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**Patrick Nixon**
Director

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**Produce:** “Owning” the department, Ramstein’s farmers’ market, and DeCA’s new produce program, Pages 8-13.

**Meat:** Naval Air Station Jacksonville Commissary, Fla., posts consistently high meat sales. What’s Andy’s secret? Natural beef is a big seller at Fort Lewis, Wash. Store directors weigh in on the product, Pages 4-7.

**Cover Story:** European bakeries go self-serve. Read how Mike Dowling and his team are giving customers the opportunity to serve themselves, Pages 20-21.

**Picture:** A customer helps herself to fresh rolls at the self-serve bakery in Vogelweh Commissary, Germany. Photo: Wally Raynes
In talking with store directors and perishable department managers about their best practices for this special issue of Vision, several key themes surface repeatedly. Some of the best suggestions are really reminders of classic management principles: Treat people with respect, know your bottom line, communicate with employees and customers, and the most timeless advice of all: The customer is always right.

Growing sales. Though geographically located on the perimeter, perishable departments such as meat, produce, bakery, deli, hot foods, seafood, sushi and plants are at the center of sales growth, both within DeCA and retail. While perishables have in the past typically accounted for about 18 percent of the agency’s sales, they are responsible for half of the $36 million increase in sales from October 2005 to June 2006.

Changing needs. Growing customer interest in perishables can be attributed to various factors, primary among them an increase in healthier lifestyles and a decrease in personal time. People want to eat healthier but they no longer have the time to make meals “from scratch,” hence the uptick in sales of fresh meat, produce and prepared meals.

New format. The future looks bright for perishables. The new commissary at San Diego will provide the blueprint for how we think about and market perishables. Look for expanded departments with more space, new formats that include healthy options and easy-to-prepare meals, and the latest in natural and organic products. We’ll offer a wider range of products, from the ordinary to the unusual, appealing to diverse, well-traveled commissary customers.

Sharing best practices. In this special issue, store directors and department managers provide a window into perimeter operations, from working the department every day to special events like meat truckload sales, seafood road shows and farmers’ markets. They share interesting stories about their stores, their staffs and the best practices they employ to deliver the best of the perimeter to our customers.

I want to thank these store directors and department managers for taking time out of their hectic and busy schedules to share their stories with Vision readers. Their words inspire us to think big, and to be innovative and original in bringing the commissary benefit to our customers.
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here is more to satisfying customer needs than the traditional pound of ground round. Sure, there’s 81-percent, 93-percent, 73-percent, USDA Choice, USDA Select and something called “chub,” but customers, armed with the latest and greatest information about the world of food and cooking thanks to cable television’s 24-hour Food Network, are increasingly demanding unique and innovative products.

Despite their food savvy, ask a customer what chub is, and you’re likely to get a blank stare. And it’s no wonder since it’s an industry term specific to the meat department.

One guy who can tell you all about chub is Gregory “Andy” Anderson, head meat wrangler at the Naval Air Station Jacksonville Commissary, Fla. Double-digit sales increases over the last couple of years suggest Anderson knows the meat business inside and out.

“Meat and perishables are the backbone of our commissaries, a real draw for the customers,” he says. “They want to come in and spend money, so I have to think, ‘What kind of display can I build that will make people want to buy?’ and that’s one of the keys to success.” And he loves to teach others how to be successful, too.

Born in Illinois, drafted into the Army in 1969 and “been living in Florida ever since,” Anderson is a hard-core meathead. How bad is it? “My wife knows when I go into a grocery store I will straighten the meat case.” That’s pretty bad. Or good. It all depends on your point of view.

Les Simpson thinks it’s pretty good. Simpson is the

Jacksonville posts consistent sales gains

Bonnie Powell
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Les Simpson thinks it’s pretty good. Simpson is the
commissary management specialist in charge of meat at DeCA headquarters. “Andy is one of our stars,” he says. “His team has achieved amazing results in meat sales over the last couple of years. He came to DeCA from industry after 22 years with a commercial grocery store chain (Winn Dixie) and we turned him loose.” While Jacksonville is 14th in overall sales, it’s second in meat sales, notes Simpson.

Starting out at Kings Bay Commissary, Ga., as a work leader, Anderson also started doing resets for Gina Klimpel, who was chief of capital investment for DeCA East. “Gina is tireless. She took me to Atlanta to do a reset,” he says. “She knew I had the basic skills and told me to get out of the box!” Anderson took the advice to heart and walked into the Jacksonville Commissary, a supermarket with an “extra sales” attitude led by store director Larry Bentley, now zone 33 manager. John Moore is now Jacksonville store director.

“I was fortunate to be part of Larry’s team,” says Anderson. “This was stuff I’d hungered for. They gave me the tools and let me go.” Anderson walked in “with 14 sets of eyes looking at me, all wondering whose side I was on.” The first thing he tried to do was get the team on his side. “I brought in some case-ready and it didn’t decrease jobs. In fact, we increased jobs by increasing sales!” Six months later he was making solid inroads.

