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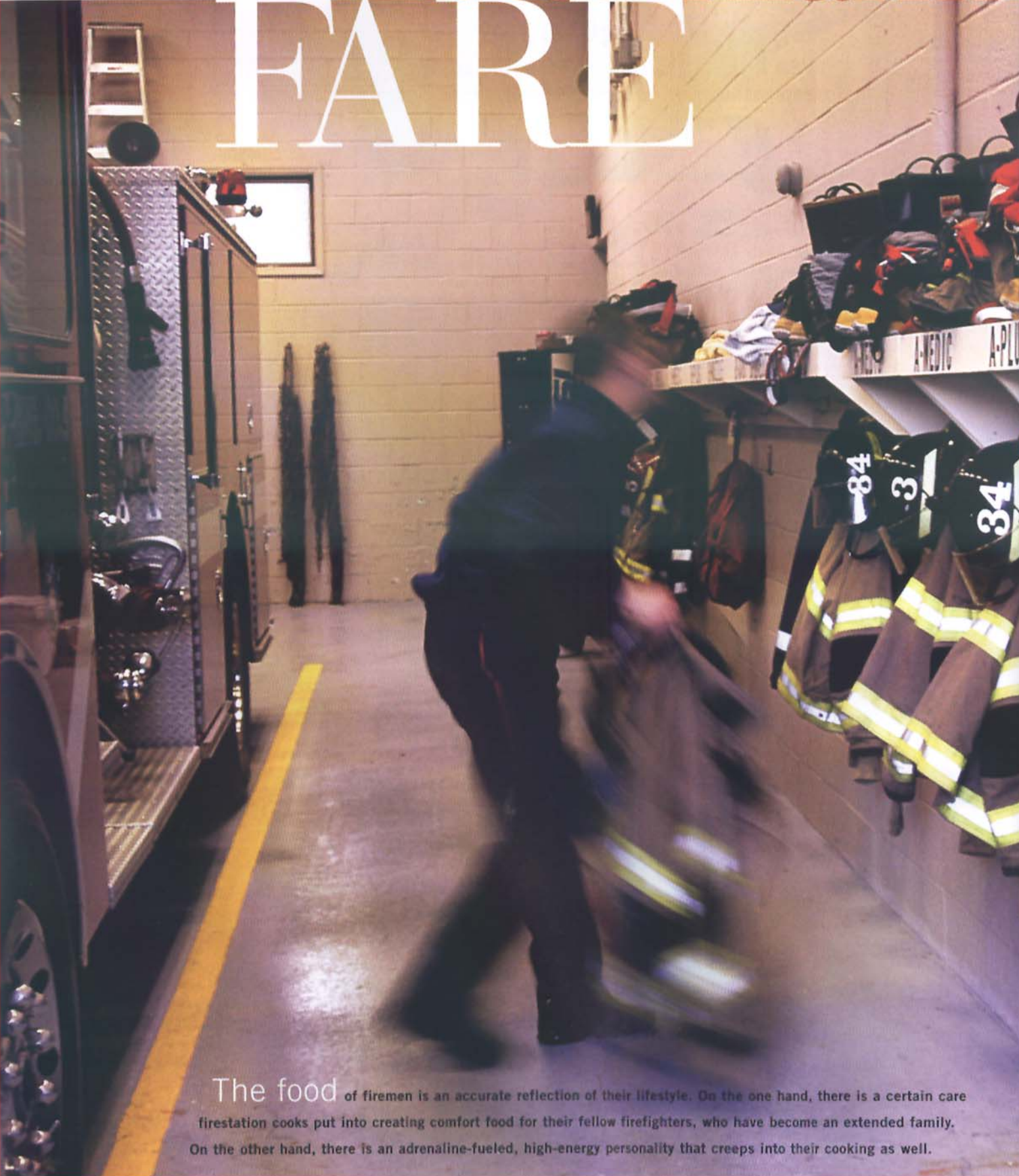
Firehouse Food

DRAYTON NABERS
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SPECIAL BEACH SECTION

