



CAPTAIN COOK
★ ★ ★
Chef of the Year
Derrick
Davenport
catches a rare
moment of
relaxation in a
Pentagon kitchen.



Today, some of the best cooks in the country aren't in restaurants or on TV—they're in the military



It's 11:30 a.m., and Derrick Davenport has been cooking for almost four hours. He's made flounder and scallops with quinoa and arugula salad. Whipped up sweet potato soup with squab. Roasted lamb loin and served it in mushroom sauce with butternut squash puree and Edam cheese fritters. Baked mini chocolate-buttermilk cakes, doused them in Chambord and ganache, and topped them with milk chocolate cream. Now, after piping on some meringue and toasting it with a kitchen torch, he ferries the dessert into the dining room, where three stone-faced judges wait. Davenport carefully sets a cake in front of each one, the last course he's presented this morning. The judges look profoundly unimpressed. ★ It might sound like an audition for *Top Chef*, but in fact Davenport is a senior chief petty officer in the U.S. Navy, one of 18 culinary specialists chosen to compete for the title of Armed Forces Chef of the Year. The 20-year-old competition takes place at the Joint Culinary Center of Excellence in Fort Lee, Va., where the military conducts most of its food services training. Each

🍴 Sarah DiGregorio 📷 cover and inside by Spencer Heyfren

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COOK LIKE A MILITARY CHEF
Check out Derrick's favorite summer recipes (including this awesome grilled jerk chicken with mango and pineapple salsa) at parade.com/chef



contestant must make and serve four courses in four hours using a basket of challenging ingredients, which (as on programs like *Chopped*) aren't revealed beforehand. Still, for all the ways the competition resembles a reality show, this isn't entertainment—training and testing cooks is something the military takes very seriously.

Napoleon famously said that an army marches on its stomach, but military cooking has never had much of a reputation—more associated with mess hall slop than roast lamb. World War II-era K rations included a lemon beverage powder so disgusting that servicemen used it to clean floors.

"If you had told someone in World War II that we'd be having a competition to find the best military chef, they'd have laughed at you," says Paul Morando, the director of the U.S. Army Quartermaster Museum, who studies the history of getting supplies to troops in the field. "Historically, army rations were not the best-tasting meals you could get."

In fact, until the early 20th century, the U.S. military didn't train cooks at all. Cooks were recruited, or whichever soldier had the inclination (or the orders) to warm up the beans just did it. But by the time World War I rolled around, military officials had begun to realize they needed a system—trained cooks, after all, are schooled in food safety. "In the early days, food poisoning was common," says Sgt. Maj. Mark Warren, winner of the 1994 Armed Forces Chef of the Year and now a judge in the competition. "You can take a casualty in the chow hall or on the battlefield. It affects readiness and morale if you lose a soldier to food-borne illness." And, he adds, there's that other reason military cooks take their jobs to heart: "The last meal a soldier gets could be his last meal."

"Every [military] campaign, there's a change in how soldiers are fed," Morando says. "But the fact that the armed forces has a culinary

competition? That shows how far we've come."

Which brings us back to Davenport. The 37-year-old is generally soft-spoken and reserved, but with bread dough in his hands, he becomes demonstrative and chatty, completely in his element. Watching him roll croissants is like watching Miguel Cabrera swing for the fences—swift, practiced, effortless.

It's not surprising that one of Davenport's earliest memories is of baking a loaf of challah bread with his grandmother when he was just 7 years old. Eddie Beatrice Davenport—a.k.a. Big Mama B—was an accomplished baker and cook; as a child growing up in Detroit, Davenport gravitated to the kitchen to be with her. He remembers leafing through her cookbooks and cooking magazines, the television always turned to Julia Child or the Galloping Gourmet.

By the time Davenport was in high school, he was sure of two things: He wanted to cook, and he wanted to serve his country. After graduating, he studied culinary arts at Schoolcraft College in Livonia, Mich. There, a chef instructor who had been in the navy regaled him with seafaring stories, further piquing Davenport's interest in military life. After spending seven years as a restaurant cook (including a stint at the Detroit Ritz-Carlton), he enlisted in the navy in 2000.

Davenport was stationed first on the USS *Annapolis*, a fast-attack submarine that carries only 150 sailors—he calls it the Smart car of subs. From the ship's tiny kitchen, Davenport turned out full meals. "It was like cooking in a broom closet," he says. "I'd have to make white or wheat bread, hamburger buns, hot dog buns, submarine rolls, then make a pastry for breakfast. ... It becomes a juggling act." He made do, using empty cereal bags to pipe frosting and making massive quantities of bread by hand when his mixer broke out at sea. He also became known for a dish called Wicked Chicken, which he describes as the chicken breast version of a buffalo wing, but spicier.

Five years later, Davenport was sent to Afghanistan. His mission: Help the Afghan National Army in Herat set up a mess hall. Every day, Davenport walked two miles to the Afghan side of the base and its rudimentary kitchen—no refrigeration, wood-burning ovens—

toting a Dari and Farsi phrase book and his 9mm rifle. Some of the 50 Afghan soldiers knew how to cook, but Davenport helped them develop military-style sanitation and portioning. The meat came fresh from the local market, daily. "We'd get a whole lamb in on the back of a pickup truck, still warm from a kill," he remembers. "I had to teach them proper ways of butchering. They were pretty much just hacking away at it on a tree stump,



SHE FED AN ARMY, TOO
Davenport's paternal grandmother, Eddie Beatrice Davenport, had nine children.

