

Jailhouse chef

Press-Telegram

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By A.K. Whitney, Food Editor

What do the mayor of Long Beach and a prisoner in the city jail have in common?

Chocolate chip cookies.

That's right, the delicious treats, nibbled in both council chambers and jail cells, come from the same kitchen, that of Felix Franklin, Long Beach Police Department Food Services Administrator.

And that kitchen is on the sixth floor of LBPD headquarters downtown, smack in the middle of the men's jail, probably the only kitchen for miles around that is behind barricades of solid steel.

The setting is not lost on Franklin.

"I find it a bit depressing," said Franklin, 71, who was recruited as chef in 1990. "We're in jail."

But the setting is not depressing enough to persuade Franklin to fly the coop.

"I love to cook," he said. "My satisfaction is when people eat (my cooking) and enjoy it."

No matter what those people may have done?

"My job here is not to punish," said Franklin. "I've had people

come in and say, this guy is a real egghead, I'm going to give him something bad. And I say, if you prepare a meal, it's going to be fixed right."

The prisoners get three squares a day (last year, Franklin's kitchen produced 150,000 meals). Breakfast is served at 4 a.m., lunch at 9 a.m. and dinner at 3 p.m. The reason behind these hours has less to do with punishment and more to do with court schedules.

Examples of meals "fixed right" include chili with rice, spaghetti with meatballs and garlic bread and baked hamburger loaf. Lunch is most likely sandwiches and pasta salads.

"We don't give them second-class stuff," said Franklin. "But we don't give them fancy."

And, inevitably, there are cookies for dessert, though not always chocolate chip – Franklin also has cinnamon sugar, peanut butter and oatmeal in his repertoire.

It is those cookies that have earned him a reputation outside the jail walls.

Though prisoners' meals are the main objective, Franklin also caters City Council meetings every week, cooks meals for police functions and basically caters for the whole city.

This makes a lot of extra work for Franklin, so he has to recruit prisoners to help. Inmates, for example, do all the dishes. And "some of them have abilities," Franklin said, so they are given cooking tasks.

Franklin, however, carefully chooses who gets the job of chopping vegetables.

"You've got knives and stuff here," Franklin said, adding that he

usually chooses domestic abusers for such tasks, because they tend to only bully their wives or girlfriends and won't try anything with another man.

While most chefs would recoil at the idea of having a wife batterer chop their salads, Franklin doesn't seem to let it bother him. He is a tough customer from way back.

"I spent 21 years in the Navy," he said.

The Navy is where Franklin was taught to cook, but the food he was preparing was far from the usual sailor's chow. He worked for an admiral who took his meals seriously, so seriously he insisted Franklin get his education in hotel kitchens from gourmet chefs. This, Franklin soon found, was as much work as boot camp.

"I just hated it," Franklin said.

But the skills he absorbed soon paid off – he cooked two meals, on two separate occasions, for John F. Kennedy.

And the president seemed to appreciate his efforts.

"He said, 'I remember you!' " Franklin said.

But JFK may not be the only one to remember Franklin. Boxing fans will remember him as "The Fighting Baker," a welterweight who won three Golden Glove tournaments in San Diego, three in Los Angeles and one nationally.

And then there were the 1952 Olympics, where Franklin was doing great "I didn't lose a fight" until he injured his hand against an East German boxer.

Why the "Fighting Baker?" Was it a reference to his prowess with chocolate chip cookies?

Perhaps not with those, Franklin said, but it definitely referred to his work in the Navy kitchens.

JAILHOUSE CHOCOLATE CHIP COOKIES

1/2 cup shortening

1/2 cup butter or margarine

1/2 cup granulated sugar

1 cup packed brown sugar

1/2 teaspoon baking soda

2 eggs

1 teaspoon vanilla

2 1/2 cups pastry flour

2 cups semisweet chocolate chips

1 1/2 cup chopped nuts (optional)

Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

Using an electric mixer, cream together shortening and butter, then gradually beat in the sugar, brown sugar and baking soda.

Beat in the eggs and vanilla, then the flour. If the dough gets too stiff for an electric mixer, stir in the rest of the flour by hand.

Fold in chocolate chips and nuts.

Drop dough in spoonfuls, approximately 2 inches apart, onto an ungreased cookie sheet. Bake 8 to 10 minutes, or until edges are

browned.

Makes approximately 5 dozen.

BAKED HAMBURGER LOAF

3/4 pound onions, finely chopped

1/4 pound celery, finely chopped

2 ounces salad oil

1/3 pound fresh bread crumbs

4 ounces beef stock

2 eggs

Salt and pepper, to taste

4 pounds ground beef

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Saute onions and celery in oil until tender. Place bread crumbs in large mixing bowl and add stock. Mix thoroughly until smooth, then add eggs, celery, onions and seasonings.

Add beef and mix thoroughly. If mixture is too moist, adjust consistency by adding more bread crumbs.

Form mixture into a loaf. Place in lightly greased roast pan and lightly oil outside of loaf.

Bake for 1 1/2 hours.

Serves 10 to 12.

