

Have trouble coming up with something scrumptious for the family, day in and day out? Just try satisfying the discriminating palates of 3,000 fast-food junkies who take no prisoners.



Food! Glorious Food!

By Michael Waters

It happened on a bright October Wednesday, just before the annual OU-Texas fracas. A spirited group of undergraduates cheered lustily as a musical ensemble, over two dozen strong, followed their buoyant conductor in blaring the strains of "Boomer Sooner" through the shiny upraised tips of their . . .

Kazoos.

Yes, kazoos. This was not your average pep rally. The site was Cate Cafeteria. The "band" was assembled from the student lunchtime crowd, all

of whom had been handed complimentary 21-cent kazoos. The "conductor" was an ebulliently grinning man named Robert Blaze.

The kazoo choir was intended as a humorous rah-rah for a championship-caliber football team. Yet its Dr. Demento-style rendition of the University fight song also might serve as an appropriate salute to an equally proud, if slightly offbeat, set of national champions — Blaze and his hard-working, fun-loving cohorts who constitute the OU Food Service.

The 42-year-old Blaze, Food Service administrator since 1985, saw his agency recognized as "National Standard Menu Champions" last summer by the National Association of College and University Food Services. OU finished first by taking the overall top ranking in the association's three divisions. More than 120 menus were submitted by members of the organization, which includes such household names as Penn State and Southern Cal.

But to hear Blaze tell it, accepting the award on behalf of his Food Service



Directing OU to the national championship among university food services was Robert Blaze, center, with assistants Deborah Wollenberg, left, and David Annis.

co-workers was no piece of cake.

"It was tough duty," he says now, pulling a mock-grimace along with his listener's leg. "I had to go to Honolulu. In June. It was *awful*, awful . . ."

Once Blaze recovered from that "arduous" trip, he returned to the same questions he has faced now for almost four years as administrator. How do you feed more than 3,000 meal ticket-wielding young people daily for the bulk of a year without sinking into a deep, deep rut? Just what can a food service do to prevent hungry mobs of on-campus resident students from scanning the week-to-week cafeteria offerings and responding *en masse* with despairing shouts of, "Meatloaf again!?" How do you please the over-active palates of a clientele who last year consumed 15,000 gallons of ice cream, 21,170 pounds of cottage cheese, 4,550 dozen hot dog buns, 18,500 loaves of bread, 8,000 pounds of potato chips, and enough Coca-Cola to float a battleship?

The lighter aspects of food service operation are easy to master. For instance, assistant administrator Deborah Wollenberg jokes, "You learn

not to use expressions like 'get the bugs out.'"

The serious work is a tad more involved. Blaze heads an agency with 250 employees, an annual budget of approximately \$5.5 million and a myriad of operations. He meets daily with his two assistant administrators, Wollenberg and David Annis.

Wollenberg manages Food Service's "cash operations"—a half-dozen small eateries whose revenues come primarily from sources other than student meal tickets. A 34-year-old licensed dietitian who holds degrees in nutrition from OU and Oklahoma State University, Wollenberg also counsels students who have special diet requirements.

Annis manages the day-to-day affairs of Couch and Cate, the two on-campus cafeterias, plans the menus, and does purchasing for the University commissary. He is also the 'Dear Dave' of *Kitchen Comments*, an unusual and highly popular weekly newsletter created two years ago. *Comments* serves as an irreverent forum where student patrons sound off about the food, often in brief, humorously abra-

sive statements. But student contributions to the five-gallon "comment buckets" at both cafeterias also include serious questions about Food Service policy, which Annis answers in print.

Approximately 1,200 copies of *Kitchen Comments* are printed each week for on-campus circulation. Each week one-fourth to one-half of its student readership responds with brief critiques of the food, complaints and compliments, policy questions, unrequited love notes to cafeteria workers and bizarre observations about life in general. Submissions to *Comments* can be as straightforward as requests for grape juice at lunch or as flowery as undergrad attempts to emulate Shakespeare: "Roses are red; violets are blue. Why in the heck do you serve us doo-doo?"

