Heart doctors struggle to serve healthy N.O. cuisine

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NEW ORLEANS — In New Orleans, it seems almost every other recipe begins “Take a stick of butter . . . .” What isn’t cooked with butter is likely to be deep-fried or seasoned with fat pork.

So what will 24,000 heart doctors eat during the American College of Cardiology’s convention this week?

“At all the official events, we serve heart-healthy foods so ‘60 Minutes’ doesn’t end up at our convention and show that there’s a contradiction of terms going on,” said Linda Karson, director of meetings services for the American College of Cardiology.

That means cereal, muffins, yogurt and fruit for breakfast, rather than eggs Sardou or any of the other cholesterol-laden local breakfast favorites. Lunch and dinner menus are heavy on fish and chicken, with vegetables and lots of green and pasta salads.

One of the biggest challenges, Karson said, was working up a menu for Tuesday night’s “Sights, Sounds, Music, Food and Culture of New Orleans.”

“Doing heart-healthy food in New Orleans is kind of a contradiction in terms,” she acknowledged.

Tuesday night’s menu includes “Cajun potpourri gumbo” with chicken and fish but without cholesterol-laden shellfish — an essential ingredient of seafood gumbo — or sausage, which is almost always included with chicken.

The red beans and rice will not have any salt pork or ham hocks, and the po-boy sandwiches will have lean meat and low-cholesterol mayo. The andouille sausage will be made with turkey, and the jambalaya with chicken.

“We’ll give them the atmosphere of it, more than the actual food,” said Karson.

But even heart doctors are likely to splurge on their diets in New Orleans. In November, Mother’s restaurant, which specializes in po-boys, sausage-and-chicken jambalaya and pork-seasoned red beans, was full of conventioneers wearing American Heart Association name tags.

Doctors could be seen in tonier restaurants at dinner, chowing down on red meat, chicken and fish with buttery sauces, and New Orleans-style barbecued shrimp, which comes to the table swimming in spicy butter.

“I think the majority of people, when they hit New Orleans, kind of say ‘Well, throw it to the winds,’” said Kermit Cosse, associate general manager at Antoine’s. “We’re known for so many restaurants in New Orleans, and we’re known for food.”

But Lally Brennan, one of the workers at Commander’s Palace, said the restaurant includes light entrees on the menu and finds many heart doctors take advantage of them.

“Whenever we have cardiologists in town, they always want lighter-type foods,” she said. “We put lots of fish on the menu with light sauces because we know they’ll ask for it. We still have our other goodies if they want to splurge. But we expect them to order a lot of the lighter things.”

The food vendors at the New Orleans Convention Center will offer some healthy foods as well as their standard hot dogs, hamburgers and sandwiches, Karson said.

“They did offer a whole lot of heart-healthy food during the American Heart Association meeting,” she said. “The big joke is they’ve got caseloads of turkey dogs left. They didn’t really go.”

Karson acknowledged that meeting organizers can’t stop private concessionaires from selling — nor doctors from eating — what they want at the convention.

“We won’t say everyone’s real concerned about heart-healthy food,” she said. “But at least we can say we’ve made a real effort to provide it.”