



HMAS Cerberus Royal Australian Navy base: cooking for 800



NAVY CATERING COLLEGE

Any expectation that Australia's troops face the kind of meals that hit metal trays with a resounding "splat" is dispelled upon entering the large polished-chrome kitchen, or galley, at the Royal Australian Navy's largest training base, HMAS Cerberus, 70 kilometres south-east of Melbourne.

Here, a dozen first-year apprentice chefs, all navy trainees, are hard at it, preparing not only for lunch but dinner that night, and even the next day's breakfast. In one corner of the kitchen, apprentices work on vats of mincemeat for cottage pie. In another, beside four refrigerator-sized ovens that can accommodate 170-centimetre-tall trolleys stacked with food trays, three apprentices crack 30-dozen eggs into a suitcase-sized plastic tub for the next morning's scrambled eggs. One harried apprentice takes to the 20-centimetre-deep mixture with a hand whisk, surely wishing it were an oar.

Assisted by contracted caterers, these apprentices and their instructors make 12,000 meals a week (including ration packs for those on training exercises) to feed the base's 800 recruits, staff and visitors, including army and air force personnel. Today's lunch menu features roast lamb, grilled pork chops, beef tortellini, chicken pilaf, hamburgers, sandwiches and a range of salad and dessert options. When, at lunch time, a few hundred young men and women descend on three lines of steaming bain-maries like an orderly plague of locusts, little is left behind. And in the adjoining dining area, a cavernous space with a high tin roof, they consume the food quickly and with a minimum of racket. It's far more hectic inside the galley.

According to Warrant Officer Class One Michael Ward, from the Australian Defence Force's school of catering, feeding Australia's troops has come →

The hall is momentarily silent. Then it's two, four, six, eight – bog in, don't wait. "They've mastered the art of consuming three courses in 28-and-a-half minutes," observes Porges. "On a slow night, it's 29-and-a-half."

The students have formed a food committee to pass on praise... or brickbats. Committee member and economics student Denise Skipper says the variety of the menu is its strength. "Generally, people are happy with the food," she says. "The girls like the salad bar and the guys like the pasta. The beef and black bean is better than what you get on King Street [in nearby Newtown]."

Complaints are few but when they arrive, Skipper goes to the top: Malhotra. Recently, students took issue with the lettuce. "We had mesclun mix and people liked iceberg," she says. "Amit said, 'That's good – iceberg's cheaper.' People were uptight about that. They thought it looked too herb-y."

Minimising costs and staying creative is a happy challenge for Malhotra. His kitchen employs eight full-time staff and six casual student waiters. He plans a skeleton menu a few days in advance but keeps his eye out for specials. "Say I'm planning

chicken but my supplier says we have some nice fillets of beef for \$11 a kilo, I would immediately change the menu," he says.

Malhotra usually arrives after the buffet breakfast – eggs (poached, fried or boiled), meats (bacon and sausages) and hot sides (hash browns, baked beans, spaghetti), plus nine cereals, yogurt and fruit – is finished. He then begins lunch preparations for as many as 15 salads accompanied by cold meats. Fresh bread rolls are delivered warm from a nearby bakery. There might also be tandoori chicken wraps, pasta or potatoes to keep the boys happy. He takes the growing number of dietary requests seriously – such as gluten- or lactose-free – even if it means making a different meal, and there is always a vegetarian option.

"It's a real challenge because we have 300-odd and you have to please everybody," he says. "But I take pride in my work; I enjoy it. I could get a job in a hotel any day but I like the personal rapport with the students. I walk out and ask them what they want to have for lunch tomorrow and if they say caesar salad, I make sure that tomorrow, caesar salad is there."