

Local Coast Guard cutter proves fine dining isn't just for 5-star restaurants

Story by PA1 Zachary Zubricki, First District Public Affairs

Boston's sprawling Coast Guard base in the North End is directly across from Hanover Street, renowned for its fine Italian restaurants, cafes and bakeries. For sailors eating in Coast Guard Cutter Seneca's award-winning galley, however, the same fine dining is a luxury savored every single work day. The International Food Service Executive Association (IFSEA) awarded the Boston-based cutter the Coast Guard Dining Facility of the Year Award in a ceremony April 5, 2008 in Denver.



Petty Officer 1st Class Ronald R. DeLeon, a food service specialist, prepares for the evening meal in the galley aboard Coast Guard Cutter Seneca, April 26, 2008. (Coast Guard photo/PA1 Zachary Zubricki)

Seneca is a 270-foot medium endurance cutter, one of 13 famous class cutters the Coast Guard operates nationwide. Winning the coveted prize within the Large Afloat category, the cutter won for the second consecutive year.

Patrols can last up to 2 ½ months for these multi-mission cutters. At sea, they conduct search and rescue operations, national defense missions, maritime law enforcement and alien migrant interdiction.

Six cooks - called food service specialists - work 12-to-15 hours a day aboard Seneca, and help keep the 98-person crew in good spirits during the long patrol.

"They ask us what we would like to see on the menu and they make sure we are enjoying what we are eating," said crewman Petty Officer 2nd Class Michael S. Thomasson. "It's a huge morale booster. They are always coming up with creative ideas just to keep everything interesting, and the salad bar on a daily basis looks like something you would see in a five-star restaurant."

The food service staff was judged on quality of food, food safety, cost effectiveness and procedures. Feedback forms are available to each crewmember during meals, and these were carefully scrutinized by IFSEA judges and helped convince them to award Seneca's cooks their second trophy, both of which are proudly on display in the ship's galley.

Thomasson said it would be too hard to pick his favorite meal because they are all so good, but he fondly recalled dining on baked Bombay Sea Trout "with just the right amount of seasoning."

"It's all about taking care of the crew," said Petty Officer 1st Class Ronald R. DeLeon, a senior food service specialist. "We don't just feed the crew. We have a monthly morale meeting and we listen to them. They like the food on the side we make in addition to what's on the menu."

DeLeon and his team pride themselves on being creative with the menu to keep things different. Examples include "burger-palooza night" when crewmembers choose from 40 different toppings, or a pizza night when each department on the cutter can request a custom pizza made from scratch.

"We are famous for theme nights," DeLeon said. "We do Latin nights, Italian nights, luau's. Every Tuesday we have wing night. Almost every day we have something going on for morale."

A native of the Philippines, DeLeon moved to Jacksonville, Fla., where he joined the Navy in 1986 and became a cook. DeLeon had a wide range of assignments in the Navy, where he cooked at a naval air



Petty Officer 2nd Class Michael S. Thomasson serves himself some fresh soup in the galley of Coast Guard Cutter Seneca, April 26, 2008. (Coast Guard photo/PA1 Zachary Zubricki)

station, and aboard a frigate and air craft carrier. DeLeon said his most interesting assignments were when he was selected to be a White House cook in 1991 and again in 1993.

"It was fun, because I met a lot of prestigious people, but at some point, I felt I wanted to go back and be a regular sailor," DeLeon said.

He joined the Coast Guard in 2000 and said one of the things he most enjoys about being underway is the close bond he has formed with his shipmates.



Coast Guard Rear Adm. Mark Tedesco, Director of the Coast Guard Health and Safety program (left), presents Petty Officer 1st Class Ronald DeLeon, a Food Service Specialist stationed aboard the Coast Guard Cutter SENECA, with the International Food Service Executives Association (IFSEA) Dining Facility of the Year Award for the Large Afloat category, with Master Chief Petty Officer Kevin Isherwood, Command Master Chief, Coast Guard Pacific Area, Saturday, April 5, 2008. The award is the SENECA's second consecutive Dining Facility of the Year Award. (U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Kip Wadlow)

DeLeon and his fellow cooks thrive on the challenge of preparing three meals a day, plus a fourth for the night watch, in a galley that is short on elbow room. DeLeon said cooking underway requires the staff to be flexible, which helps enable the crew to perform its mission.

DeLeon said his duties don't end when the meals are over. The ship regularly conducts man overboard and shipboard firefighting drills, and DeLeon and his staff are expected to fill their assigned roles despite just like everyone else. And after a long training mission, there's no shortage of hungry sailors.

"We still have to come up with a meal for the whole crew," DeLeon said. That's where the skills all of sudden come out. It's like an assembly line. Sometimes I surprise myself when we get it done in 45 minutes."

Logistics are also a big part of the job, according to DeLeon. When the cutter embarks on a long patrol, the galley is stocked with about 500 pounds of potatoes, 200 pounds of onions, 400 pounds of chicken, 400 pounds of red meat, 200 pounds of sausage and ten cases of coffee.

"As much as possible as far as cooking is concerned, we love to cook with fresh food, and we find a way to cycle it in as we hit port," said DeLeon.

"I think they deserve the trophy," said Petty Officer 3rd Class Luis S. Rodriguez, a food service specialist new to the team.

"A lot of the food we do here in the Coast Guard is all from scratch," said Rodriguez, a former Army cook. "In the Army a lot of the food is pre-made."

Rodriguez said he is learning a lot from the cooks he works with, who have helped him transition to a new service.

"They always put something more into the meal," he said. "Here, they care about it. It's the heart they put into it."