



# THE HAND THAT FEEDS



by Abby Luby

**Since when does an institutional food menu include oxtail soup, jerk chicken, sausage jambalaya, fried yucca or bread pudding with whiskey sauce?**

Since Joe Hand took charge of the kitchen at the New York Military Academy, that's when.

With about 350 cadets and staff at the Cornwall-based academy, the meals at the campus have changed quite a bit since 1995, when Joe Hand became manager and chef of the NYMA kitchen. Integral to Hand's innovative menus is assuring the cadets get healthy and nourishing food while keeping the selections interesting and different.

New York Military Academy (NYMA, pronounced "NEE-mah"), a century-old, now co-ed military boarding school for grades 7 to 12, attracts students from all over the world. Well-known alumni and ranking officers from nearby West Point regularly frequent the mess hall, where the typical

menu is on a five-week cycle; most breakfasts are the same but the daily lunches and dinners change from week to week.

Within that framework, Hand creates diverse *raisons d'être* to jazz up his menu. Dinners for all four Thursdays during Black History month in February, for example, offer African-American cuisine—from fried catfish to collards, jerk chicken and oxtail soup (something like beef stew without the potato and celery). On "Cajun Nights," dishes include chicken and sausage jambalaya, fried catfish, beans and rice, salad and corn bread, and bread pudding with whiskey sauce.

Hand feels that young people should learn about new foods. "If you give kids different foods enough, they will make the decision to try it," he says. "We put garbanzo beans and baby corns on the salad bar and if it's on there enough, they'll eat it. To me, I'm teaching them as well as feeding them. I'm doing both which puts me ahead of the game."



One recent lunch included deep-fried yucca—a potato-like side dish Hand had been introduced to at a fine foods show. He was convinced that the cadets would like it if they thought it was fried potatoes (the yucca looked strikingly similar to Tater Tots). “Having worked with young adults all my life,” he says, “I listen to the cadets to know what their preference is for food. I balance the fried items with healthier foods.” To that end, he put a health bar “on wheels,” to encourage more students to choose fruit, raisins, cottage cheese, coconuts and yogurt.

And Hand is not above making food fun, or sometimes even creepy. For Halloween, he served “Frankenstein Ribs with Fried Maggots in Earth” (beef ribs with rice in a brown sauce). “What is my goal? Making sure my kids are happy and that they are eating quality food, nourishing food.”

For Joe Hand, successfully serving more than a thousand meals a year necessitates regular feedback from the cadets. Not only does he want to know if they like the food but also if the mess hall is working efficiently for them. At

lunch, for example, about 320 cadets are served complete meals in two cafeteria-style serving lines—total elapsed time to serve them all is less than 15 minutes. A few minutes after the primary service some already are back for seconds.

Hand’s main assistant is Eboni Abassa, a senior student liaison from Togo, Africa. Abassa is Hand’s “ear to the ground”—the mess hall officer who weighs in with the cadets for feedback and input on the menu.

Abassa connects with each grade-level leader to make sure there are no discipline issues at meal times. Hand also relies on Abassa to make announcements from the kitchen as well as to invite cadets to contribute to special-event meals. “The kids have to know that this is their mess hall and they have ownership here,” Abassa stresses. “All the cadets being involved with running of the mess hall is giving them exposure to real-world situations.”

Involving youngsters in the basic living skills is a model based on Hand’s rearing. Born in Burgaw, North Carolina,





he was the fifth child in a family of nine. He grew up on a farm where his father was a sharecropper for peanuts, corn, tobacco, strawberries, cabbage.

"You go to school during the day and you come home and hit the fields until it gets dark, then you feed the chickens and the hogs, you chop the wood and get ready for bed," Hand remembers. "Church—you had to walk three or four miles for Sunday school and then you had to walk back. You pull off those clothes for next Sunday and put on your Monday-to-Saturday clothes."

Hand seemed to gravitate toward the kitchen, helping his mother chop wood for cooking biscuits in the stove, or getting a rooster's "neck wrung" for dinner. One hand cut okra and washed vegetables while with the other pumped well water. "I don't remember my mom actually teaching me to cook, but just by being with her in the kitchen she did, because here I am," he beams.

He compares farming 50 years ago to today's chemical-dependent farming techniques. "In the 1950s, these

chemicals weren't available and you had the kids out there in the fields actually picking off the worms—hence the food wasn't contaminated. Very few farmers today have machinery that does the work of laborers. When I was on the farm, there was a lot of workers. Now we have these big machines that do the work of the laborers and you have more chemicals that go into the food."

Growing up working on a farm meant that "responsibility came quite early," he says. "You know how to drive when you're pretty young because you have to drive the tractor. Dad tells you to get in the field, he's not going to show you but twice and then you got to do it yourself. I drove the school bus tenth to twelfth grade in high school."

After high school, Hand left for New York City with his future wife. ("My mom told me I could go as soon as I finished harvesting the crop in December, which I did, then I left." He arrived in New York City in 1961 with a high school diploma and credentials of being a responsible,





hard worker. At age 18 he began work as a pot washer in the kitchen of Roosevelt Hospital. Later that year he was hired by a Massachusetts food service company, Servamation, to work in the cafeteria at Teacher's College at Columbia University. Hand started there for \$40 a week as a line server making sandwiches, then moved up to the grill station, then to the fast-food counter, finally becoming night supervisor.