PHOTOS: FROM LEFT: TINA RUPP, FOOD STYLING BY CARRIE PURCELL, PROP STYLING BY KARIN OLSEN; SPENCER HEYFRON FOR PARADE
COURTESY OF DERRICK DAVENPORT

so we got them cutting boards and showed them how to cut it in a more manageable way.”

By the end of his yearlong deployment, Davenport had helped set up the Afghan Army’s first bakeshop, which turns out fresh naan every day.

Still, some might ask why food service should be any army’s priority. Surely the Afghan Army has bigger fish to fry?

Davenport has a ready answer. “We play a huge role in the morale of the force,” he says, noting that home cooking is good for soldiers in more ways than one. “If they have a good meal, they’re going to perform their jobs better.”

Of course, in the military, some meals are better than others. If troops are on the move, they’re often eating portable Meals-Ready-to-Eat, or MREs. But at a larger base, the dining facilities closely resemble those you’d find at a college, with salad bars, burger griddles, and custom omelet stations.

When Starlett Henderson’s husband returned from serving in Bosnia, she realized, to her shock, that he actually missed the dining hall. “You don’t think of soldiers coming back spoiled,” says Henderson, cofounder of the Army Wife Network and a former army officer. “But after his deployment, Hamburger Helper on a Thursday night wasn’t good enough for him anymore!”

Corrie Blackshear was an army evacuation medic for eight years, from 1997 to 2004. “People are always surprised that the reason I don’t like lobster is that I got tired of it on deployment in Kosovo,” she says. She also remembers having some of the best Middle Eastern food of her life on a base in Kuwait. “It’s more than nourishment. It’s spiritual nourishment,” she says.

“These are not the days of Beetle Bailey anymore,” says Warren. “The soldiers we get today have grown up with Emeril, Rachael Ray, *Iron Chef*. ... There’s a stigma that military cooking is institutional and generic. But society has a higher expectation for chefs today. And I’d put our chefs up against any in the industry.”

In fact, holding military chefs up to private industry standards is one of the benefits of the Armed Forces Chef of the Year competition, which is sanctioned by the American Culinary Federation, a civilian organization. The hope is that well-trained military chefs can compete for civilian jobs when their service ends. Today, Davenport—along with Billy Daugette, an army staff sergeant who won Armed Forces Chef of the Year in 2011, and two other culinary specialists—is stationed at the home of Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Davenport and the others cook some meals for him and manage his household—a job that includes throwing elaborate dinner parties for visiting foreign chiefs of defense. In many ways, it’s akin to running a fine restaurant—overseeing budgets and personnel, always looking for new ways to please their clients.

In June, Daugette is joining the army’s Training With Industry program, which will place him in a California country club kitchen for a year before sending him back to Fort Lee to teach other military



BY THE NUMBERS

In 2012, the U.S. Armed Forces consumed ...

24,884,000
pounds of cooked chicken

8,800,000
tortillas

6,072,000
pounds of ground beef

5,250,000
gallons of milk

3,100,000
pounds of cooked bacon

780,000
gallons of orange juice

765,000
pounds of coffee

448,000
pounds of Thanksgiving turkey

367,000
pounds of grits

214,000
gallons of ketchup

109,000
gallons of salsa

42,773
gallons of soy sauce

Source: Sgt. Maj. Mark Warren,
Joint Culinary
Center of Excellence



cooks what he’s learned. A country club may seem an unlikely destination for a guy who finagled fresh eggs in Tikrit, Iraq, and got army welders to rig up a makeshift smoker in the desert, but Daugette has an eye toward the future. “If I got out [of the military] right now, what’s my marketability?” he asks. “It’s important to be involved with the civilian industry.”

Davenport is also looking ahead to the civilian world. He’s currently juggling his military

duties with grad school, pursuing his master's degree in business administration at Sullivan University. He doesn't know when he will retire from the military, but when he does, he'd like to teach cooking and maybe open his own restaurant, with "Michigan meets French meets southern" fare.

But for now, he's happy to say he put as much effort into feeding the recruits on the sub as he does preparing meals for the highest-ranking officer in the military. The food he's making now might be fancier, but nothing quite compares to the satisfaction of seeing that a crew of homesick sailors eats well. "Some of the best compliments I've had were back on the boat," he says. "You're away from home. You don't think you're going to get a meal like your mom or grandmother would make." But if Davenport's on board, you certainly will.

Back at the 2013 Armed Forces Chef of the Year competition, the judges were much more impressed with Davenport's cooking than they let on. He wins, cementing his reputation as one of the best cooks ever to come out of the navy.

Davenport allows himself a brief moment of fist-pumping celebration ("I was like, 'Yes! Finally!'" he says in his understated way), and then it's back to work. When it comes to turning chow into cuisine, it seems Davenport isn't ready to come off the front lines just yet. ■