

Go To Section

SEARCH ARCHIVES:

HOME

NEWS

BUSINESS

SPORTS

FEATURES

HELP

EDITORIAL

MOVIES

OBITUARIES

TRAFFIC

WEATHER

A & E Home Life, etc. Sunday Journal Travel What's Up
Columnists 24 Hour Features

FRONT: Features

Past Editions

Wednesday, September 18, 2002 3:45AM EDT



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FOOD & NUTRITION

TODAY: High 82°F; Low 66°F. A few t-showers; humid.

TOMORROW: High 84°F; Low 66°F. Humid with clouds and sun.

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8,207.55 -172.63NASDAQ
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MORE STORIES

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Master of the improv

An innovative chef goes with the flow in a special kitchen

By SUSAN HOUSTON, Staff Writer

RALEIGH - The Interfaith Food Shuttle truck is running a little late this morning, which gives chef Rob F. Newmeyer time to review his wish list as he waits on the edge of The Healing Place parking lot.

"I got to get fruit. Fruit is key. I run it all day long. Watermelon, honeydew, cantaloupe, strawberries," he says, ticking off the items on his fingers.

A baseball cap shades his eyes from the bright morning sun as he continues to check the facility's entrance, just off Lake Wheeler Road, for any sign of a big white truck.

As food services manager for The Healing Place, a residential rehabilitation program for homeless substance abusers, Newmeyer, who is 38, is responsible for feeding three square meals a day to about 160 men.

He has a limited budget that must be devoted to buying essentials such as meat and dairy in bulk, so he relies on the kindness of strangers to round out his menus. Grocery stores and other retailers supply his daily bread and desserts — day-old stock, sample cakes and special orders that were never picked up. The wholesale vendors at the State Farmers Market next door come through with all-important fresh (relatively speaking) produce. Thus his relentless scanning of the horizon for one of the three food shuttle trucks.

"And I got to find salad — iceberg or romaine



Chef Rob Newmeyer of The Healing Place says the men he cooks for need fruit, so these apples from the food shuttle will come in handy.
Staff Photos By Jim Bounds

READ MORE ABOUT IT

"How to Cook Without a Book" by Pam Anderson (Bantam Doubleday Dell, 2000).

"The Minimalist Cooks at Home" by Mark Bittman (Broadway, 2002 revised edition).

"Unplugged Kitchen" by Viana La Place (William Morrow, 1996).

HOW TO BE A MORE INNOVATIVE COOK

Chef Rob Newmeyer of The Healing Place and cookbook author Mark Bittman, in a telephone interview from his home in Connecticut, offer

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lettuce, mixes by the case," he says.

What will he do if there isn't any?

"After I sob?" the deep-voiced Newmeyer asks with a dramatic flair. He never knows exactly what will, or won't, be on those trucks, so he's constantly running options through his mind. "I'll do a vinaigrette and make a corn and bean salad," he improvises. "Canned corn, black beans and kidney beans. Chop up some cilantro. That'll work."

Newmeyer has been able to make these kinds of quick judgment calls since he came to The Healing Place in January, a year after it opened. "I don't see ingredients. I see meals," he explains. A big stack of day-old hamburger buns is really Sunday's sloppy joe dinner. Boxes of cornbread mix and cans of creamed corn will be Monday's Mexican pie. Bunches of browning bananas became last night's banana puff pudding dessert.

When a familiar white truck turns in at 10:40 a.m., a look of relief crosses Newmeyer's face. It's not the produce truck, which usually arrives first, but the Cary run with goodies from Hardee's, Fresh Market, Harris Teeter and Lowes. The Interfaith Food Shuttle collects leftover food from area restaurants, day-old bread and other items from local grocery stores and excess or second-quality produce from wholesalers. Volunteer drivers deliver the food to agencies that serve the homeless or feed the hungry.

When the drivers roll up the truck's back door, the chef goes shopping. "I'll take the bones to make stock," he says, surveying several plastic-wrapped packages of spareribs, hocks and assorted soup bones. Even without the calculator he keeps in his pocket, he knows that the small amount of ground beef on the truck is not enough to feed his 160 men. "I'll leave you with the hamburger," he tells the volunteers.

He takes two boxes of pastries and desserts and a big box of bell peppers in assorted colors. He may roast and puree the peppers and add them to a sauce, but most likely they will go into a soup.

"Every day we have a soup," Newmeyer says. Soup satisfies the residents' need for vegetables and the chef's desire to be innovative. "It's a great way to nail two things together that have never been nailed together before."

Newmeyer also snags two packages of white

these tips.

Expose yourself to new ideas. Read more cooking magazines and cookbooks. Pay attention to ingredients in restaurant dishes and ask about techniques. Explore new dishes and ingredients at local ethnic eateries and markets. "Look at Gourmet and Bon Appetit," Newmeyer says. "Look at your cookbooks and dogear the recipes you like." Think about these favorite recipes and how you can liven them up with different ingredients.

