

# the aviary kitchen

## Food for the Flock

by Laura Ellis, Media Relations Manager

Imagine preparing a meal for 800. Every day. Twice a day. Year round. And imagine that your guests are quite particular — some are strict vegetarians, some go the Atkins all-protein route, others demand sushi and nothing else.

That is the challenge facing Tracy Crawford, Commissary Specialist for the National Aviary.

Tracy, a professional chef by trade who earned a culinary degree from the Pennsylvania Culinary Institute and a diploma from Le Cordon Bleu, is applying her extensive background in culinary arts to feed a different set of hungry customers.

“I’ve put in 16 years of 16-hour days in the restaurant business, and I’ve worked every area of the kitchen from food prep to kitchen management, but this job, I absolutely love,” says Tracy, who when she spotted the Aviary’s ad for the position, immediately cut it out.

“The minute I saw the ad, I just knew that I had to have the job.”

Tracy is not new to bird care, having spent six years in the 1990s working in bird retail supply stores. During that time she became a certified pet nutritionist and worked extensively

with avian veterinarians. She also developed a commitment to “enrichment” — a term used to describe the presentation of activities, toys or foods that help offset boredom in pets and zoo animals by creating mental or physical challenges — while caring for her own birds: “Simon,” a rescued Umbrella Cockatoo, and “Serena,” a rescued Lilac-crowned Amazon.

That experience enabled Tracy to quickly absorb the carefully monitored nutritional requirements of the Aviary’s more than 200 species. After following the trainers through their daily feedings and reviewing what had typically been done in the past, she put her experience and her own creativity into motion to add variety and nutrition.

Now, on any given day, enter the Aviary’s kitchen and you’ll hear the staccato thwack of knives on chopping boards. Brightly colored fruit — papaya, bananas, oranges, grapes and more — are quickly being diced and sliced into bird size portions. Tracy’s “daily specials” are posted on the wall, with menus drawing from 14 types of dry grain pelleted diets and 17 types of fruit, as well as fresh vegetables, meats and fish.

Tracy is careful to switch out the menu regularly. While



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The Aviary kitchen is always a busy place. Here, Aaron, Christa and Elizabeth help Tracy prepare meals for a real crowd.

one day's dinner might include bean sprouts, yams, spaghetti squash and pasta, another day's meals could include baby beets and brown rice. All of it is restaurant quality, even the raw fish served to Patrick, Simon, Stanley and Elvis, the Aviary's mischievous quartet of African Penguins.

"Tracy has revolutionized the way we approach the birds' diets," says Dr. Pilar Fish, Director of Veterinary Services and Animal Programs. "Her expertise in inventory control and purchasing means that we now receive the highest quality produce at a much better price. Our birds are receiving restaurant quality foods, and that cannot be said for many zoos."

Along with deliveries of fresh fish, fruits and vegetables, there are other staples that arrive (in carefully marked boxes) that would not be found on any restaurant inventory sheet. Mealworms, wax worms, earthworms and crickets, all of which are served up live, are on Tracy's menu, as well as frozen mice for the Aviary's birds of prey. Asked if she ever feels a bit squeamish working with these more "unusual" menu items, Tracy replies matter-of-factly, "The way I look at it, meat is



Professional Chef Tracy Crawford is living her dream in the Aviary kitchen.

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meat. It's pretty straightforward."

Tracy has also been inventive in adding color and creating stimulating enrichment for the birds. Edible flowers such as nasturtiums now grace many of the food trays. Penguins receive frozen blocks of ice and enjoy the challenge of attacking the "ice intruder" in their midst. Other birds take on the challenge of digging into "popsicles" — frozen blackberry or orange juice embedded with nuts and seeds. Such challenges not only keep the birds occupied, but provide them with opportunities to problem solve as they would in the wild.

At the end of the day, trays are gathered, and as in every good

restaurant, extensive cleanup is in motion. An industrial-size dishwasher scalds dishes clean, and every surface is bleached and sanitized. Counters gleam, and the next day's menu, for 800, is set.


Asked if coming in the next day to do it all again seems repetitious, Tracy responds, "Working with the birds, and with the staff and trainers here — this is my dream job."



Please consider leaving a legacy to the National Aviary by becoming a member of the Phoenix Society.

Contact Patricia Rambasek, CFRE, Director of Development and Communications, at 412-323-7235, ext. 214 for more information.

While the raw fish our African Penguins eat isn't live, it would be if they were in the wild. Here, a juvenile Simon shows off the backward-pointing barbs that all penguins have on the roof of their mouth, as well as on the tongue. The barbs act as a conveyor belt to move the fish along, explained Erin Estell, Manager of Animal Programs.



**The Sushi Bar is Open**

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