The first step in figuring out how to increase sales is to simply push a “buggy” around the store and look at the meat case, like a customer would. He did that at Jacksonville.

“We needed more line items,” he observed. He called suppliers and increased the line items by 100. “You never want shoppers to reach out and buy what’s there week after week. Your sales just stagnate.” He’s a stickler with suppliers about coupons as a way to get customers to try new things.

“Put two rows of a new item with coupons behind it and see what happens,” he says. “Put florescent star bursts in the case.” They can be handwritten, but make them eye-catching. The supplier might give you banners, too, he says, “anything to get attention and create excitement!”

One of the biggest drawbacks he finds when he goes to visit other commissaries is a lack of excitement in the meat area. “We’re the grocery store for the best military in the world. Even in the face of tight payrolls we have to find something day after day to get us excited about work.”

Excitement? You mean like taking on 700 pieces of beef destined for stores closed by Hurricane Katrina? “Yeah,” he says. “I said ‘Send it to me,’ and we sold it all in a week. The coolers were so full I couldn’t fit in a gnat. I went out on a limb and had to trust that my guys would make it work. They did.”

After two years of double-digit sales increases, sales gains get harder and harder. “I didn’t think we could increase sales this year, but we have,” he says.

“My real goal is to get the word out to other stores about creating a sense of excitement. There is a lot of good out there but DeCA has not reached its meat sales potential … yet!”

Anderson’s suggestions for improving meat sales

Build a team and be versatile. “You have to be able to do more than one job.” Keeping well-stocked cases is on the list, as is the philosophy “Two rows are better than one.” Create eye appeal! “When they get to the meat case, something has to be there that sells itself,” he says. All of that is part of creating excitement, “which is my job as a manager.”

Look at the customers. “Young spouses don’t have a lot of cooking experience and young families are our hardest nut to crack. But once we get them to come in, we’ve got them.”

Have recipes and brochures. “We go through recipe cards by the case.”

Grandma meals are over. “Good ol’ prime heavy steaks are not the thing anymore now. People are also more health conscious,” he says. “We sell 1,500-1,800 packages of ground beef every day, lots of 97-percent. And customers buy boneless, skinless chicken.”

Think “quick and fast” meals: thin-cut steaks, flavored spare ribs, rib-eyes and tenderloins. “Of course some things don’t sell as well as others,” he says. “I tried flavored items and sometimes they didn’t sell, but people’s tastes change. It’s a balancing act and you have to watch the trends.”

Fresh-cut and case-ready, they both need to be there. “I hope it (case-ready) never takes over the meat department, but there are case-ready items that need to be there and they add to the meat department. It sells out-side the gate and it’s helped our sales.”

Last but not least: Have a hobby. What’s Anderson’s? “Every Wednesday night I cook for around 200 at church.”

Perhaps it beats spending your spare time straightening up the meat case at that “other” grocery store chain down the street. ■

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**Jacksonville’s Meat Numbers**

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<th>Sales</th>
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<td>FY03 $5,009,080</td>
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<td>FY04 $5,822,629</td>
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*FY05 meat sales surpassed those of FY03 by $1,410,005 or 28.15 percent.*
An iconic advertising campaign once asked, “Where’s the beef?” If you ask Fort Lewis, Wash., store director Gene Lantz, he might rephrase the question to, “Where’s the natural beef?”

It’s in the meat case at the Fort Lewis Commissary and in 51 other stateside commissaries — a new line of USDA Choice natural beef products under the American Range Beef program. The selection includes such items as 90-percent lean ground beef, tenderloin, T-bone, porterhouse and rib-eye steaks.

Military shoppers are demanding more organic and natural products for their families and the commissary is stepping up to the plate. “Today’s consumer is more concerned with healthy eating than ever before,” says Patrick Nixon, Defense Commissary Agency director. “Natural beef can be a great option for commissary shoppers who don’t want additives and preservatives in the food they serve to their families. This program is a nice fit with ‘It’s Your Choice, Make it Healthy,’ the agency’s initiative to be the nutritional leader for military families.”

According to John Tobe, chairman of the board of Laura’s Lean Beef Company, parent company of the American Range Beef program, the company’s natural beef is 100 percent pure beef. No antibiotics or growth hormones are used; if the cattle become sick, they are removed from the American Range program. The beef is minimally processed with no additives, preservatives or other artificial ingredients.

“Our products come from cattle raised on American ranches and farms on an all-vegetarian diet of mostly grasses and grains, with no animal byproducts,” Tobe
says. “The cattle are fed a grain-only diet at least 100 days prior to harvest to improve the texture and tenderness of the beef.”

“Our customers are really looking for organic and natural products,” says Lantz. “With savings of more than 30 percent over retail on organic and natural products, military shoppers can take better care of their families at substantial savings by using their commissary benefit.”

How do Lantz and Fort Lewis Meat Manager James Docherty market the product to their customers? What advice would they give to store directors who might consider carrying natural beef in their meat case?