Practice, practice, practice. Learn the basics, like how to roast a chicken, cook a stir-fry, make a sauce or soup, bake a cake. Cooking is like playing music: Before you can improvise, you have to know the tune.

Keep a well-stocked pantry. "That way, the more options you have when you start playing around," Bittman says.

Substitute. Don't be afraid to try a new recipe if you don't have every single ingredient. "Few ingredients are indispensable," Bittman says. "Many vegetables and seasonings are interchangeable."

Cook without a book. Get ideas for dishes from magazines and cookbooks, but don't follow recipes slavishly. Get the general idea for a recipe then make adjustments according to your individual taste and cooking style. "Recipes are going to be different. That doesn't mean one is right and one is wrong," Bittman says.

Group ingredient changes by cuisine. Adding tomato sauce, onions and garlic makes a basic dish more Italian, while chiles, beans and corn skew toward Tex-Mex. You'll create an innovative, yet more coherent

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asparagus, a delicacy so dear to his chef's heart that he gives a little sigh when he sees the packages. It would be a shame to hide the asparagus in a soup, he muses. Maybe he will saute them with some shallots as a special treat for the residents on kitchen duty this week. "That's one of the perks of working in the kitchen."

A little after 11, the produce truck rolls in. "You got salad mix?" Newmeyer asks volunteer Ann Rummgardner, keeper of the inventory chart. She nods, and he shouts, "Yeah, baby!"

He takes three 20-pound boxes and five 50-pound bags of new potatoes, two 20-pound boxes of peaches, plus assorted amounts of apples, grapes, eggplant and squash.

"We did good," Newmeyer declares as the truck pulls away. Already he sees menu items in the boxes stacked just outside the kitchen door. He (and the staff) will roast the potatoes whole with fresh rosemary grown in The Healing Place garden. They'll cube and roast eggplant to put in soup. Assorted vegetables will go in soups, salads or maybe a frittata, which has become a favorite breakfast item.

"At first, they were like, 'What the heck is that?'" Newmeyer says of the initial reaction to his frittata, an Italian omelet studded with vegetables and sometimes meat, firmer than the French style and flat instead of folded. "But now it's something that they really like."

Most of the simple, homey food he serves to residents, who are often seriously undernourished, runs counter to Newmeyer's classical training.

For six years, Newmeyer apprenticed at Bagatelle, a French-influenced restaurant in the heart of Key West's Old Town. The restaurant, located in a 19th-century home, features items such as tuna tataki and Jamaican sweet curry chicken on its current menu, a far cry from sloppy joes and Mexican pie.

Before he, his wife, Jennifer, and their daughter, Madison, moved here last year to be closer to his in-laws in Wilson, Newmeyer had held a series of jobs with Project Open Hand, a nonprofit that provided groceries and hot meals for 1,200 AIDS/HIV patients in the San Francisco area. When he was the group's "special chef," his creative challenge was to take the basic menu for these meals and come up with palatable alternatives for clients with allergies and food sensitivities. Later, he became kitchen manager and then purchasing manager with a \$13 million annual budget.

dish. "It's not too hard to dump the sesame oil and soy sauce from an Asian chicken and watercress soup and make it Italian by using Parmesan cheese and olive oil instead," Bittman says.

Be a free spirit. At least once a week, do some "pantry cooking." Challenge yourself to create something new from the ingredients at hand.

Don't pigeonhole ingredients. Who says tuna is just for tuna salad or olives are just for martinis? Open your mind to trying old favorites in new ways.

Try, try again. Don't give up right away if your first innovations aren't that successful. Even Bittman has had a couple of failures. "You have to be willing to make mistakes and be willing to expand your horizons," Bittman says.

RECIPES

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At The Healing Place, though constrained by resources and his residents' tastes, he sometimes can't help indulging his classic chef inclinations. Once he whipped up polenta with capers. "And they said, 'Who messed up the grits?' " he says.

But for the most part, he lets the residents' preferences prevail. He has even learned what a ham hock is and how to season vegetables with bacon grease. "I'm frying chicken like I never fried it before, and I make a wicked collard now," he boasts.

Alan Reep, development director for The Healing Place, acknowledges that Newmeyer has learned to cook Southern.

Reep says Newmeyer's cooking has played a role in the residents' recovery. But he has done much more for the residents.

"Food to this population was just sustenance," Reep says. "Rob's put the fun back in food for them. They look forward to what he can do. They write about the food. They brag about it."

Newmeyer's lasagna and other pasta dishes were what Todd Haymond of Raleigh liked best when he was a resident at The Healing Place. Having successfully completed the program, Haymond has come back to work in Newmeyer's kitchen. "I think he does an excellent job of making gourmet meals out of on-hand stuff," Haymond says. "I put on a couple of pounds."

For his part, Newmeyer enjoys the challenges to his creativity. "I give everything a whirl once," he says.

There's just one ingredient the chef will never be able to use in his on-the-job cooking. The Healing Place has a zero tolerance policy when it comes to alcohol.

"I can't even use red wine vinegar or sherry vinegar," he says.

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