

ARMY CULINARY ARTS COMPETITION AT FORT LEE

Gourmet meals on field-grade equipment

BY R.M. WIGGINS
STAFF WRITER

FORT LEE — Sometimes it becomes necessary to improvise, adapt and overcome a challenge.

"That's what we do," said Marine Gunnery Sgt. Jesse Rogers, assistant team manager for the Marine Field Cooking Team. All of the team members are instructors at the Joint Culinary Center of Excellence, Rogers said.

The Field Cooking event began Tuesday with the Army Reserve Team and Marines going head-to-head in an event that requires planning, preparation and a willingness to adapt to any situation that the team may find itself in. For the event, teams must prepare 50 portions of a three-course meal, all within a set period of time.

The very presence of the

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Staff Sgt. Karla Arce from the Marines team prepares potatoes during the field cooking competition at the Army Culinary Arts Competition on Tuesday.

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Marines in the event shows the joint nature of the Army Culinary Competition and the fact that the forces train together on post. For team captain Marine Staff Sgt. Lenard Tilly, the event is also an opportunity and a privilege.

"Everybody doesn't get the chance to represent their service," Tilly said. "It's an honor to come out here to display our skills."

But that honor also comes with the occasional challenge. Whether that's minor electrical issues that both teams apparently faced early in Tuesday's event or the nature of cooking a gourmet meal on a piece of military equipment designed to be deployed to the front lines.

"One of the challenges we might face today is the fuel supply," Tilly said. The containerized kitchens that the teams cook their meals on in

the field-cooking event are designed to be deployed with units. From the "CK" they can prepare meals for up to 800 soldiers three times per day — the cook tops and ovens in the CK are powered by Modern Burner Units using JP-8 — essentially jet fuel. "Anything can happen. If that fuel supply isn't even, it can be a challenge like something you wouldn't face in a kitchen with a steady gas line."

Another challenge for the event, according to Tilly, is the timing. Courses must be going out of the kitchen starting at 11:20 a.m. and service must be completed within a set amount of time or a team can lose points. While is still being served, a second course may not yet be completed.

For the Marines, their first course — a cream of broccoli soup — was still being served to tables while duchess potatoes were being prepared in an oven on the containerized kitchen.

Before guests arrived,

Rogers gave junior Marines tips on serving to the guests.

Marine Pvt. Hector Martinez said that it feels good to be participating in the event. "I'm a little nervous because I've never done anything like this before," Rogers said. In addition to never having worked as a restaurant server before, Martinez said that he was nervous because he would be serving senior leaders. Among the diners Tuesday at the field event, which was closed to the public, were Maj. Gen. James Hodge, Combined Arms Support Command, Sustainment Center of Excellence and Fort Lee commanding general; Brig. Gen. Gwen Bingham, quartermaster general; retired Lt. Gen. David Weisman, civilian aide to the secretary of the Army; and Col. Rodney Edge, Fort Lee garrison commander.

It wasn't just the eyes of senior military leadership on the servers and the teams, it was the eyes of judges like Certified Master Chef Steve

Miller:

"We're looking to see if the meal is appropriately sized, if it's hygienically prepared, if the flavors tastes and textures combine well," Miller said. "It's really up to the team to make sure that they produce the best meal possible."

Miller said that he saw a lot of great teamwork in both kitchens. "These have both been well organized teams that have a lot of team spirit," Miller said.

Today, the event opens to the public with multiple events including field cooking, ice carving and an international competition similar to Sunday's Armed Forces Chef of the Year event. Admission to the event is free, tickets for field cooking meals can be purchased starting at 11 a.m. there are only 50 tickets available per team.

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