“Start with a basic lineup and expand as you determine what your customers buy,” Docherty advises.

“Here at Fort Lewis,” he continues, “natural beef definitely has a built-in customer base. We’ve got organic produce and grocery items, and we offer a full line of healthy-choice foods, so our customers are already accustomed to the idea of ‘natural’ and ‘organic.’”

“We have a large percentage of shoppers who are young and savvy about food choices and health. It’s a lifestyle for them and they are eager to embrace products that are free of hormones, pesticides, additives and other artificial ingredients,” Lantz says.

For shoppers who don’t know what natural beef is all about, “We make sure our staff know the facts about the product,” says Docherty, “and they in turn educate the customer.”

Docherty says the number of people who don’t know which meats to select or how to prepare them surprises him. “We have to stay up on seasonings, marinades and condiments as well as cooking methods. It makes our job challenging, but it’s very satisfying at the same time.

“Visual appeal is another key factor in marketing natural beef,” he continues. “Our staff does a great job of merchandising the product and they work hard to maintain the display, keeping the product organized and eye-appealing. We display about eight feet of upright case from top to bottom using the American Range dividers and posters. The natural beef product stands out because of its modified atmosphere packaging and distinctive red, white and blue label.”

Lantz and Docherty agree that many patrons are glad to see the line of natural beef in the store. They say customers don’t mind the extra cost, because even so, it’s still a substantial savings over commercial retailers.

“I’m most proud of the meat department team,” says Docherty. “The product, display case and the service is top-notch, yet they’re always striving to improve and are open to new ideas. Sales have been up for six months straight and we’re doing it with a smaller work force.”

For recipes and a complete list of commissaries carrying natural beef, check the American Range Beef program link on the “Military Links” page at http://www.commissaries.com/links.cfm.

What they say about natural beef . . .

“The [natural beef] product looks great and is selling very well at this time.”

Meat Manager Billy Tatem, Naval Air Station Oceana, Va.

“For the record, our first delivery sold out with only one leaker! This was a total of $1,720.18 (15 cases). Our next order is for 60 cases.”

Meat Manager Anthony Glassburn, Wright Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio

“The [natural beef] product flew out of here. I bought just a case each of the product to check the quality and customer response and I can tell you this product is going to be a winner! I have a load of it coming in and just wish I had the room in my case to dedicate a full row to the total product line. This is really going to be a good line.”

Meat Manager Larry Still, Eglin Air Force Base, Fla.

“In the first four and a half days, we sold $1,121.80. Of that, 88 units were ground natural beef.”

Store Director Dennis Pimento, Naval Base Norfolk, Va.
She may not have an actual deed or title, but taking ownership of the department gives Ramstein Commissary, Germany, Produce Manager Heidi Yusko a real sense of personal pride in how it’s run and the fantastic sales numbers it posts.

“I like to think that the produce department is mine and I manage it like I own it,” explains Yusko. The Ramstein produce department is the leader for DeCA Europe in both sales and tonnage.

Store Director Harry Nichols says Yusko obviously loves her job. “She goes completely above and beyond the call of duty on a daily basis,” he says.

Yusko says both her professional performance and the store’s are based on sales, so stellar produce sales are enormously rewarding to her. “I also like the fact that my department is never out of tolerance.

“Our produce department is unique among overseas stores in that we carry more than 300 line items throughout the year,” Yusko explains. “But the thing that really makes Ramstein produce special is the regular sales we run every weekend.

“During the week, we typically offer 25 percent off of one select item,” she says. “Saturday and Sunday are our busiest days, so it makes sense to wow our customers where we have the most impact. When the weekend rolls around, the sales really kick in and customers find that we feature no less than three manager’s specials of at least 50 percent off. These specials are always our top selling items, such as apples, strawberries, cantaloupes, potatoes and lettuce. We don’t try to push kumquats or lychee nuts. We give the customer a great deal on what is already on his or her shopping list. The customers understand this and are here every weekend, driving up produce and total sales.”

Nichols says the produce department is considered a desti-
nation category. “It’s the first department you see when you enter the store, so we always try to keep it full with lots and lots of high-quality fruits and vegetables. It is a living, breathing department and naturally draws in our customers.”

Yusko begins a typical day in produce at 7 a.m. She checks the department to make sure the late shift has everything ready for opening. She and her staff crisp and stock the fresh salad and begin preparing the salad bar. She takes stock of the produce supply in the back room, consults her calendar and places orders for the next day. When the day’s shipment arrives, it is inventoried and inspected for quality. Substandard produce is returned. If it’s viable, Yusko negotiates with the vendor for a substantial price reduction. At 11 a.m., Yusko is back on the line checking and rechecking produce and working with employees.

“I get back to the office when I can and take care of e-mail and any suspenses I may have,” says Yusko. “I either stock and cull or work on my employee files, depending on what needs to be done first. Then of course I’m back in the store taking care of customers and monitoring employees.

