hands-on instruction is an invaluable tool in this industry, and assists in preparing students to perform their duties at their first duty station.

Government Food Service: *Two years ago Army Food Service set a goal of focusing on support to service partners and customers. It began working with the Navy and Defense Logistics Agency (DLA) Troop Support in developing a common joint-operating system. Please discuss any progress.*

Rodriguez: DLA and each service agreed to continue with their current system at the present time.

Government Food Service: *What can you tell us about progress made since the decision was made to cancel development of the Common Food Management System? Alternatives were going to be assessed that would meet all service requirements. Is the Army Food Management Information System (AFMIS) still a candidate and does it continue evolving.*

Rodriguez: There is no joint system at this time being worked.

Government Food Service: *Army Food Service also is working with the services and Natick on common field-*

feeding equipment to support small- to large-feeding environments in all feeding operations. Please discuss any progress.

Rodriguez: The Joint Interservice Field Feeding (JIFF) Working Group (WG) is the integration and synchronization of the efforts across the Joint Services with respect to equipment and systems that provide the capability to feed warfighters across the globe as they engage in full-spectrum military operations. The products/results of the WG should serve as the basis for a higher level of joint-service cooperation in the development, production, fielding and sustainment of combat feeding equipment. The objectives of this cooperative effort are commonality of hardware designs, components, support networks, etc.

Government Food Service: *How is training being influenced by trends in military food service? What are these trends? Is training being further influenced by business practices from outside the gate to better prepare for careers?*

Rodriguez: Training is constantly evolving to ensure that it is current, relevant and value-added to the operational environment based on changes in military doctrine, subsistence and equipment.

Government Food Service: *Nutrition and dietary guidelines became a big influence since the introduction of Soldier Fueling, Go for Green and other programs in the last year. Describe how this is influencing JCCoE training as well as food handling, processing and menu planning?*

Rodriguez: JCCoE continues the dialogue on the projects. We learn from the feedback from Army food-service personnel and their supporting dietitians. This allows us to refine and to provide guidance and assistance to the Installation Food Program Managers/Food Advisors in the implementation of the nutrition initiatives. The form of assistance ranges from quick or long e-mails, individual phone calls, teleconferences, on-site Special Assistance Visits, inclusion of the programs as part of an overall Food Management Assistance Team review, and topics for the Army Food Program Advisory Board. It all serves as part of a path to better practices, improved ingredients and refreshed menu design, leading to very satisfied diners and ultimately their better performance, better health. As the mid- and senior-grade staff rotate back to the school house as either instructors or students, they bring additional questions and answers on how to phase the changes into on-going operations, and they bring suggestions back for points of emphasis during training for the novice cooks.

COMMANDER'S UPDATE

Army staff sergeants Antonio Williams and Melinda Andrews put the finishing touches on a fettuccine alfredo and asparagus dish, prepared for the residents of the Richmond Fisher House. Both soldiers are students at the Advanced Culinary Course at the Joint Culinary Center of Excellence, Quartermaster School, Fort Lee, Va.

(PHOTO COURTESY: SHARON MULLIGAN, CASCOM)

Government Food Service: *The Department of Defense (DoD) is working on an anti-obesity and nutrition awareness campaign. Military Community and Family Policy (MCFP) is collaborating with many agencies. The campaign also aims to assess the nutritional environment of military facilities and ensure healthier foods are available in dining facilities, as well as in DoD schools and other places where service members and their families purchase food on base.*

Is Army Food Service at work on this campaign? If so, describe what is being done.

Rodriguez: JCCoE is actively collaborating and providing information to the DoD MCFP on the nutrition initiatives occurring within the Army Food Program — sharing information on the food procurement process, implementation of the Soldier Fueling Initiative in Initial Military Training, and Go for Green nutritional labeling. Additionally, the Army Office of the Surgeon General has an ongoing Performance Triad Initiative (food, exercise and sleep), which engages many of the same concerns and many of the same participants as in the DoD MCFP campaign. These mutually supporting investigations will require a detailed review of the behaviors of individuals, engagement of leaders, and installation policies and resources that shape the options for making the healthy choice the easy choice.

