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## Where There's Smoke, There's Dinner

By NICK SAMBIDES Jr.

JOE MAIDA can defibrillate a stalled heart as easily as he can pull people from a vehicle trapped underwater. The rookie firefighter can also adroitly handle the less-daunting technical tasks that perhaps only veteran firefighters admire, such as seamlessly hooking a hose to a standpipe in total darkness.

And can he ever cook.

It seems the one thing that his fellow Stamford firefighters most appreciate about Firefighter Maida, a scuba diver and emergency medical technician, is his culinary ability, which is the last thing he thought would happen.

When he arrived at the department a year and a half ago, Firefighter Maida was informed that he would have to learn to cook with the best of them before he would really be respected.

"I told them, 'I've never tried it before, but I've seen it done before,' " he said one recent Saturday night after serving a flawless meal of generously seasoned London broil, baked potatoes and steamed vegetables.

A fellow Stamford firefighter, Jim Randall, was not nearly as comfortable in the kitchen when he was a rookie about 10 years ago. When told to prepare open-faced turkey sandwiches for lunch, he returned from a grocery store at 11 a.m. with two frozen turkeys.

"The guys said, 'What are we going to do with these?' " Lt. Phil Hayes said. "And he said: 'Why? You wanted turkey. This is turkey.' "

In the tradition-steeped world of firefighting, cooking is a rite of passage. The rookies set the table and clean up after the veterans, especially during overnight shifts. They also wash the vehicles, sweep the floors and clean the bathrooms.

Whenever a menial duty needs to be done, they do it, and keep it, until a newer firefighter comes along, which can sometimes take as long as five years.

The cooking duties are intended to build camaraderie, not to haze, said Jim Duffy, a captain with the Wallingford Fire Department.

"Besides," he said, "somebody did it to us. This is how we get even."

Captain Duffy, whose rookie specialty was shrimp fra diavolo over pasta, added: "The traditions help them become part of the team, part of the brotherhood. The newer guys must learn that each individual serves the group. People coming from the private sector might not understand that.

"You go to a firehouse anywhere in the country and you will see similar traditions. In this case, with the food, it builds morale, and that helps with the safety of the unit, and ultimately, the safety of the public at fire scenes. The guys watch out for each other."

Thomas Curcio, an assistant fire chief in New London, said that making the rookies cook "puts a little more pressure on them to perform."

His kitchen specialty was grilled Cajun steak, garlic mashed potatoes and a grilled vegetables dish, and the meal was said to be a favorite among his colleagues.

When it comes to handing out cooking responsibilities, the fire departments vary their approaches. Stamford and New Haven firefighters give their rookies time on the job as cook's assistants, sometimes for several years, before allowing them to run a kitchen.

"I guess the guys don't want to chance a rookie coming in and destroying a meal," said Ron Dumas, an assistant fire chief in New Haven.

It was at least three years before he made a debut with his specialty: pork chops smothered in gravy, with cabbage, corn bread and a banana pudding dessert.

Many departments, like Wallingford's and New London's, have their rookies cook a huge, elaborate dinner during their first overnight shift. Other departments make sure the rookies are the last to eat and the first to clear the table.

John Kruczek spent hours preparing food at home before serving his first overnight meal in Wallingford in 1999. He made chicken cordon bleu, mixed vegetables and fresh bread. Dessert was brownies, rich with chocolate but light on the palate. The veterans were satisfied.

One of Kruczek's rivals, John Rainey, brought lasagna to his shift. He too passed the taste test, but the veterans criticized him for serving food prepared by his mother.

John Silvestri's shrimp scampi with broccoli was said to be a delight, but a few of his Wallingford diners grumbled when he erred in leaving the tails on the shrimp.

Cooking for so many critics while starting a new career can be stressful. Kevin Costello knew he would eventually have to cook when New London hired him in August. He was ordered to have a meal ready on his first overnight duty -- or else.

The rookie had his wife, Amy, help him make lasagna. "It went well," he said. "Nobody died or got sick."

Assistant Chief Curcio said, "We ribbed him about getting helped by his wife, but it was a good meal."

Firefighter Costello can also make a good Salisbury steak and a fine meat pie -- with his wife's help.

"She pretty much prepares everything and tells me what to do," he said. "I like the tradition; it's a way to get to know everybody. A firehouse is really your second home, and the firefighters are your second family. Just like at home, it's great to have traditions."

Not every rookie likes cooking, and some of the stories have become legend. Besides Firefighter Randall's miscue with the frozen turkeys, which some regard as clever -- "He did that the first time," Firefighter Keith Gower said, "and he never got asked into the kitchen again" -- there was the rookie who confused cabbage with lettuce, and the meal in which the jalapeño sauce melted the tinfoil.

Firefighter Maida likes the tradition, but will enjoy eating someone else's cooking when the city hires new firefighters in November.

"There are times when I am at home," he said, "and I ask my wife, 'What should I cook for dinner tonight?' I'm not even at work yet and already I am worried about it."

In Middletown 11 years ago, one firefighter found he had to instill the tradition. When Samuel Jones arrived in 1991, he was aghast to find that his co-workers were eating brown-bag meals. After fighting fires for 10 years in Jackson, Miss., he knew the value of a cooked meal on the job.

One night he brought in four large sacks of food, several implements -- including a cast-iron skillet -- and made a Southern classic: fried chicken, biscuits and grits with tomato gravy.

"When he started, we thought, 'What a disaster is going on in there,' " Robert Ross, Middletown's fire chief, said of Jones, who is now the assistant fire marshal in Middletown. "He had these big spoonfuls of Crisco going into the frying pan and flour flying everywhere. We were sure we would have to send out for pizza."

But the meal, the chief said, was extraordinary.

"If Sam was cooking in the station tonight, I would come in for it," he said. "I'd lie to my wife and tell her I had to go to a meeting."

Photos: Above, Firefighters Joe Maida, left, and Stuart Rieve draining egg noodles at a downtown Stamford firehouse. At left, firefighters who eat in Stamford like to load their plates; Firefighters Maida and Tom Gibbons finish a run and head back to the firehouse where, bottom, their colleagues are serving themselves. (Chris Maynard for The New York Times)