“Our customers compliment us on the quality and selection of our department,” she says. “We always hear, ‘Wow, the selection is great here! I’ve never seen this strange fruit before! Everything looks so nice.’ We get that kind of reaction from the customer because we work at it.”

Pearl Harbor Store Director Alan Esperas and Produce Manager Benigno Balangue, Naval Base Pearl Harbor Commissary, Hawaii, have a philosophy that serves them well — they’re No. 1 in produce sales in DeCA West and No. 2 in DeCA — and they’ve boiled it down to an acronym: GOLD.

“That stands for ‘Grand Opening Looking Good Daily,’” explains Esperas. “It reminds us to strive for grand opening day perfection. When we throw open our doors first thing in the morning, the store offers the freshest produce and customers are faced with fully-stocked cases. We strive to maintain this grand opening style impression throughout the day.”

The Pearl Harbor produce morning crew gets an early start on the day. At 5 a.m. they are cleaning and removing unwanted products from the display case. The GOLD philosophy means they keep themselves busy “fronting all products,” rotating and replenishing displays, for full, attractive and fresh cases all day long.

“We’re proud of our produce sales and we’re proud to serve the greatest customers in the world,” says Balangue. “We have some of the most experienced and knowledgeable produce people. They are the backbone of the department and the secret to our success with sales and customer satisfaction.

“Never underestimate the importance of a well-trained and dedicated staff. They are the key to a successful produce department.”

Ramstein Produce Manager Heidi Yusko

“Our customers tell us they appreciate that we listen to them, their suggestions and constructive criticism,” he says. “We listen to them and we learn from our customers.”

Balangue says that in addition to the usual displays, manager’s specials, product demonstrations and cross merchandising, the Pearl Harbor produce staff puts in extra hours preparing for special events like produce road shows and farmers’ markets, and building and maintaining special holiday displays.

“We’re looking forward to DeCA’s new local produce initiative,” he says. “We expect it to make the procurement process a lot more efficient and allow us to offer lower prices, which of course, the customers enjoy.”

Speaking of the next biggest thing in the produce world, Balangue says overall demand for produce will increase as customers try to eat healthier. “We can’t forget about the organics craze,” Ramstein Produce Manager Heidi Yusko predicts. “Pre-cut salads will continue to rise. The use of customer scale labelers will expand. Prepared fruit and salads for the lunch crowd will be a must.”

Balangue offers the following produce tips: Keep it fresh, keep it full and keep it moving. Keep a positive attitude. Remember who your customer is. Take pride in your work and the fact that you’re serving members of the U.S. military and their families. Listen to your customers, be respectful and always employ tact when speaking with them. Most important of all, staff your department with people who know the produce business and aren’t afraid of hard work.

Yusko offers these words of wisdom: Practice management by walking around. Keep accountable documents filed and logged for the appropriate month. Keep historical records in the same manner, so you can easily determine what was ordered a year ago. Set up folders for new employees as soon as they arrive and brief them on administrative details and all pertinent aspects of the job. Staying on top of accountability and employee records keeps you prepared and ready for surprise inspector general visits. Keep culled produce in the back-up storage area and sell it by the case to customers who have animals to feed. Deal with conflict in a calm manner that diffuses rather than escalates the situation. If the conflict is between employees, separate them and talk to each person in private. If the conflict involves customers, remember the customer is always right. Never underestimate the importance of well-trained and dedicated employees. They are the key to a successful produce department. Cull, cull, cull are the magic words in every produce department.

And for a final thought, she adds, “If you build it, they will come.”
Smiling customer service is the order of the day for Ramstein Commissary, Germany, administrative assistant Carol Manning. All photos: Gerri Young
The smell of hay was in the air. Folks walked around in bib overalls and straw hats as the sun just got out of bed. The Ramstein Commissary, Germany, had “gone country” for Labor Day weekend and customers showed up in droves.

More than 100,000 pounds of produce, plus flowers and fall gourds, were brought in by German supplier Wasgau GmbH. A tent, built the day before, was the scene of great activity in the early morning hours as trucks arrived for unloading and commissary employees stood ready to arrange a large number of pallets in a very short time.

By the end of the three-day sale, customers had purchased $46,668 in produce and set a new one-day sales record on Sept. 2 of $19,215 for the commissary.

“It was tons of work,” says Store Director Harry Nichols, “but a great time was had by all. Some customers asked if we planned to do it every month or all the time. One customer, leaving with a load of produce, laughed as he said he had only come for milk.”

Produce Manager Heidi Yusko and DeCA Europe Produce Specialist David Kryniski planned the sale well in advance and enlisted as much assistance as possible from Wasgau and other vendor representatives to provide product demonstrations to add to the excitement.

Surrounded by stacks and bins of produce, vendor representatives provided tastes of fresh-cut pineapple, fruit salad with special dressings, organic breads, Parma ham and cantaloupe. Kay Blakely, DeCA Europe’s consumer advocate, cooked pear honey next to stacks of pear boxes, filling the air with the sweet aroma and enticing customers to come over for a taste, a recipe and a pack of pears to take home.