"One thing took me to the next level and then the next level," Hand remembers. "When I got to the point of being night supervisor at Teacher's College, the manager left and I asked to become a manager. Within three months, if I didn't make the grade, they would put me back to night supervisor, but I made the grade and they wanted to send me to school."

Columbia sent Hand to Pratt Institute in Brooklyn for a semester where he found that classroom lessons weren't really teaching him anything new, but he also realized that formal education has some intrinsic value. "I guess being

young and not understanding the educational part about food service I agreed to go, but while I was in school my mind was really back at the cafeteria. What they were teaching me in the books I was way above that. I was wasting my time. I don't think there is any classroom education that can teach what you get from hands on, but there is that very valuable piece of learning that you can get from school that you could take to the job with you."

In 1979, Hand left Columbia to work for Dining and Kitchen Administration (DAKA), a spin-off company of Servamation. DAKA sent him to the University of Bridgeport, Connecticut, where in 1984 he became food service director. "There were 1,400 kids on the meal plan," Hand recalls. "It was a huge operation, and I was in charge of all of the meals on the campus—the cash operation as well as the board plan for students."

Hand's talents earned him a bigger district, including two more schools; he was promoted to area manager and later to district manager. "When you get beyond a certain

number of units, you become district manager, which means you could supervise up to 12 units."

In 1992, Hand left DAKA and joined another spin-off company, Culinary Management Corporation, based in Woodbury, New York, which employed him at Webb Institute on Long Island. In 1995 he was transferred to NYMA.

Joe Hand's years of experience gave him the bigger picture of food service, from tweaking the seasoning for jambalaya to creating menus and arranging food delivery to numerous schools and institutions simultaneously. "I got all the plates in the air now," he says. "A plate each for catering, meal plans, cash food and Meals on Wheels. Whether it's fine dining or institutional style cooking and service—I have a sense of both."

NYMA Communications Director Barbara Malone is impressed with Joe Hand's career and his role today at the academy. "Joe has worked his way up to a management position but he still rolls his sleeves up and does cooking. He even helps wash dishes; he does everything," she notes.

Hand does occasionally cook at NYMA. He likes to experiment with new recipes, testing each first on a small scale and then multiplying it to see if the dish holds up for 350 people. "I like cooking sometimes but I really enjoy teaching other people how to cook," he says.

Hand often recognizes talent in the kitchen and easily offers opportunities for any of his crew to try things out. Husband-and-wife team Olvina and Armondo Campos were cooking when Hand first got to NYMA. Hand steered Armondo towards management. "Armondo knew how to cook but he didn't know the office part, like how much to order. I taught him that aspect of food service. After that he was promoted to his own unit at Tuxedo Park School and I supervise him from here. Olvina Campos makes better soup than I ever could, so I let her cook. She's doing a marvelous job." Hand realizes that "the best part of managing any operation is treating your employees the way you want to be treated and just be fair. You also have to keep trying—if you burn the bread today, you got to try again tomorrow."

These days, Hand really shines when it comes to high-quality catering. At NYMA's Alumni Weekend he will juggle more than twice the usual number of meals. He oversees feeding the cadets as well as the alumni for breakfast, lunch, barbecues, special class dedication and dinners.

"I do this with the same number of staff," says Hand. "I have a lot of balls in the air and it's a busy weekend, but it's fun. After I feed the cadets I have to flip the dining room over for the alumni. It's got to rock and roll. We get it done, that's what makes it exciting."

While "juggling all those balls in the air," Hand does not lose sight of small details. "It's not the big things that usually trip up managers or chefs in any big operation," Hand says. "If your menu calls for steam ship [whole leg of beef carved on a stand] with roasted potatoes, broccoli *au gratin*, rolls and butter, and you forget the butter—that's the thing you forgot to write down and mark off before you got



running. All of a sudden someone asks for hot tea with lemon and you're saying, 'Where's the lemon?' All you know is the steamship is there!"

Malone says visiting military officers who are on the move from bases all over the world appreciate Hand's menus. "The universal comment that I get is they are so used to bad military food and they are so happy to be here because they consider this to be home-cooked food," Malone says. "It's not the experience they have on military bases. To have a home base where the food is nurturing means a lot to them."

When Hand came to NYMA eight years ago, he didn't have any grand scheme to change the way things were done in the mess hall or to modify the food on the menu. He says he just arrived with his expertise and did what he knew how to do best. "I wasn't coming to flip the table over," he says. "Joe was coming here as Joe, and I said to the staff, 'This is what I think we should do.' And this is where we are and I'm very happy doing what I do."

For Joe Hand, the quality of the food he serves at the New York Military Academy is critically important, but he also knows why his food must be so good.

"I know managers that think once the food is in the house they can say 'I'll see you tomorrow.' They have no interest in seeing students getting fed," he comments.

Clearly, that is not Joe Hand's way. "My responsibility here is that once the last cadet is fed, then I can go home." ❖

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