"I gave Dave a goal: 'We need to communicate with our students,'" Blaze says. "This is what he came up with, and now they write to 'Dear Dave' like it's Ann Landers or something. We send *Comments* out all over campus, to the OUPD and the purchasing department and news services, because they get a big kick out of what the students are saying."

Annis, a 33-year-old South Dakota native who is kidded by students for his alleged resemblance to Captain Kangaroo, answers comments "in kind." He composes a several-paragraph reply to a complaint about the structure of OU's meal plan. He gives matter-of-fact thanks when students offer praise and responds to lunch invitations with lines like "Have your people contact my people." To a student who asks simply, "Dave, what's the deal?" he replies, "Aces and eights." Yet Annis does admit to some trepidation about looking over the pile of comments on a Monday morning, the day students are most likely to have responded to flub-ups with Don Rickles-like ripostes:

"Dear Dave: These subs must have been made for World War II . . . the snickerdoodles you served at lunch make great paperweights . . . I suggest

From *Kitchen Comments*—“Dear Dave: These subs must have been made for World War II . . .” “I suggest renaming this stuff ‘Gristle Au Gratin’ . . .”



Butchers at the commissary process 16 half-carasses of beef every week. At left, strips of beef for fajitas are cut and weighed.

Below, Blaze visits one of the Couch kitchen cooks who prepare the several hundred flame-broiled hamburgers served at the two campus cafeterias each class day.



renaming this stuff 'Gristle Au Gratin' . . . my steak wasn't red enough, I could actually see brown marks . . . the steak you served at lunch was still mooing on the plate . . ."

"It's sometimes tough to come in and see things like 'Dear Dave, you're ugly and your mom dresses you funny,'" Annis says. "But I think the payoff is at the end of the year. In our annual survey last spring, which was after the first full year of *Comments*, we repeated a number of questions such as 'where do you get your information about Food Service?' The first year we asked the question, only five percent of the students reported taking their questions about Food Service to us. And now it's over 60 percent."

The Food Service crew can take comfort in one other thing. Despite what the Monday morning quarterbacks write in *Comments*, a full 90 percent of students surveyed last year rated the quality and variety of Food Service meals as "adequate"—high praise considering the source.

Comments has helped Blaze and his assistants get hip to the kind of jazzy slang used by today's kids. Annis has discovered, for instance, that words like "sludge" can be used in a complimentary sense. "It's a popular strawberry-banana mixture we serve here," he explains. "They like it, but they call it 'sludge.'"

"It's like the 'green icky goeey stuff,'" Blaze interjects.

"Oh, yeah," Annis corrects his boss. "The 'green ishy stuff.'"

"The 'green ishy stuff' is guacamole," Blaze explains for the benefit of an outsider.

"Some of them can't spell 'guacamole,'" Annis adds.

Perhaps one reason for the success of *Comments* is that in addition to sludge and green ishy stuff, student diners have a lot to comment on—and a number of ways to "do lunch." For one thing, the cafeterias' award-winning menu includes off-the-wall selections such as Spanish spaghetti, club cod fillet and exotic entrees picked up from recipes provided by stu-

dents. The breakfast selection usually includes two to three styles of eggs—and, for the gourmet, Cap'n Crunch (with crunchberries). "If anything," Blaze says, "we probably go overboard with choice."

"We'll have a Sooner Express line where you'll almost always have a hamburger with different toppings," Annis says. "We'll throw in another choice on the line besides the hamburger. There are always at least two entree choices in the other line. So they usually have a selection of at least four different entrees every lunch and three different entrees at night."

A student who tires of turkey tetrazzini, bagel cheddarwurst or simply the cafeteria atmosphere can seek a change-of-pace from an Adams Center hamburger grill (Adam's Apple) or a popular two-year-old sandwich-deli in Ellison Hall (Baker's Dozen), which Wollenberg says is characterized by consistently long lines during the noon hour. Anyone desiring more on-campus choice than that can sample the wares of the Little Caesar's pizza parlor, set up in Adams Center through a contractual agreement with Food Services. Blaze says Little Caesar's was chosen by OU in a competitive blind taste test and was the first pizza company in the country to go into a residence hall, although the practice since has become more common.