Government Food Service: *Nutrition initiatives and dietary guidelines aim to improve how soldiers eat. A year ago, the Army was reviewing the process for selecting ingredients used to prepare or buy end items and revising recipes to make better-for-you options. Recipe cards are also continually updated to support United States Department of Agriculture Dietary Guidelines as well as the Army's nutritional goals.*

Army Food Service also was waiting for DA PAM 30-22 to be signed and approved. Some steps were already being taken, such as switching to calcium- and vitamin D-fortified orange juice and providing whole-grain choices of breads, cereals and pasta.

Please give an update on changes made to ingredients and recipe cards. Also update whether DA PAM 30-22 was approved and the changes, if any, made in response to it.

Rodriguez: The revision of the recipes within the Armed Forces Recipe System is ongoing as part of a joint initiative, so it is much more than the Army's interests at stake. The collaboration between the servic-



es has been excellent, and the early batches of revised recipes are under validation reviews by various food-service operators in each of the services. The work by the Joint Recipe Committee and the separate lines of effort by the DoD Nutrition Committee spotlighted the need for engaging the Defense Logistics Agency Troop Support and establishing improved clarity in product and ingredient acquisition standards.

The updated DA PAM 30-22 Operating Procedures for the Army Food Program is in the final stages of revisions and review and includes the DoD Menu Standards, Soldier Fueling Initiative and Go for Green nutritional labeling.

Government Food Service: *What other programs is JCCoE involved in regarding nutrition and dietary guidelines?*

Rodriguez: The Army Food Program has a representative in the Dietary Supplements Subcommittee of the DoD Nutrition Committee. The exceptional needs of military forces operating in extreme environments are considered by this group, and inform the Army decision makers in support of the operations forces. Additionally, this forum considers medically adverse events reports and the research of the Food and Drug Administration to stay aware of ingredients that may interact to impact health or psychological well-being. Often this group has early insights into the hot-button health and consumer behaviors that appear in the national news, and often the same products affect our Army personnel as well. One of the many points of concern this past year is the over-consumption of caffeine, often found in elevated levels in energy drinks, and then combined with other botanical products that together have impacts on men-

tal focus, advanced decision-making, motor skills and emotional balance. The Army Food Program needs these insights to more properly decide on products to incorporate or avoid in cataloging decisions.

Government Food Service: *What is on the horizon for JCCoE? Facility expansion was completed to accommodate additional classrooms, training labs, training dining facilities and offices. How did the first year go?*

Rodriguez: The facility expansion to accommodate U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force foodservice training went extremely well. The incorporation of the U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force staff into JCCoE was seamless, and the relationship between each of the services continues to grow and flourish.

Government Food Service: *Joint training brings U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine Corps students alongside U.S. Army; tell us about how this is going. Is the sharing of ideas influencing training and procedures?*

Rodriguez: The Joint environment enhances training execution as it provides a greater knowledge base where best practices can be shared, refined and implemented. This results in enhancing training methods and procedures thus ensuring that the training provided is current and relative to all students regardless of service.

Government Food Service: *What challenges do you see ahead and how do you see JCCoE responding? (Budget/fiscal constraints, dietary guidelines and nutritional requirements, culinary training, menu variety)*

Rodriguez: As good stewards of the financial and infrastructure resources and optimizing our impact on the people of our military community, the work we do is focused on the right balance of supporting the physical, tending to the psychological and acknowledging the social expectations of our diners. So there is a blending of nutrition science, behavioral analysis, opportunities in equipment and delivery methods, and tradition and trends in finding the path forward. One thing we know — we are not done learning or teaching.

The new nutritional requirements and dietary guidelines are providing well-rounded meals to the soldier that supports a healthier lifestyle, making them a more effective and efficient team member.

Budgetary constraints always provide somewhat of a challenge when meeting our mission due to the large amount of travel associated with providing on the ground support for the Army Food Program. We have been able to meet the needs of our customers

by utilizing technological support as an additional resource.

Government Food Service: *Describe how foodservice programs (rations, equipment and automation) are evolving?*

Rodriguez: As the world of food service is constantly changing, so must the current automation systems. The Army Food Management Information System is an ever-evolving system to improve menu planning, inventory management and overall expenditures.