Representatives from Wasgau stayed at the market throughout the weekend and quickly caught the fever of the fun. “We’ve never seen anything like this in Germany,” says Ergen Heim, chief executive officer for the company. He even shot video footage to share with his staff. Katja Geis, executive assistant to Heim, and Hans Juergen Kirsch, head buyer, stayed for nearly the entire three-day event.

A Wasgau truck added brilliant green color to the picture and allowed workers to dispense an unending supply of watermelons off the back lift. The watermelon seller, Garry Briggs, produce work leader, might not have been on the playbill as entertainment, but he certainly provided lots of it as he shouted encouragement to customers and even drew funny faces on the melons to entice them to buy.

A bouncy castle entertained the children and a small band provided music. Community groups like Women, Infants and Children Overseas provided healthy eating information, while the Health and Wellness Center advertised the dangers of smoking and the Ramstein Enlisted Spouses Club gave away hot dogs and drinks.

While the store might not be able to meet customer requests to have the market every month, ideas for next year’s event were generated throughout the weekend and planning begins any minute. While the market certainly had a modern twist, it also had all the ingredients of a traditional farmers’ market, but none of the cows and pigs looking over the fence.

Hmmm ... now there’s another idea for next year. ■

(More photos, next page)
Ramstein Commissary goes country ...

(Continued from previous page)

▲ GREEN ACRES IS THE PLACE TO BE ...
A few “farm hands” take a little time from their work at for Ramstein’s Labor Day farmers’ market to pose for a snapshot. They are Tasha Soria, produce storeworker; Heidi Yusko, produce manager; Harry Nichols, store director; and Juan Rodriguez, store manager. “It was tons of work,” says Nichols, “but a great time was had by all. Some customers asked if we planned to do it every month or all the time. One customer, leaving with a load of produce, laughed as he said he had only come for milk.” By the end of the three-day sale, customers had purchased $46,668 in produce and set a new one-day sales record on Sept. 2 of $19,215 for the commissary.

► Storeworker Leader Garry Briggs is a one-man melon machine as he shouts out special deals.
Store Director Tony Andre, Fort Buchanan, Puerto Rico, says about 30 percent of his total produce sales are unique and culturally specific fruits and vegetables indigenous to the island. The remaining produce is shipped to Fort Buchanan from Florida.

“Taro, yucca, boniato, calabasas, malanga, cassava, and of course, papaya, plantain, banana, pineapple and mango are staples of the Puerto Rican diet,” explains Andre. “All of our produce employees are of Puerto Rican descent, so the products that are most in demand are also standard fare on their tables at home. Our employees are totally invested in the produce we sell and are always excited about presenting it in ways that are creative and appealing to the eye!”

“Fort Buchanan customers have two main concerns when it comes to produce: quality and price,” says Produce Manager Carmen Santiago. “Our prices are often half of that charged for the same products downtown. Our freshness, quality and availability are superior considering the challenges of the process we have for getting it on the shelves.”

The challenges Santiago speaks of include a two-week lead in procuring produce from its stateside location in Florida, and the logistics of shipping it to Puerto Rico. This is all changing as the agency implements a new produce purchasing program allowing commissaries to work directly with contractors in procuring fruit and vegetables. The agency’s new small business contractors will procure produce from local and veteran-owned farms.

A six-month produce test in southeast Virginia’s Hampton Roads area commissaries achieved resounding success that should prove exciting to customers, commissary employees and produce vendors alike as the program launches worldwide. DeCA Director Patrick Nixon says the goal is to complete transition to a new way of doing business in CONUS, and begin transition of Europe and the Far East.

“Although DeCA has had a long and valued partnership with Defense Supply Center Philadelphia, we had to go ‘outside the box’ with total commitment to our customers in mind,” explains Nixon. “The test results were exciting: substantial savings to the customer; better, fresher produce; more promotional activity; Web-based ordering; fresher produce from local farms; easier, faster bill paying; and management reports that let us review and manage produce operations in a way we could never do before.”

According to Nixon, it’s a source of great pride for growers to provide their finest produce to commissary shoppers. “While transforming our produce business represents a huge challenge, it reflects our dedication to delivering the best benefit possible to the best customers in the world — our nation’s warfighters, past and present, and their families.”

Andre echoes this sentiment. “The change to private industry produce providers will shorten our order lead time and provide us product flexibility to meet the changes in customer demand,” he says. “And it will no doubt greatly improve our efficiency.”

Among the findings of the local purchase test, the biggest blockbuster was an increase in customer savings of up to 17 percentage points. Order lead time was reduced from an average of 47.5 hours to 24.8 hours. Produce quality was equal to or improved. Tonnage increased from 24 to 33 percent. And perhaps the best news of all: Average produce sales increased 4.6 percent.