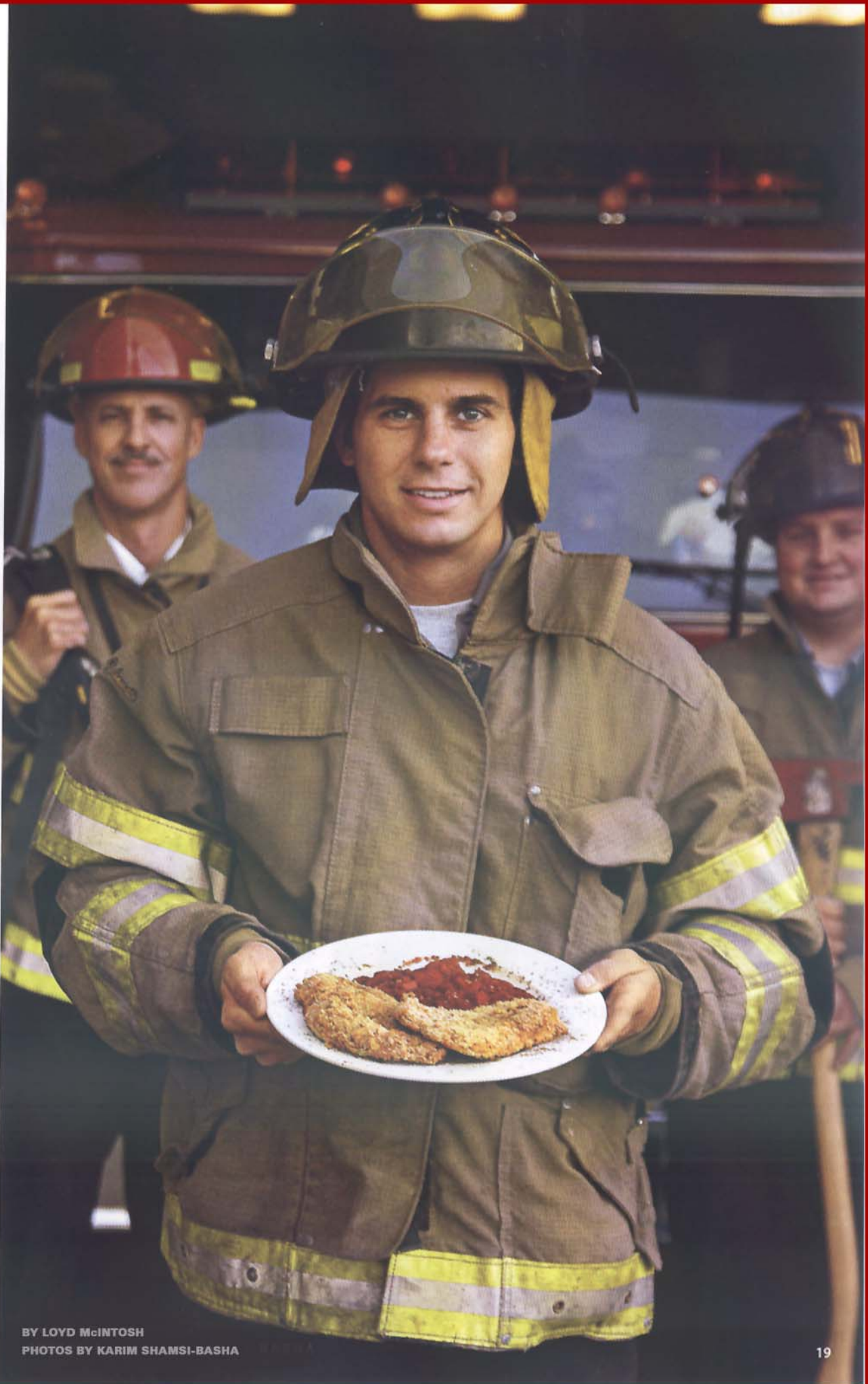


edibles & elixirs

Three-Alarm FARE



The food of firemen is an accurate reflection of their lifestyle. On the one hand, there is a certain care firestation cooks put into creating comfort food for their fellow firefighters, who have become an extended family. On the other hand, there is an adrenaline-fueled, high-energy personality that creeps into their cooking as well.



BY LOYD McINTOSH
PHOTOS BY KARIM SHAMSI-BASHA

Theirs is a world full of charred meats tossed onto flaming hot grills, thick and hearty soups and chili, fragrant stews simmered all day in heavy iron pots, and insanely spicy concoctions that defy reason.

Many of these dishes, and the men that prepare them, have become the stuff of legend. Tall tales about this or that culinary disaster and how many men needed medical attention fill these firehalls with good-natured laughter. However, many of these firefighters have become fantastic cooks as well.



Vestavia Hills Fire Station 5

At Station 5 in Cahaba Heights, firefighter and paramedic Wayne Quick is something of a folk hero around the Vestavia Hills Fire Department. The 10-year veteran firefighter has become one of the best firehouse cooks around and, when on duty, is usually the one manning the stove.