None of this catering to youthful tastes means Blaze and company lack concern about instilling good nutrition habits. Currently Annis and Wollenberg are putting together a system of color-coded cards that explain in layman's terms the calorie content of various foods and pie graphs that break down the protein, fat and carbohydrate content of food items. The information comes from a booklet Wollenberg assembled last year offering data on levels of "the five nutrients that people care most about" found in 553 cafeteria food items. The list is basic enough to be readable but thorough enough to include the amount of protein in a hot Sicilian

sandwich (25 grams) and the sodium content in a cupful of sunflower seeds (zilch).

On a day-to-day basis, cafeteria menus boast at least one entree at each meal marked by a heart symbol, signifying that food item to be low in calories, fat and cholesterol in accordance with standards set by the American Heart Association.

So how does Blaze's marketing philosophy account for "Kazoo Day?"

"The students are going to eat at the same place day in and day out," Blaze explains. "If you didn't have something crazy going on every once in a while, you'd get into a rut fast."

The kazoo-fest is one type of what Annis categorizes innocently as "special meals." Some special meals are built around the food itself—for instance, when the purse strings are loosened enough to serve a prime rib dinner or provide for a hallowed event such as the "annual buffalo barbeque." Sometimes the extra effort will go to add atmosphere to a meal, perhaps using helium balloons, pumpkins or kazooos.

Occasionally out-of-the-ordinary foods and off-the-wall decor are combined to create an event such as the Halloween Special Meal. For this all-out "monotony-breaker," the two cafeterias were decorated with student entries from poster-coloring and pumpkin-carving contests. Balloons went up, and 2,400 caramel apples gave the meal a holiday ambiance. No kazooos could be heard, but the special meal treat of the evening, shark fillet, did offer an irresistible chance to indulge in a spot of vaudeville humor.

"We put up big banners," Annis explains. "They said, 'Come to Couch and Cate Cafeterias. See the man eating shark.' And we had a guy sitting in a chair . . . eating . . . shark."

Barrump-bump.

"We've had success with some of our carnival meals," Blaze adds, "where we do the simplest things . . . once we rented some cotton candy machines from the fairgrounds people and served cotton candy, just like at a real

"So we stood there, ready with the cameras, and finally the millionth customer walked in . . . and the guy was wearing a Penn State shirt."



carnival . . . it was really popular."

One could argue this is a lot of trouble and expense employed to court a captive audience—on-campus resident students. They will, by virtue of economic necessity, eat most of their meals on a meal plan purchased from the University at the beginning of a semester.