For customers, the new produce program promises even higher-quality produce purchased from local- and veteran-owned farms at significant savings, resulting in the freshest goods on the market, with a longer shelf life and a better price break. Since commissaries sell at cost, all savings go straight into shoppers’ wallets.

“We never accept the status quo when it comes to our customers,” says Nixon. “Our health-conscious customers demand outstanding produce at the best prices in town, so we’re ready to take produce to a new level.”
If the food world had high school superlatives, chicken would certainly be voted “Most Popular.” Let’s face it: For people who watch what they eat, chicken has long been the lean choice. But as more and more people discover the benefits of a healthy lifestyle, seafood may eventually take the “Most Likely to Succeed” vote.

And why not? According to experts, seafood — particularly when grilled or broiled — has earned a sizable reputation as a healthy meal. Researchers and medical professionals say nutrients found in seafood help reduce risk of death by heart attack and prevent a host of chronic health problems and terminal illnesses. The U.S. Department of Agriculture recommends two seafood meals per week that are rich in omega-3 fatty acids. Species that are rich in omega-3 include wild and farmed salmon, trout and herring.

Mike Madigan, store director at Bolling Air Force Base Commissary, Washington, D.C., is optimistic about sales for the store’s fresh seafood counter. “Sales in our seafood department routinely add up to 2 percent a month,” he says. “Our current best-selling fish is the salmon filet, but we also do well with catfish, tilapia and marinated salmon. Shrimp is our No. 1 shellfish followed by snow crab legs, lobster and lump crabmeat. More and more of our customers are aware of the healthy benefits of fish in particular, and as we push for healthier food choices, seafood consumption and sales are bound to go up.”

After all, you can only eat so much chicken.

Laurie Combs, who runs Bolling’s seafood department, says she focuses on three objectives to promote sales: sanitation, customer service and product presentation. “Seafood goes bad quickly and when it does, it isn’t a pretty sight, so first and foremost, our seafood has to be the freshest available, and our department has to be clean. Most importantly, it has to smell clean. People won’t bother with it otherwise.”

She says product presentation is always a key element in sales. “Your display case has to be maintained in a professional manner throughout the business day. If the product looks good, it will sell well,” Combs explains. An important detail, she says, is to treat every customer as if they were a first-time customer. “We treat them right the first time and we have them hooked — no pun intended! Never stop learning your customers’ preferences and tastes.”

Combs has 10 years of experience in her role as Bolling seafood manager, and during that time, she says, the store has had plenty of turnover in staff. “Folks transfer in and out, so we’re always train-
ing employees on seafood operations. The customer expects uniform service regardless of our staffing situation, so training is critical. The first thing I tell new employees is to never be afraid to ask questions. And I make sure they get plenty of experience working directly with shoppers so they learn the nuts and bolts — and the value — of customer service.”

A typical day in the Bolling seafood department begins with switching on the equipment and inspecting the case before stocking it. Combs makes a bee-line through the department, making sure product signs and prices are accurate. When the staff arrives, she checks their schedules and takes a mental roll call to make sure everyone is present and the department is properly staffed. Once the store opens, administrative functions take a back seat and customer service becomes the activity of the day. Combs says the first rush of the day is around lunchtime and typically lasts until 1:30 p.m. During the lull hours, they restock the case for the late afternoon rush and prepare for the next day’s business, writing orders, receiving and verifying deliveries, and moving new product to the freezer. Each day before closing, all seafood is removed and the case is sanitized.

“Special orders keep us busy,” says Combs. “Bolling’s proximity to the Pentagon and a myriad of government agencies means special orders come at us simultaneously and from all angles. The trick is to keep calm and focus on filling these orders. It’s exciting and it’s gratifying to know that our labor is a contribution to so many significant official events.”

Store Director Madigan says the seafood department enjoys prime real estate in the commissary. “Produce is Bolling’s first perimeter department,” he explains. “Seafood is next. Customers place their order at the seafood counter and continue shopping. They return when they’re finished, pick up their order and head to the checkout. They really seem to like this convenience.”

Madigan and Combs share these additional tips on maximizing seafood sales:

Know your product and how to prepare it. Sales on new items are often based on an employee’s ability to offer the customer proper preparation information.

Communicate with the customer even if they are not shopping the department. Order seasonal items before the season, not during. Have enough lobster on hand to satisfy all the customers who want a special meal on holidays such as Mother’s Day and Father’s Day.

Advertise the department and educate customers. “Bolling usually conducts First Term Airman Center tours once a month,” says Combs. “Many of these young service members have never made a purchase from a seafood department. We have a tray of steamed shrimp on hand for samples. Many, if not most, are unaware that they can order steamed crab legs and shrimp. Single service tours and product sampling are just a couple ways to stimulate conversation with customers and advertise your products and services.”

