Edwin Edwards is a man of many talents, but barbecue isn’t one of them. When the governor grills chicken at his ranch, “he likes it well done to the point of being crunchy, of being burnt. We try to dissuade him from barbecuing,” said his daughter Anna, smiling. Luckily, the governor has a few people around the mansion to do the cooking. The mansion staff includes nine people who help cook and serve food, said Anna Edwards, the mansion hostess. The kitchen staff are trustees from the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. “All of them have been in prison for a very long time. It’s considered a privilege for them to be here,” Anna Edwards said.

One of the privileges is making meals that are a cut above regular prison fare. The mansion kitchen is known for its good cooking, and meals are a pleasure the governor likes to make time for, his daughter said.

Breakfast at the mansion is usually only attended by the state troopers and any other support staff around in the morning. Lunch and dinner are larger affairs. “Lunch is at high noon. Dinner is at six. My father can get a little testy when it’s late,” said Anna Edwards.

Like most governors, Edwards sometimes uses the mansion to hold large luncheons. Recently, for example, he played lunch host to wives of state legislators. Dinners at the mansion tend to be more private affairs. “Meals are a very important part of this family’s time together,” said Anna Edwards. “It’s certainly not unusual for my brothers and sisters and their children to be here with us.”

The mansion is also frequently open to social and civic groups who use it for evening functions. However, these groups provide their own food, plates, napkins and silverware. The Edwards family may make its kitchen staff available to help serve food at these functions. When that happens, the kitchen help may not get through cleaning up until 5 a.m.

The governor sometimes comes back in the kitchen to see how things are going. “He’ll come back to the stove. He may look in a pot and see a particular piece of meat he wants,” said Thomas. The governor’s favorites include stewed chicken, gumbo, fried seafood, red snapper and fried chicken, his daughter said. Edwin Edwards also insists on some type of dessert after every meal. He has a particular weakness for Thomas’ banana pudding, which Anna Edwards describes as “dynamite.” Thomas says the secret is in the butter. He adds a stick while the pudding is cooling.

That won’t help the governor’s battle with the bulge. The “new Edwards” that the governor promised for his fourth term apparently won’t mean a change from banana pudding to bran muffins.

“He pretty much eats what he wants,” said Anna Edwards. “I try to keep him on low-fat. The governor hates working out and he hates dieting. He figures if he’s happy, everyone should leave him alone.”

The Edwards family had a minor flap with former Gov. Buddy Roemer shortly after they moved back into the mansion this year. Anna Edwards said that Roemer left very little money in the budget for the mansion kitchen. To keep the mansion stocked with food, Edwards sought donations from both state and private sources.

The cupboard crisis at the mansion had a silver lining, according to Anna Edwards. In seeking alternate sources of food for the mansion, she established supply arrangements that could be cheaper for the state in the long run. Through agricultural operations at prisons and universities, state government has plentiful sources of beef, dairy products and vegetables. Anna Edwards plans to use these sources permanently, which should be less costly than buying the food as it was done in the past.

Were there any jokes around the mansion when the kitchen budget was running dry?

“Neither I nor my father think that budgets are very funny,” Anna Edwards said. “I do remember thinking that this might be a good way to get Daddy on a diet.”
Anna and Edwin Edwards sample a shrimp dish prepared by cook Dwayne Coleman in the mansion kitchen. Edwards counts seafood as one of his favorite dishes, and he especially likes the mansion’s banana pudding, said Anna Edwards.