Government Food Service: *What changes have come about as the result of the Army working with manufacturers, Natick and the Office of the Surgeon General regarding nutritional targets for operational rations, expanded menus and improved ingredients?*

Rodriguez: Changes in the combat feeding program continue to successfully address the needs of soldiers deployed in combat situations. Success in improving variety has been reached with the 2012 introduction of the Unitized Group Ration Short-Order Option, which serves to increase the variety of dining. U.S. Army Natick maintains continuous improvement on the existing combat rations as we follow regulations for combat feeding established by the Office of the Surgeon General. Our relationship with the food industry continues to improve as together we work to select products that address the nutrition goals for less sodium, saturated fats, trans fats, etc. And through our policy division, buying guides and product cataloging work to meet the goals of the Army Nutrition Program.

Government Food Service: *Are any changes in store for the 28-day menu?*

Rodriguez: The current menu for the theater is known as the DA G4 CONOPS menu. The current menu is rotating at a 21-day cycle as of Jan. 1, 2013. The menu will continually be reviewed for possible reduction as operations in the Middle East are downsized.

Government Food Service: *Any changes regarding involving service members in menu planning or customer surveying? Is the 28-day menu uniform throughout the Army, such that the meals served on a given day is consistent around the world or vary as long as the primary ingredient for the day is used?*

Rodriguez: The DA G4 CONOPS menu is enforced



Joint Culinary Center of Excellence instructor, Staff Sergeant Steven Behr, right, takes a moment to show Navy Culinary Specialist Daniel Hemingway proper techniques.

(PHOTO COURTESY: SHARON MULLIGAN, CASCOM)

in Afghanistan, Kuwait and Qatar at this time. This may change as the mission changes. The majority of Army dining facilities operate on menus created at installation level.

Additionally, the Army's 21- or 28-day menus are used by the deployed forces operating under constrained delivery systems. The subsistence prime vendor orders the supplies and packs the trucks to support the menu; the massive work is intense, and change is disruptive to meeting timelines. The menus served should be relatively consistent with the published menu — this means that the variety and choice intended for our diners is in fact delivered, and we want the contract operators to meet the standards. That said, there are situations that call for expedited use of certain ingredients or enhanced service in response to unusual circumstances. So, yes, there will be some variation, but it is not expected to be a routine departure from the published cycle. The menus themselves are subject to change over time as winners and losers in the choices and products are identified and communicated via the Food Program Management Board (Menu Boards). The lead time in implementing the change is substantial to moderate the impact on the supply systems.

In the garrison feeding programs in CONUS, the constrained supply system is not as much an issue and those foodservice operations for permanent party feeding have much more latitude for change.

Moreover, developing and planning menus based on customer preferences, as well as nutritional and budgetary considerations, is an ongoing and evolving process. Input from service members is currently gathered from sources such as customer comment cards, talking with diners during meal times at dining facilities, through online suggestion forums, and

from enlisted dining facility advisory council boards chaired by the DFAC manager.

The primary consideration when conducting menu planning is the customers' preferences because the dining facilities exist to provide subsistence support to soldiers and civilians, especially the junior SIK [Subsistence in Kind] soldiers residing in the barracks. Menus are designed to draw the maximum amount of diners as possible while providing nutritionally complete and cost-effective meals. As the customer demographic changes, and technology influences the way people communicate and transfer information, methods for gathering service members' input will continue to adapt. For example, foodservice leaders at Fort Carson appeal to younger generations' affinity to use smart phones and the Web to communicate by encouraging diners to submit their comments in online forums. Dining facility managers use this information to identify trends and to develop menu items intended to appeal to the local diners. Future technological advancements will offer more opportunities to gather real-time customer opinions, and enable military foodservice personnel to create meals and serving methods that appeal to soldiers while meeting the commander's intent.

Government Food Service: How is this progressing?

Rodriguez: The change in the number of menus available on the DA G4 CONOPS is moving forward as planned. The new version of the menu went into effect on Jan. 1, 2013. Individual menus are being deleted as the inventory is depleted. The Army is working closely with the Defense Logistics Agency Troop Support and the prime vendor to ensure a smooth transition.

Government Food Service: *Are any plans in place to construct, refurbish and/or consolidate dining facilities? Describe some of the projects underway or coming up, and the goals. Also, is utilization being studied and are there any steps to achieve higher rates?*

Rodriguez: The Army is focusing on building dining facilities that are the right size and right location to support the feeding mission. Way ahead is looking at some of the existing dining facilities to incorporate changes that will allow flexibility in design to established Provisions on Demand (POD) feeding stations based on the menu items. Adding to the construction project is placing a kiosk in key areas on base to support the feeding mission.

—GFS