

Circus Cooking

by Clint Hamblin



Did you ever think about joining the circus? Well, Raymond Slizewski did exactly that.

"I was 40 when I ran away from home and joined the circus," Slizewski said, "and it was the best decision I ever made."

The half-Samoan half-Polish Slizewski received his culinary degree at Newbury College in Boston and has been applying his cookery skills as the chef and cookhouse manager for the Big Apple Circus for the past five years.

"I love the daily challenge of managing breakfast, lunch and dinner for about 140 people," Slizewski said. And thanks to the internet, he is able to stock his kitchen through an online food purveyor. "Our supplies are delivered weekly no matter where we are, and from that order I create the menus for the week," he said.

Slizewski occasionally takes requests for favorite dishes, but with performers and crew from America, Armenia, Brazil, Bulgaria, China, England, France, Germany, Italy and Russia, he has his hands full trying to please the many cultural tastes of his diners.

"The Russians will eat anything," he joked, "and when we're busy moving in or out of a location, a good old American hamburger or hot dog will always do the trick."

"We're having baked haddock today. Yesterday, we had Hawaiian pork chops. We try to do simple things like American

chop suey or pasta. But because everybody has a different schedule, I have to prepare food that can wait in a warmer or be heated up in a microwave when desired. Breakfast is a very big deal," he said. "If I run out of Lucky Charms or Cap'n Crunch cereal, I'll have an international revolt on my hands."

Many performers cook for themselves in their small kitchens in their RV or trailer. They head out to the local markets to take advantage of the fresh food available.

Jun and Bing Long, professionally known as The Long Twins, are internationally known Chinese acrobats. They bend and twist their bodies in and out of very narrow cylinders so they can't afford to have an ounce of fat on their two incredibly in-shape bodies.

"We have to watch our diets very carefully, so we eat a lot of vegetables and fruit and drink lots of water but we never eat lunch or dinner before a performance," Jun said. "We always wait until after the last show." It's impossible to eat anything substantial before the balancing and contortion work. The food might not stay down.

"Now that we're in Boston, we love to visit Chinatown to buy our supplies. We mostly cook stir-fry style, cutting everything up into small pieces and using the special spices and sauces that our mother sends us from our home in Szechuan, China," Bing said. "Szechuan is known for

very spicy food, and we really enjoy these familiar tastes." The Long twins love breakfast. "We could eat American cereal all day."

Francisco Tebar Honrubia a.k.a. Picaso Jr. comes from Spain where they live on fresh fruit and vegetables. He puts ping-pong balls in his mouth and spits them into the air juggling 4 or 5 at a time. "I can eat anything, especially beans and rice," he said. "Of course I love my paella, but that's not always easy to get on the road. We cook all our dinners in our RV."

While diet is important to some, it is of no consequence to others. Brenda Jenkins, the chef of the smaller cookhouse next to the Big Top, makes pepperoni pizza and calzones and she makes sure that everything is ready to go when people want some sustenance before, during and after the performances. Once the show is in progress, the crew comes in to grab a quick bite before they need to return to their job. Some have laptop computers with Wi-Fi and communicate with their families around the world while eating anything from a salad and sandwich to a piece of pizza.

"We love food," production manager Georgia Stephenson said. "And we make every effort to provide the best for our people."

Sounds good to me! Maybe running away and joining the circus isn't such a bad idea.



Circus crew members



Brenda Jenkins



Raymond Slizewski