

The Firefighting Family

(Published in *The Santa Monica Star*, June 2011)

“Who’s cookin’ today?” asks Chief Walter Shirk, first thing as he steps through the door around 11:15 a.m. This might be an odd comment for an outsider to hear, but at the Santa Monica Fire Department’s Station Number Three, it’s so normal that the answer is immediate. Fireman Brent Noon is cooking, proudly declaring the menu: lunch is sandwiches filled with delicious cold cuts and dinner is salmon with rice and a side salad. While Brent prepares their meal, the others – fully suited up and ready to go in their uniforms – chat happily away at the table nearby like one big family.

The longstanding firefighter tradition of cooking in-house stems simply from practicality – they work ten 24-hour shifts a month, from 7 a.m. one day to 7 a.m. the next, with the possibility of getting a call at any second during that time. They definitely don’t have time to go out to eat, and sometimes they don’t even have time to order in. In fact, halfway through lunch, engine four gets a call and four men silently excuse themselves from the table and disappear. Two minutes later, engine three is also gone, leaving behind an empty kitchen and a table full of dirty plates and partially eaten sandwiches.

The chef de jour at the firehouse is chosen based on a point system. Each firefighter gets points every time they cook a meal; therefore, the firefighter with the lowest total points is chosen unless there’s a tie, which is then decided by seniority. Every shift each firefighter pitches in 15 dollars out of their own pocket – five dollars for lunch and 10 dollars for dinner. For this station of nine firefighters, they can spend a total of 135 dollars a day for lunch and dinner (they eat an early lunch and skip breakfast). The chef then goes out at 10 a.m. to the market to pick their ingredients for both meals. Of course, they are still on call, even at the market. Though food is a close second, the safety and well being of the Santa Monica citizens are, undoubtedly, the firefighter’s top priority. Sometimes, their human appetites must be put on pause to pursue their heroic duties.

“The latest I’ve ever eaten here is nine forty-five,” said Fireman Ryan Demirdjian. “But we eat better food here than we do at a restaurant.”

At 6:15 p.m. things have quieted down a bit. The news flashes on mute across the television, and an iPod is blasting in the kitchen. Fireman Cody Shirk is making sure there is a clean surface for Brent to work with, sponging off the counters in the dark room, lit only by the last bit of sun breaking through the blinds. He turns down the music and picks up the station’s announcement system in one smooth motion.

“Chow,” Cody says simply.

A minute later all nine men in their fire department shirts and navy gym shorts are in the room, the lights are flicked on, and several delighted comments are exchanged from engine three to engine four about seeing each other for the first time all day since the morning. Brent serves up an impressively presented main course as they all sit down at the table together.

Engineer John Skorstad digs in and compliments Brent on how he cooked the fish right through perfectly. Mike Ayala jokes about how great the tartar sauce is, and then laughs, revealing that he made it. As the chatter dies down they all sit quietly, enjoying their meal together, and truly savoring each bite as if this had been born into this routine.

“It’s a family here, we do everything together,” said Ryan. “We work together, we fight together. We do all those things that families do.”