‘Doing time’ in the Police Barracks kitchen

By DOROTHY TRICK

When Willie Spikes and Charles Matthews wake up Wednesday mornings at the State Police Barracks in Baton Rouge, there’s no need to look at the calendar. Wednesday is fried chicken day, and the two cooks know they are going to spend most of the morning browning and deep-frying several hundred pieces of Southern fried chicken for their inmates’ lunch.

Preparing a hearty cafeteria menu is the chief assignment for the two inmates, who agree that it’s a Wednesday lunch menu guests “love our fried chicken.” They work within the large kitchen facilities of the Louisiana State Police headquarters complex on South Foster Drive between Florida Boulevard and Government Street. Spikes and Matthews are just two of several dozen inmates who are “doing their time” in the kitchen.

Although few Baton Rougeans are aware of the program, the state-operated cafeterias in Baton Rouge are staffed by inmates who prepare and serve as many as 1,500 meals daily. One cafeteria, situated near the South Foster Drive headquarters of the Department of Public Safety, originated in the 1970s as an employee cafeteria. Another cafeteria, at the Independence Boulevard State Police Training Academy, serves the student officers attending classes at the academy. A third cafeteria on South Foster functions as the dining room for the prisoners who are housed at the barracks.

The headquarters cafeteria and the one at the academy training center behind the Drivers’ License Bureau at Independence Boulevard are open to the public.

One recent morning at the academy cafeteria, where Spikes is assigned to cook, he served the cafeteria’s usual deep-fried beef steak from a deep-fryer. Assisting Spikes in setting up the serving line was Edward Anthony, another inmate assigned to the kitchen at the academy cafeteria.

‘I cooked in the service. I hope I can do this when I get back out on the streets. Maybe I’ll work offshore for awhile, and then maybe into a small business,” said Anthony.

Anthony loves his food to have a good taste. He says his shrimp creole and gumbo are two of his best dishes.

Other items on the day’s menu included meatballs, spaghetti, okra, and tomatoes, potato salad, and beans. Prices range from $.60 for vegetables and salads to $1.85 for meat entrees.

“A lot of people don’t know we are open to the public,” said Jacqueline Jackson, who supervises the inmate staff at Independence Park cafeteria. “We don’t have any problems here. Our biggest challenge is to figure out how much to prepare and serve, and to schedule enough food when classes are in session.”

Less than three miles from the Independence Boulevard site, Charles Matthews stirs a pot of lima beans at the Department of Public Safety cafeteria on South Foster Drive. “I’m not sure I want to do this as a career...you really have to enjoy this to do it every day,” he said.

Matthews, who is assisted by only one cook, said the supervisory personnel insist on “letting the two of us handle it.” Matthews said he attended an institutional cooking school at the Winnfield Correctional Center.

In another part of the South Foster complex, William Black prepares breakfast, lunch, and dinner every other day for the inmate population housed at the facility. He assists personnel in obtaining the supermarkets and helps prepare and serve food.

Black, who’s had no formal culinary training, said he believes his barbecued ribs are favorites with the inmates. “They really enjoy the ribs,” he said. “This is one of my hardest days.”
Black said he started baking in 1987 at Wade Correctional Institute. He learned by talking to other cooks and by looking at a few “cookbooks here and there. I think when I get out of here, I can possibly go offshore. Here, I prepare food for 180 people and that’s probably a similar setup out there.”

Spikes, who began cooking in 1984 in Washington Parish, likes the less confining environment at State Police headquarters.

“This place is the best for doing time,” said Spikes of his assignment at the academy’s cafeteria. “They don’t hassle you. Everybody is pretty nice. The inmates get along and there are no fights.”

Black agreed. “This is the place to do it. We’re getting schooling and Bible study, crafts and church three or four times a week.”

Captain Fred Kennedy, warden at the State Police Barracks, reported that approximately 200 inmates are housed at the South Foster complex. “There is a long process for selection. The inmates are screened through the system. The selection is based on a number of criteria, including previous criminal record, institutional record and work experience,” he said.

“It’s ideal for us if we can get someone who has kitchen experience. Some of them had worked in kitchens before they got into trouble. It’s like that for other jobs, as well,” Kennedy said.

“I think they’re getting first-hand experience here. It’s on-the-job training, but not in a job environment. They’re placed in a situation and shown what needs to be done. They become good at what they do,” he said.

Kennedy said in addition to the inmates who staff the three cafeterias operated by the Department of Public Safety and the State Police, several inmates are regular chefs at the Governor’s Mansion, where they prepare and serve the governor, his staff and guests on a daily basis.

Although the cooks are required to follow the recipes established by the supervisory personnel, they admit that every now and then they are tempted to get a little more creative and “add a little of this or a little of that.”

With hope for meaningful careers when they get out, the prison cooks look to putting their lives back together. Until then, “Tomorrow, I’ll be frying that chicken!” Spikes said with a smile. And Matthews nodded.