

Universal Studios Hollywood chef aims to stir up some excitement

Eric Kopelow runs the theme park's central kitchen, where menu items — including more upscale fare — are prepared in King Kong-size batches to serve as many as 25,000 visitors a day.

August 12, 2010 | By Hugo Martín, Los Angeles Times

In Chef Eric Kopelow's kitchen, soup cauldrons are the size of hot tubs. The hand mixer resemble a jackhammer, and the mixing bowls are as big as huge kettledrums.

Instead of measuring ingredients with tablespoons or cups, Kopelow doles out portions in quarts and gallons — often hundreds of gallons.

"There is nothing here that's small," he said. "The smallest portion we make is five gallons."

Big equipment and huge portions are the norm in the central kitchen for Universal Studios Hollywood, where Kopelow, 49, and his cooks prepare the [food](#) to feed as many as 25,000 daily visitors, depending on the time of year.

The 48,000-square-foot theme park kitchen, located on the back lot behind Universal's CityWalk, goes through 2,100 pounds of chicken a day, 300 gallons of [salad](#) dressing a week and 750,000 pounds of watermelons a year.

In a kitchen like this, any mistake can be huge — like the day they put 50 pounds of salt in the frozen lemonade instead of sugar.

Kopelow, a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America in New York, developed the kitchen over the last 10 years to better manage the quality and variety of the park's food.

Kopelow's kitchen is an example of a nationwide trend among theme parks to boost food sales by upgrading the menu choices to include items such as tuna salad sandwiches with muenster cheese and pickled red onions, and tossed salads with homemade mozzarella.

Food sales generate at least 17% of revenue at theme parks, according to a 2008 estimate by the International Assn. of Amusement Parks and Attractions. But that rate is likely on the rise, said Ken Whiting, a food consultant to the industry.

"When it comes to meals, everybody's game has stepped up from a standpoint of quality and value," he said.

Universal Studios Hollywood has taken the trend a step further by centralizing the food operation under one kitchen. Most major theme parks prepare food in small individual kitchens scattered throughout the parks.

Kopelow ran another centralized kitchen in his previous job as executive chef for UAL Corp.'s United Airlines. He left the airline, he said, because he worried about the future of the airline industry after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Kopelow knows that theme park visitors are drawn by the attractions not the food. But he said his goal was to leave park guests with a good impression.

To that end, he said, he makes pizza with homemade sausage, sandwiches on rolls baked daily and **salad** dressing with freshly chopped garlic, among other **food**. He also tested at least 125 recipes before he settled on the formula for the dough for the pizza crust sold at CityWalk's Puccino Pizzeria.

"It's Universal's food, but it's my standards," he said.

Disneyland in Anaheim does not operate a centralized kitchen for the entire park partly because of the broad and complicated geography of the park and the diversity of food offered in the 17 sit-down restaurants and more than 100 quick-food outlets in the theme park, said Michele Gendreau, the park's food and beverage director.

However, she pointed out that the park does operate a central baker on the grounds. "It's a different model but it tips toward the same point" of managing the food quality, Gendreau added.

At Universal Studios, Kopelow oversees the kitchen's 100 cooks and 20 bakers who prepare the food served at the park's 12 restaurants and 85 food carts.

But the chef's work is still guided by the bottom line. He said he tests at least one new item each week. Those dishes that don't sell are quickly discontinued, such as the jambalaya and the giant stuffed baked potatoes he tried in the last couple of years.

"They didn't sell because they were too heavy," he said. "You eat a heavy meal and all of sudden you are sliding all over a roller coaster."

The park still serves traditional theme park food such as hamburgers, hotdogs and pizza. But Kopelow has also introduced 12-ounce rib-eye steak, a roast beef sandwich with brie and pears, and smoked pulled pork on homemade ciabatta bread.

Among his most popular dishes are the daily-made sandwiches with heirloom tomatoes and fresh basil, and also the fried chicken and mashed potatoes served at Doc Brown's Chicken Restaurant.

Reviews for the food have been mostly positive at the park and on food review websites. On a recent afternoon, a guest stopped him as he strolled out of the International Cafe to compliment him on his food.

"I told him that the sandwiches were exceptional," said Steven Stubblefield, a tourist from San Antonio. "We didn't expect the sandwiches to be this fresh."

Theme park aficionado Robert Niles, editor of the website Theme Park Insider, called Kopelow's food "above average for the industry" but said the park's only high-end eateries with table service are at CityWalk, the retail and dining area located outside of the park.

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The kitchen has also received positive reviews from the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, which has given the kitchen an average rating of 90 points out of a perfect 100 over the last few years.

Kopelow grew up near Philadelphia with a dream of becoming a doctor until he realized he couldn't stand the sight of blood. Now he spends most of his days supervising his cooks, testing recipes and checking in on the restaurants in the theme park, donning a tall chef's hat. Several times a day, he said, tourists in the park mistake him for a costumed character and ask to pose for photos with him.

A self-described perfectionist, he recently interrupted a cook in his kitchen to teach her the proper way to cut the rind off a melon.

But even with Kopelow's supervision, slip-ups occasionally happen. A few years ago when the kitchen bought a new frozen lemonade machine, one of the cooks accidentally added 50 pounds of salt to the recipe instead of sugar.

"We never sold it," he said. "We could tell when it was coming out of the machine that the texture was a little off."

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