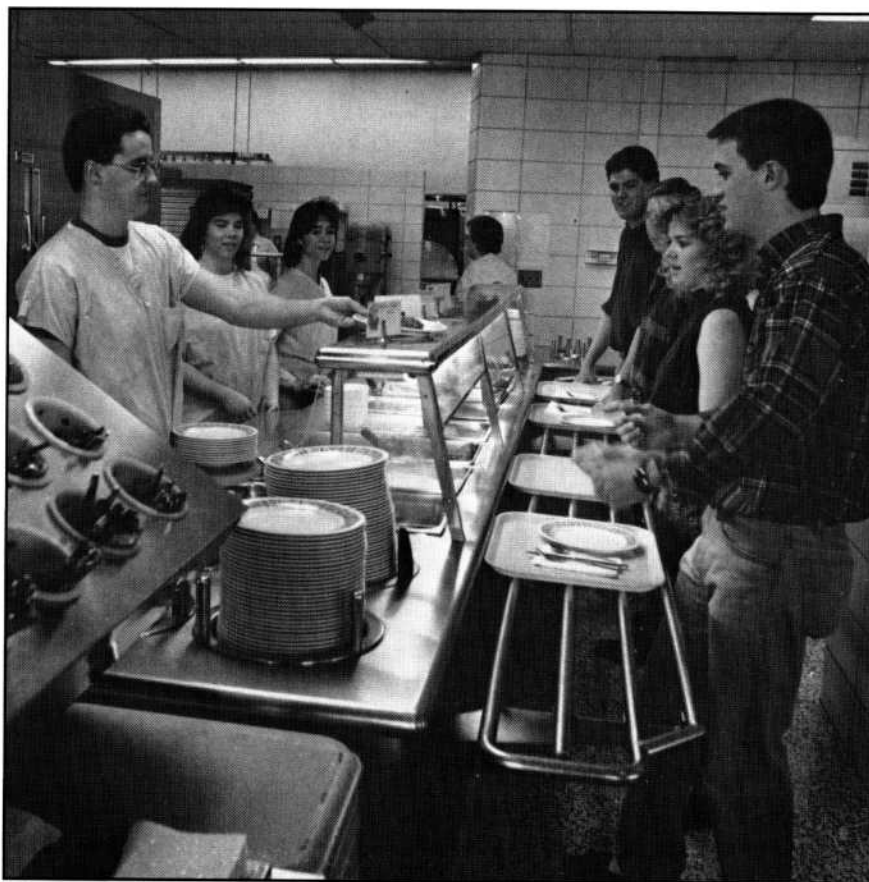
"Sure they're a captive audience," Blaze responds. Yet he cites several reasons for trying as hard as possible to keep the customers satisfied. "If the students are happy living here on campus, they'll come back next year. Student rotation is something we're really concerned about, trying to keep students in the residence halls. On the other hand, even if they do eventually live off-campus, we've had a decent number who were impressed enough to keep on buying meal plans."

Occasionally even the best-laid plans of food service administrators can go a little bit awry. "Last year we celebrated our one millionth customer," Blaze reports. "We had cameras; we had music; we had a cake and hats . . . and when the millionth guy came in, we were ready to jump all over him and have a big celebration. So we stood there, ready with the cameras, and finally the millionth guy walked in . . . and he was wearing a Penn State shirt."

Blaze relates this anecdote with a burst of full-throated laughter that seems to symbolize his belief that people can be conscientious without being pensive. More than most folk, he displays a definitive relish for the foibles of everyday life, the banana peels that everybody slips on.

"I'm a veteran, and I've been in situations where it's life-and-death," he explains. "This isn't one of them. Maintaining a sense of humor at work is important to me because it fits my style. Dave and Deborah are hard workers, and they've got a tremendous sense of humor . . . Being too serious gives you ulcers. We don't have to take ourselves too seriously to get things done."

Maybe a sense of humor can keep a



In addition to the Sooner Express line with its ever-present hamburgers, the cafeterias feature at least four different entrees at lunch and three at night.

job from getting moldy, but one-liners do not win awards for food service at the national level. The portfolio submitted by Blaze, Annis and Wollenberg to the National Association of College and University Food Services featured an exhaustive description of OU's standard menu, along with their efforts to increase nutritional awareness, data on garnishes and "a lot of specific criteria you had to address," Blaze says.

Blaze was especially gratified by the source of the award. "It especially means something to get this from your peers, from people who are food service directors and know the menus. It's very prestigious."

Thus far the award is a highlight of Blaze's career, which began in culinary arts and gradually veered toward

business. He holds a degree in the former from the Washburn School of Chicago. ("I'm not a chef, but I carry those credentials.") He managed operations such as snack bars and hospital cafeterias, completed a B.S. in business from the University of Texas at Austin and spent six years as food service director at Texas Women's University before coming to OU in April 1985.

Like any ambitious coach, Blaze brightens visibly at the chance of becoming a two-time national champion. "We're going to submit it again. We're going to repeat." Then his leg-pulling mood returns. "We'll get a huge sign put on the cafeterias like they have on the football stadium. It'll say 'National Champions 1988.'" A pause. "No, I don't think they'd really let us do that. But it'd be nice." 