Quick is also fanatical about his fitness. A regular marathon runner, Quick is around six feet tall and looks as though he might weigh 150 pounds soaking wet. He takes his training and his dietary habits seriously, especially when it comes to performing his job.

"I've done some research on what firefighters eat. Up north, for instance, they eat a lot of high-calorie meals because they run fire calls," Quick said. "Some of those guys run three or four house fires a day, so they want a lot of high-calorie meals with a lot of carbohydrates."

Station 5 is not only a normal neighborhood fire station, but it also handles hazardous-materials calls throughout the city as well as special rescues. With the possibility of more and dangerous calls pervasive, the crew of eight spends a lot of time during the day involved in training and equipment maintenance. Quick says mealtime is a chance for them to come together and break bread as an extended family.

"There is a lot of camaraderie and we talk a lot about what went on today or during our off days. It's a lot like a family since we spend on average 54 hours a week here," Quick said.

The day we caught up with Quick, he was in the middle of preparing chicken Parmesan with marinara sauce, wheat pasta and homemade white and wheat bread. For this dish, Quick breads



WAYNE QUICK'S CHICKEN PARMESAN

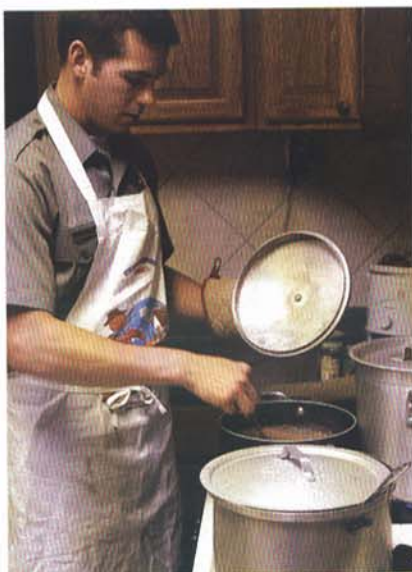
- 4 boneless skinless chicken breasts
- 1 bottle of Italian dressing
- 1 14-ounce container of bread crumbs
- 4 cups mozzarella cheese

Marinate chicken in Italian dressing for 1 to 2 hours. Coat the chicken with bread crumbs and bake in oven for 1½ hours at 350°. After baking, place chicken in a hot skillet and top with cheese for two to three minutes; turn chicken over and let cook for another 1 to 2 minutes. Serve with marinara sauce (see below) and whole wheat pasta.

MARINARA SAUCE

- 2 medium onions
- 3 tablespoons of minced garlic
- 1 28-ounce can Italian-style diced tomatoes
- 1 28-ounce can crushed Italian tomatoes
- 1 6-ounce can tomato paste
- 3 tablespoons sugar
- 1 cup water

Sauté minced garlic and onion. Add tomatoes, tomato paste, water and sugar. Add salt and pepper to taste. Simmer until flavors blend, at least 1 hour.



Vestavia Firefighter Wayne Quick prepares his Chicken Parmesan for the crew.

enough chicken breasts for 10 men with Italian breadcrumbs mixed with a little egg and Italian dressing. Then he bakes the chicken for about an hour and a half. (See Wayne Quick's Chicken Parmesan, left).

For his marinara sauce, Quick combines one can each of crushed and diced tomatoes, Italian seasoning, a little salt, pepper, sugar and tomato paste.

"It's real simple but the extra bit of seasoning makes it a little better. I cook it for about an hour and a half to two hours. The more you cook it, the better the seasoning comes out," Quick said.

Quick uses whole-wheat pasta for its healthier properties and makes his own bread, using a bread machine to knead the dough then finishing it up in the oven. Completing the Mercedes Marathon for the third straight year, Quick is very attentive of what he eats, and he tries to prepare healthier meals for his crew. However, he is mindful not to force his lifestyle on to others.

"If they request it, I'll try to make it, but I'll modify it to make it somewhat healthy," Quick said. "If I fry something I'll try to use olive oil instead of regular vegetable oil."

