

River Oaks chef plans to serve up a tribute to the troops

Charles Carroll assembles superior food, entertainment for a journey to Afghanistan to honor America's military

By ZAIN SHAIK
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Mayra Beltran Houston Chronicle

Charles Carroll, executive chef of the River Oaks Country Club, has raised more than \$150,000 for the event. "This is going to be as Vegas as we can make it," he promised.

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ON THE MENU

- Seafood gumbo
- Crawfish etouffee with rice
- Jambalaya, with chicken, andouille and whole beans
- Potato salad
- Mixed green salad
- **Fresh fruit Source:** Chef Charles Carroll

"That would probably be one of the reasons why I sought him out," he said.

Carroll, who will be joined by *Top Chef Masters* contestants Rick Moonen and Rick Tramonto, will not be preparing the meal directly, but said the overall organization of the event was a special challenge.

"In my heart, I want them to know that we are here for them," he said.

Much of the food for Operation H.O.T. (Honoring Our Troops) was selected and prepared in advance by Carroll's organizing partner in Louisiana, Chef John Folse.

The menu includes seafood gumbo, crawfish étouffée with rice, jambalaya, with chicken, andouille and whole beans, potato salad, mixed green salad, and fresh fruit.

Many of the ingredients were frozen and shipped to Kuwait by boat six weeks ago, Carroll said. That food will be thawed and prepared along with other components of the meal by the chefs in Kuwait.

He has been considered for the head chef job at the White House and has earned culinary honors at competitions worldwide, but the top man in the kitchen at River Oaks Country Club says his greatest achievement will take him to a war zone next month.

It was an idea that came from a colleague, but seemed like the ultimate of chef's accomplishments: Organizing a meal and thank-you event for troops at a U.S. base in Afghanistan, chef Charles Carroll said.

For the last year, Carroll, 46, has put planning for his Afghanistan mission ahead of his usual preoccupations, which typically include cooking dishes — like his recent "duck confit crisp with micro salad, poached egg and croissant crouton" — for former presidents, movie stars and professional athletes.

From a wood-paneled nook in his clamoring kitchen that doubles as his office, he has rounded up more than \$150,000 in donations, organized shipments of food to Kuwait and plans to bring a staff of 34 people to prepare a Cajun-Creole meal and host a show and musical performance for troops fighting overseas.

The event, set to be held next month at an undisclosed base, will bring an unprecedented chef's touch to about 2,000 troops while also offering an elaborate thank you to men and women in uniform, said Army Chief Warrant Officer 5 David Longstaff, who oversees food service operations for troops in Iraq, Afghanistan and throughout the Middle East.

Along with other entertainment, troops will see two celebrity chefs go head-to-head in an adaptation of the TV show *Iron Chef* and will hear recorded thank-you messages from former U.S. presidents Jimmy Carter, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, Carroll said.

"This is going to be as Vegas as we can make it," he said.

Operation H.O.T

The endeavor has not been an easy one, with clearance required from government officials and coordination across borders to organize 24 pallets of equipment to be shipped from Kuwait to Afghanistan.

The undertaking's logistical challenges alone were likely a nightmare to work through, making the breadth of the meal and show impressive, said former White House usher Gary Walters, who interviewed Carroll for a job there.

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Longstaff said military personnel overseas often enjoy shows by celebrities and sometimes get donated meals, but never on this scale.

"It's not only food, but it's celebrity chefs and a whole show that goes along with the donation, so this is the first time we've ever done one of these," he said. Such events are paid for by the donors, with no costs to the government, Longstaff said.

That has meant a lot of work for Carroll and his assistant, Hilmi Ahmad, who are still scrambling to collect gifts like Gatorade, energy drinks, instant coffee and M&Ms that troops have asked for.

Putting together the event was a grueling but rewarding process, especially as Carroll continues to direct a 61-person kitchen staff that serves large events daily. Last week, the kitchen was at work to prepare a meal for 561 people from the Offshore Technology Conference while Carroll was continuing to solidify arrangements for his trip to Afghanistan.

"It's been the most challenging thing I've ever tried to do," he said. "Imagine getting one video from one president as a cook in Texas."

Also helping Afghans

George W. Bush, in his recorded message for the event, thanked the troops and expressed his pride in their accomplishments.

"I really don't miss much about the presidency, but I do miss being commander and chief of the greatest military the world has ever known," he said. "I wish I could be there with you."

Also appearing in a recorded message will be Houston's Joanne King Herring, whose work in Afghanistan Carroll plans to highlight as an example for what can be accomplished with the security created by the military. Herring is raising money to support a group of charities that is developing self-sustaining villages in Afghanistan, with schools, water infrastructure, health care services and agricultural potential.

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