

Dining excellence

Fort Benning facility hoping to be named tops in the Army world

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The staff and management of the NCO Academy Dining Facility (DFAC) are hoping for an early Christmas present. They are anxiously awaiting the judges' decision in the Philip Connelly Excellence in Army Food Service Award. The Fort Benning facility has already won best large Army DFAC in the southeast, a first for Fort Benning, and they hope to bring home the trophy for best in the world.

The dining hall, run by L&S Services, started going for the gold about a year ago when they were recognized for best Thanksgiving decorations. From there they took honors for best inspection, then Fort Benning commander Maj. Gen. Walter Wojdakowski nominated them for the Connelly award. Now the DFAC is up against seven other Army large facilities worldwide.

A three-person inspection team, one International Food Service Executives Association (IFSEA) representative and two Army Quartermaster Center and School (QMC&S) representatives, visited the NCO Academy Nov. 16. The judges and the criteria are tough. "We only look at the best in the entire Army. The fact that we are here means it (NCO Academy DFAC) is pretty good," explained James Riddle, the IFSEA team member.



The NCO Academy Dining Facility (DFAC) at Fort Benning has been named best large Army DFAC in the southeast and is now being judged against seven others in the world for the Philip Connelly Excellence in Army Food Service Award.



Cook Roosevelt Johnson confers with judge James Riddle.

The judging had an inauspicious beginning. The morning they were to begin the inspection, their trip was delayed by a power outage. The team was able to get another flight and so made their breakfast and lunch visits the next day. The staff was ready for them.

Manager Ronald Jenkins said they have been practicing the lunch for a year. The menu included their signature dish, beef yakisoba, as well as lemon baked fish and rotisserie chicken. The NCO Academy kitchen is the only one with a rotisserie and so that is also a specialty. The

chicken wings are another specialty and one of the soldiers' favorites. Each cook creates his or her own signature sauce. In addition to the entrees, the serving line includes short order items like hamburgers and taco salad, and deli sandwiches. There is also a salad and dessert bar.

Jenkins, who has been manager for a year and a half, says he and the staff have revamped the facility. They started with a blank slate: white walls with little decoration, and came up with the color scheme and décor color scheme. The entrance now looks like a café, plants and curtains add color and art from Partner in Education Hardaway High adorns the



A meal served by the NCO Academy Dining Facility.

walls.

That is just the packaging. The staff has also focused on the food and its presentation. "People eat with their eyes," Jenkins said. "The first thing we want to do is grab their attention. It's rewarding when a person looks at the food, can't decide and wants

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a little of everything."

Jenkins believes they have come so far in the awards process because of attention to detail. "The Army food service is very regulated. There are policies and standards," he explained and laughed. "They even have a technique to mop the floors."

The judges watched the preparation and serving of each meal, talked with soldiers and kitchen workers and sampled the fare.

Chief Warrant Officer Michael Gillis, the senior member of the judging team, watched the cooks make bread in the morning. He advised one of the soldiers in the line he better get some. "It's got a honey butter glaze on it," he said.

Gillis, who has been in Army Food Service for more than 30 years, obviously enjoys this part of his job. "For us, this is the most coveted and prestigious competition there is. This is equivalent of four or five stars for a restaurant."

Riddle, who also served in the Army before joining IFSEA, believes the competition helps improve the quality of the food and as a result the soldier benefits.

The results of the evaluations are expected before Christmas and each committee will name a winner and runner-up. In addition to a silver bowl or plaque, selected representatives of both winning and runner-up units are hosted as guests of honor at the weeklong food education conference of IFSEA.