Bolling store director Mike Madigan, seafood manager Laurie Combs and store worker Marsha Winterhalter. DeCA photo
The Camp Pendleton Commissary in sunny California occasionally hosts a road show, but there are no antiques in sight. Instead of great Aunt Gertrude’s pre-Revolutionary War silver service and Grandpa Nick’s Civil War saber, the Pendleton road show is all about seafood: big ice chests of Dungeness crab, king crab legs, raw and cooked shrimp, and snow crab clusters.

Much like an open-air seafood market one might find at Pikes Market in Seattle, or Fisherman’s Wharf in San Francisco, the seafood road show is a smaller version set up on the commissary sidewalk.

“All you need is a sidewalk,” says Camp Pendleton Store Director Bill Vick. “The vendor does the rest! Customers love the outside market style presentation and the low prices. It’s simple, fun and has the atmosphere of a fisherman pulling up to the dock to sell the catch of the day, fresh off the boat.”

The appeal for store director and commissary staff is the simplicity of it all. Logistically, the commissary only needs space on the sidewalk. The vendor delivers the product to the back door, where it is received and placed in the cooler or freezer. The seafood is displayed on ice in portable fixtures with service personnel behind the counter, both supplied by the vendor. The customers pick out what they want and the counter person bags, weighs and prices the seafood.

The biggest commitment the commissary takes on is to promote the road show. To get the word out, Vick says they display posters, give out fliers and “talk up” the sale with customers. Store Director Robert Nagle, Marine Corps Air Station Miramar Commissary, Calif., who has also hosted his share of seafood road shows, confirms the importance of promoting the sale. “You can get good sales with normal foot traffic,” says Nagle, “but the really good numbers come from getting the word out.” In addition to flyers and posters, Nagle says he also makes use of the store’s public address system and basewide e-mail.

“Star Fisheries, our current vendor,” says Vick, “initially focused on crab, crab leg and shrimp road shows. Now, in addition, they’re selling fresh fish in the same market-style atmosphere. It certainly doesn’t hurt that Star Fisheries is well-known in the San Diego area with a strong reputation for quality and freshness.”

Seafood isn’t the only “catch.” The road show also hauls in curious customers and increased sales for the commissary. Sensing the potential, many store directors are clamoring to bring seafood road shows to their stores. While the original concept was the inspiration of DeCA West leadership and was implemented in commissaries in Southern California in February 2006, Tom Milks, DeCA’s director of sales, says the seafood road show concept is “catching” on. “We’ll be hitting stores along the East Coast from northern Virginia to South Carolina,” he says. At present, the seafood road show is solely a stateside phenomenon.

The Fort Myer Commissary, Va., hosted a seafood road show in July, and Store Director Troy Collins reports that it was a complete success. “Judging from customer response, they saw the road show sale as an opportunity to buy fresh and frozen seafood at truckload or case lot sale prices,” he says. “The customers lined up and bought large quantities of their favorite seafood.”

The Fort Myer road show surpassed projected sales by about 10 percent. “We thought we’d sell about $20,000 of seafood during the three-day road show,” explains Collins “We sold that plus an additional $2,000.

“We will definitely host more road shows,” he says.

For store directors considering hosting a road show, Vick shares this encouraging comment: “Just do it! Find a reputable vendor that can provide the product and conduct the show.” Collins offers these tips: While attractive, the display units are free-standing and do not have a power supply, so be sure to have large quantities of block and chunk ice available. Keep power cords and surge protectors on hand in case they are needed for the scales and coolers. A sheltered location to protect against rain and extreme sun is a must.

Miramar Store Director Nagle says it’s important to get the right mix of products. “In the summer months, sea scallops are a very good seller. Customers can grill them on the barbecue. In the winter months, bay scallops work better for dishes made on the stove or in the oven. Lobster tails and cooked shrimp are always a big hit. The size of the shrimp and cost being offered in the commissary’s road show cannot be beat.” He says customers have asked for larger lobsters, and the Miramar staff is planning a special “large lobster sale” just in time for the holiday season.
location, location, location. That’s one of the biggest rules of thumb in real estate. And to hear Store Director Tom Testerman, Naval Air Station North Island Commissary, Calif., tell it, the same rule applies for commissary delis.

“One of the reasons our deli stands out within the store is its location,” Testerman explains. “Our deli is right across from the produce department and it’s the first thing customers see when they enter the store.”

Testerman and his deli crew focus on providing outstanding customer service. “We do daily product sampling and demonstrations,” he says “and we use the store’s public address system to alert customers to special deli deals.”

Like other departments within the commissary, the deli has its own jargon and specialized operations. Testerman says the Military Deli and Bakery Services employees at the North Island Commissary deli are well-trained and know the nuts and bolts of deli service, right down to different cuts of meats and cheeses. “Furthermore,” he says, “they are trained to provide expert advice on cheeses that complement specific meats. Our customers love this specialized information and service.”

The North Island deli has something else in common with real estate wisdom. Many seasoned realtors will tell you, “Selling a home may depend on smelling a home,” hence professional staging that includes baking cookies, pies and bread to entice potential home buyers. The North Island deli has warm bakery smells in spades, and they hit the customers’ noses the minute they walk into the store. “The smell of fresh bread baking first thing in the morning,” says Testerman, “sets the stage for a great shopping expe-
rience. What better way to start your day?”

