

VIETRO

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Feeding the Soul

Professional Chef Serves Up Dignity At Unusual Foggy Bottom Soup Kitchen

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About six months ago, the homeless clientele at Miriam's Kitchen in Foggy Bottom began calling their breakfast spot Chez Miriam.

This week's Valentine's Day menu gives an idea why: spinach and cheese omelets, home fries, collards, grilled ham, fruit salad and upside-down peach cake—all made fresh in the kitchen. The previous morning's offerings included jambalaya, cheese grits, scrambled eggs, green beans, fruit salad and cherry muffins.

Not a bad way to start the morning, said Alaina Wakeman, 22, who has been living on the streets since

she arrived from New York 2½ months ago. "It has more breakfast food than other places," she said. "Some serve (only) hot dogs and beans."

Steven Badt, the person responsible for the new cuisine, comes with credentials not often found in soup kitchens. A graduate of the Natural Gourmet Cookery School in New York, Badt worked as a chef in restaurants in New York, Boston and Washington for seven years before signing on at Miriam's Kitchen in July. His résumé includes stints at Hotel Tabard Inn and Buffalo Billiards, an upscale pool hall in North-

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BY MELANIE BURROUGHS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Teams of 15 to 20 volunteers produce a changing menu of options. "It's the premier breakfast feeding program for the homeless," one regular said.

Chef Adds Dash of Dignity To Soup Kitchen's Meals

CHEF, From B1

West Washington. Badt, 34, said his goal is to transform Miriam's from a soup kitchen into a restaurant, one that provides free meals prepared with the same care as if the recipients were paying customers.

"One of the reasons to put effort into food to create dignity for the clients," said Badt, Miriam's first full-time director of kitchen operations. "When they line up at the [serving window] and have a choice of eight items they feel respected, important."

Ruth Dickey, director of Miriam's since January 1998, said reaction to Badt's efforts was almost immediate. "Nobody thought we would have deserved a real chef," one guest told her a few weeks after trying a range of the daily changing offerings.

"Our homeless neighbors are really valuable, as valuable as our other neighbors," she said. "They deserve a fantastic breakfast."

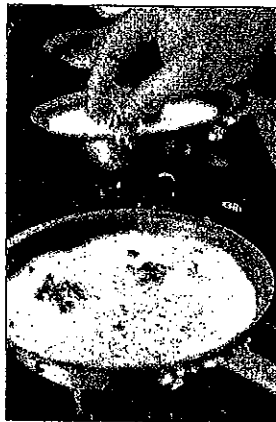
Neal Avery, 49, a regular for eight years in the basement dining room at Western Presbyterian Church, said the kitchen gives him and his friends just that. "It's the premier breakfast feeding program for the homeless," he said. "A lot of caring goes into the food preparation."

On Thursday, Badt and 15 volunteers turned out nearly 150 meals in two hours. From 6 to 7 a.m., several volunteers cut and diced ham, diced fruit, heated potatoes (diced and cooked the day before) and prepared omelet ingredients: shredded cheese, sautéed spinach and cracked eggs. Others placed napkins and flowers on the tables and set up coffee, juice and cereal stations.

Between 7 and 8, several people shifted trays of food to the serving window and handed up selections for the guests, who lined up according to numbers given to them when they arrived. Four volunteers cooked omelets nonstop while others cracked eggs, replenished the serving area and began cleaning.

"It's crazy like this, but I like activity," Badt said between sprints across the kitchen. "You don't want people standing around. It's fun. If you're a volunteer, it's easier to get up at 5:30 if you're inspired, if you know [the work] can't be done without you."

Drew Ortner, 24, a consultant with Booz Allen Hamilton who volunteers three times a month, said he enjoys the lively atmosphere at Badt's kitchen and the challenge of making his own cooking decisions. The supervisor/chef leaves much to the discretion and experience of the volunteers. "There's a



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lot of trial and error," Ortner said.

Badt said he offers "no set recipes" to his teams of 15 to 20 volunteers, most of whom are on a regular rotation. "I'll ask someone to make their version of lasagna, chili, meat loaf, to bring in their own recipes or improvise. The simple fact is that you don't need a recipe to make good chili or tomato sauce."

Instead, he offers general instructions and expects the volunteers to take it from there. "The key is slowly seasoning your food so you don't over-season it," he might tell them when preparing chili. "Let it simmer for a while and then taste it again."

On occasion, Badt will give recipes to complete novices. But he said he is "trying to do way too much... in an hour to have cookbooks spread out around the tables."

Badt plans menus one or two days in advance, depending on the available food—half of which is donated. The rest is purchased from the Capital Area Community Food Bank and food wholesalers. He uses fresh fruit and produce whenever possible.

When the only option is canned goods, "the key is stating clearly to both the volunteers and guests that we aren't simply opening up cans and heating them up," Badt said. Instead, canned goods are used as ingredients in a "homemade" menu item, such as a soup or casserole.



PHOTO BY MELANIE BURROUGHS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Steve Badt, who directs kitchen operations at Miriam's Kitchen, breaks eggs for omelets with Alice Welts. Badt encourages volunteers to bring their own recipes or improvise as they cook.

Except for bread, which is donated by area bakeries, everything is prepared and cooked in the kitchen. Donated meats, such as ham and lamb, must be cooked on the premises. And leftover dishes from dinner parties and outdoor barbecues no longer are accepted.

"We don't need 150 people getting food poisoning," Badt said.

Miriam's Kitchen was started in 1983 by a coalition of businesses and churches, including Western Presbyterian. In 1994, when the host church moved from 1906 H St. NW to 24th and G streets NW, its new neighbors waged a zoning battle to keep the kitchen from moving with it. A federal court ordered that the kitchen be allowed to operate, and the D.C. government decided not to appeal when the church agreed not to create unreasonable noise or traffic.

Elizabeth B. Elliott, chair of Advisory Neighborhood Commission 2A, said the furor over Miriam's Kitchen died down. But the community remains divided over how to address an increasing number of homeless residents in the area, including whether to provide additional food services, she said.

Since Dickey's arrival four years ago, the staff has expanded from one full-time director to include a full-time kitchen director/volunteer organizer and a full-time social worker with two assistants on one-year appointments, Dickey said.

The budget in that time increased from \$130,000 to \$350,000. Since Badt's arrival last year, the number of people served has increased from a maximum of 125 a day to 150 day during the winter, and from 150 in the

summer to 200.

Although located in a church basement, Miriam's Kitchen has no explicitly religious component. "We want to have as welcoming and inclusive a place as possible," said Dickey, 30, who said she believes that there's a strong spiritual and social justice aspect to the service the facility provides.

One exception was last week's memorial service for Arnold Scoggins, a popular and longtime guest at Miriam's. More than 50 guests, volunteers and staff members gathered in the dining room to share stories and their appreciation for Scoggins, who collapsed on the steps Feb. 5 and was pronounced dead at George Washington University Hospital.

Badt, who said he was inspired to help others by the monks who taught him at a Benedictine high school in Morristown, N.J., said he loves his job because it combines his passion for cooking and for people.

His career search began with an undergraduate degree in political science, followed by chef's training and experience and a master's degree in nonprofit management.

While studying at the University of Maryland, Badt worked at Food and Friends, a five-chef operation on L Street SE that delivers three meals a day to the homes of 1,300 people with HIV/AIDS, cancer and Alzheimer's disease. Dickey heard about Badt's work at Food and Friends and hired him when the kitchen manager's job opened up last year.

"My own faith in God per se isn't the strongest," Badt said, "but I feel a great sense of spirituality giving back to the community."