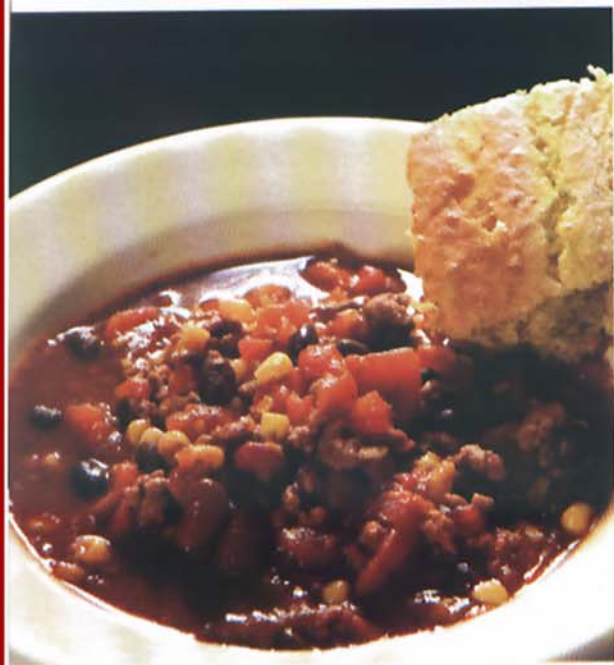
An example of his health conscious substitutions is his use of venison, which is much leaner than beef. One of his favorites is venison chili, which includes kidney beans, chili beans, black beans and pintos with plenty of venison in a spicy and hearty concoction that is a perfect representation of Quick's personality.

"A lot of guys say they don't like it, but you can put venison in something and not tell them and they can never tell the difference," Quick said. "It's all about how you prepare it."

Trussville Fire Stations 1 & 2

The fire department in Trussville is much younger and smaller than many in other area municipalities. The department has only employed paid firemen for the last six years and is still a combination paid/volunteer department. Mealtime at Station 1 and Station 2 is a little different than other cities, but that hasn't kept a couple of men from standing out for their gastronomic expertise.

At Station 1, three-year fire department veteran Chris Jenkins prepares a hearty taco soup on a cold and rainy day in December. There are plenty of



CHRIS JENKINS' TACO SOUP

- 1½ pounds ground beef
- 1 28-ounce can diced tomatoes
- 1 28-ounce can crushed tomatoes
- 1 11-ounce can niblet corn
- 1 can black beans
- 1 can kidney beans
- 2 packages taco seasoning
- 2 packages ranch-style salad dressing mix

Sauté the ground beef in a large skillet until brown. Add one package of taco seasoning and then drain. Place meat and remaining ingredients into a large pot and simmer on low to medium heat at least three hours.

variations of this soup, including the well-known Santa Fe Soup. Chris' version isn't that different, but it is the perfect meal for a day like this—heavy cold rain with a definite possibility for car accidents. The soup's main ingredients are ground beef, tomatoes, black beans, and kidney beans. He simmers the soup on the stove at a medium-high temperature for several hours and serves in bowls with a little cornbread on the side (See Chris Jenkins' Taco Soup, left.).

"It's not real spicy but it has a little bit of a kick," Jenkins said. "You can put it on in the morning and let it cook all day and have it for lunch or you can have it for supper.

"I like spicier foods. Some of the men can't handle real spicy foods, but I've never really had a problem with it. I tend to like extra-spicy food myself," he adds. Jenkins is a fairly serious cook and handles most of the meal planning during his shift unless his co-worker Al Kinney is making his famous fair dogs. In fact, Jenkins says, he thought about making cooking his career at one point in time.

"When I got out of high school I even considered going into the culinary arts," he said. "I like to cook, I just didn't know if I wanted to do it as a job. I've been cooking for as long as I can remember. Both of my parents worked and I'd get home and there wouldn't be anything around, so I would make something," Jenkins recalls. "I watch a lot of cooking shows. I'm a big fan of Emeril. I'll admit it!"

However, the real culinary star in Trussville is Barry Jones, a long-time member of the Trussville Fire Department who works out of the smaller Station 2. Jones was a volunteer in the department for almost 15 years before joining fulltime three years ago. He says cooking and sharing meals together has always been part of life in the Trussville FD.

"Even as volunteers we would cookout once a month, usually on a Thursday night, like a family-oriented get together. We still try to do that with the volunteers now because we're a combination department. So once a month we get together and have a cookout."

Jones recently won several awards for his cooking during a recent festival on the Cahaba River. Winning for his barbecued Boston butt, ribs and smoked sausage, Jones believes his homemade sauce was the winning edge, and one he is not likely to divulge.

"I made a homemade barbecue sauce in a one-gallon milk jug and I broke it out and used it for this cook off," Jones said. "I use fresh lemons. I will tell you that. The rest is a secret." ●