

More than s'mores at summer camps

By Sally Pollak

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When 40 kids sit down July 1 for their first meal at Saltash Mountain Camp in Mount Holly, they'll chow down on something familiar.

Spaghetti, says cook Sam Arfer.

He'll make two sauces, one meat and one vegetarian. Arfer will also prepare broccoli with garlic and lemon juice -- and a special dessert to welcome the kids.

As the summer progresses, Arfer says he'll liven up his menu.

"These kids are coming away from home, in a totally new environment. They're losing some control," Arfer said. "They don't have their own rooms. They don't have access to junk food. Food is a nice, comforting thing. The No. 1 thing is, they're going to enjoy it."

There are thousands of kids in Vermont this summer who don't have access to junk food -- boys and girls eating three meals a day at sleepaway camps.

Camp cooks need to be master organizers; on-the-fly moms; OK at arithmetic (how much pasta serves 250?); well-versed in nutrition and good with gorp.

Oh, yes, it helps as well if they can prepare good, healthy meals that kids will eat. Broccoli for 100, anyone?

A little humor comes in handy, too. Have you ever had to stare down a hungry mob when you're not sure there's enough mac and cheese left in the pot?

"By dinnertime, they're ready; people are hungry; they're ravenous beasts sometimes," said Ryan Burhans, 29, program director at Camp Billings in Fairlee.

Burhans has spent 21 of his 29 summers at Billings. This includes eating his mother's breads and cakes when she was the camp baker (and Burhans was 8); many years as counselor or program director, and head cook in the summer of 2006.

"I think that job is without a doubt, hands-down the longest, hardest job," Burhans said. "That summer I wasn't at camp, I was at a job. I was going into work. You learn as you go."

He learned, for example, that when you make stir-fry for 250 people, it means standing over two flat-top grills for an hour or so just, well, stirring and frying.

"It's amazing," Burhans said. "They love it."

He cooked fresh farm vegetables supplemented with frozen vegetables because prepping fresh vegetables for hundreds of people is too time-consuming, Burhans said. He flavored the stir-fry with ginger, soy sauce and garlic -- "as if it was a night at a restaurant."

One of Burhans' priorities -- serving a minimum of prepared, pre-portioned foods and cooking meals from scratch -- is an approach favored by Arfer.

He's been cooking at Saltash Mountain Camp for 20 years. The camp is one of six Farm and Wilderness camps; it specializes in overnight adventure trips.

"We don't really use any pre-made foods," Arfer said. "There's no chicken nuggets, no Kool-Aid."

Arfer cooks with vegetables grown at the camp, planning meals around what's in season. Some summers, the camp has raised animals and had delicious meals from the butchered meat, Arfer said.

This summer, they'll be milking two cows and pasteurizing the milk, Arfer said. They'll collect and eat eggs from the camp's laying hens.

"Since the kitchen is a program area, we also function as role models and counselors," Arfer said.

As a cook, he tries to achieve three goals: "The kids have to want to eat it; it's got to be nutritious; and we have to make the budget," Arfer said. "We can't have blueberries at every meal."

At one of the Farm and Wilderness camps, Camp Flying Cloud, campers and counselors cook outside over an open fire, and bake bread and pizzas in a wood-fired clay oven. Food is stored in an ice box that uses ice cut from the camp pond during the winter.

Arfer, who lives in Ludlow, is the Farm and Wilderness registrar in the camp off-season.

This week, it's back to the kitchen for the summer. Time to start planning menus, placing orders and cleaning the kitchen after its 10-month layoff. This last chore is one Arfer calls a "monumental task."

"It's a matter of sweeping and dusting and scrubbing everything," he said. "Sharpen the knives and fire up the refrigerator."

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