

TABLE FOR 200 PLEASE!

Photography Stephen Baccon

If you think it's hard dreaming up family meals night after night, spare a thought for the chefs – and their staff – who cater to hundreds. By Erin O'Dwyer.



St Andrews College, Sydney University: cooking for 300

Celebrity chefs chatter on our screens and smile from our bookshelves but as they stray further from the heat of the kitchen, who are the people responsible for feeding that most difficult of clientele – the masses?

To answer this, *Sunday Life* slipped into kitchens where a dinner sitting is akin to a military operation. These dedicated cooks prepare meals, often three a day, for hundreds of hungry mouths (and as many personalities). They work in unusual environments, to tight schedules, for a crowd whose tastes can range from steak-and-three-veg to gluten-intolerant.

THE COLLEGE

Amit Malhotra stands proud in his white chef's toque and doubled-breasted jacket. "I feel hurt when I say I work at St Andrews College and people say, 'Oh, you run the canteen there.' That is a misperception – it's not a canteen by any standards."

On the evening *Sunday Life* attends a formal dinner at the University of Sydney college, it's like dining at a five-star hotel. Staff in starched whites wait on our table. The silverware gleams and, magically, my wineglass is always full. By his own admission, Malhotra, 42, runs a tight ship. He rose from the position of hotel trainee to executive chef at the prestigious Mughal Sheraton in his native India. There, hotel quality is determined not by its rooms or facilities, but by its menu. "And the food here is a shade better than Sheraton quality," says Malhotra.

Students agree. "The food is very good," says Tim Dunstone, a postgraduate physiotherapy student. "When you're working and studying, it's something you don't have to worry about."

The cuisine also attracts college alumni, such as Colin Davidson, a retired judge. "It's much better than what I remember getting in the '50s," says Davidson, a regular. "We had stew. And too many carrots."

Tonight, the carrots are steamed to crisp perfection. After an enormous caesar salad comes Moroccan chicken, which Malhotra has marinated overnight in a secret spice mix. The tangy fillets are served with a creamy tarragon sauce with a hint of white wine alongside a mushroom risotto with fresh herbs. Dessert is tiramisu or chocolate mud cake. The icing on the mud cake is a heavenly one-inch thick.

The co-ed college serves three meals a day, seven days a week. Four nights a week, it is a sit-down affair. The students arrive at 6.30pm and file into the historic hall wearing academic gowns over skintight jeans and summery frocks. The scene resembles Harry Potter's Hogwarts. Stained-glass windows, framed portraits and, seated at the high table on a raised platform, alumni and college staff. There are whoops – "Freshers, yeeha!" – apparently, an ancient jest at the first-year students – then we stand for a grace given by Bill Porges, the principal. →