Testerman says he hopes to add more hot entrees and a hot soup selection to the deli lineup. “And I’m always looking for innovative ways to create excitement, new ideas and promotions.”

A typical day for Testerman starts with a walk-through of each department, making sure display cases and shelves are stocked. He checks for cleanliness, especially in each department, but not least the restrooms. He goes over receiving and warehouse deliveries. At the sushi counter, he checks on the availability of special orders and ensures they’re ready for customer pickup. In the deli, Testerman inspects the hot food selections. He’ll take one last look at the rotisserie chicken, sandwiches, sushi trays and salads to make sure they are fresh and ready to go.

“And let’s not forget the sweet tooth,” he says.

No, indeed, let’s not forget that.

“I swing by the bakery to make sure we have plenty of fresh cinnamon buns, donuts and other fresh pastries available for our customers.”

At the Royal Air Force Mildenhall Commissary, England, deli, it’s all about the fresh sandwiches. Store Manager Cynthia Weber says she sells more than 200 daily during the work week. “Our customers love our sandwiches and they rely on us for a quick and healthy lunch.”

Weber says a new sub sandwich shop recently opened up next door and tested their deli mettle. “We thought our deli sales would be affected,” she says, “but it turned out our regular customers had only a fleeting, novel interest in the shop next door. Deli worker Paula McCarthy keeps an eye peeled on what they’re doing next door, the daily specials they offer, but we don’t spend time worrying because our customers are loyal and keep coming back.”

Along with those sandwiches, Mildenhall customers are also fans of the experience, knowledge and teamwork that deli employees display. Weber says she considers herself enormously lucky to have the staff she does. “They are multiskilled and knowledgeable,” she explains. “As a store manager, I am very fortunate that employees are willing to learn and grow and serve the customer in any way they can. Many is the time Tambera Goodwin, our grocery manager, helps out in the deli when needed.”

Weber has the distinct advantage of managing a deli staffed by DeCA employees and provides these suggestions for enhancing store and deli operations:

- Cross-train your employees. Share your knowledge.
- Today’s employees are tomorrow’s store management. Plan your day, but leave wiggle room for unexpected events; priorities can change quickly in a small store. Check daily sales, walk the store, cover suspenses and meet deadlines on time. Help customers find products. Roll up your shirt sleeves and help a cashier, make signs or change labels. Do whatever needs to be done. Illustrate for employees that management is with them 100 percent, working right beside them, elbow-to-elbow. Listen to customers; it’s good to see issues from a different perspective. Listen to employees; they often have great ideas. Get organized with a calendar; mark suspenses and keep notes on your progress. There’s no such thing as “above and beyond”; just do the job to the absolute best of your ability.

North Island Store Director Tom Testerman offers these tips: Customers are the reason you have your job; give them your undivided attention. Stress one-on-one service. Be a listener. Be positive. Follow up on promises made to people, customers and employees. Provide daily product samplings and demonstrations. Manage your time wisely. There is never enough time to do all that needs to be done in one day, so prioritize your “to do” list. Set up a daily routine. Go down your list and assign taskings to department managers, then follow up. Build a team that is committed to excellence and ensure each member feels they are an important part of your team. Lead by example.
Charles Culberson IV, food service worker at the Vogelweh Commissary self-service bakery, checks the products several times a day to ensure good availability for the customers. Shelves can be accessed from both the front and the back.

Photo: Wally Raynes
European bakeries go self-serve

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When DeCA Europe found it necessary to take over the deli and bakery operations in its commissaries, the creative juices started flowing to figure out how to bake a better bread — a tough task in a land well-known for breads and beautiful pastries.

“We didn’t really need to bake a better bread,” reports Shirley Disch, commissary management specialist now overseeing overseas operations. “In August 2003, we had a series of significant contract issues which caused us to take the deli-and-bakery service in-house. Since that time, no contractor has been found despite the efforts of all concerned.”

With the operations division becoming more expert than ever on the deli-and-bakery process, one change after another was implemented with the customers’ best interests in mind. Product assortment was tweaked to better meet American preferences and, with the middleman removed, prices significantly decreased.

This year, former deli-and-bakery project manager Jeff Rose began fielding a concept never before tried in the commissary system: self-service bakeries.

“Many commercial stores use this system quite successfully,” says Rose. “It saves labor dollars for DeCA and makes shopping quicker and easier for the customers.”

“Since service clerks are not needed in the self-service bakeries, the lower staffing significantly contributes to payroll savings,” says Melvin Fox, DeCA Europe deputy director.

“We’re proud of how far we’ve come since we took charge of these operations,” he continues. “The self-service concept gives customers a chance to see the pastries and breads up close, smell the aroma and pick whatever they want without ever waiting in line. At the same time, bakery personnel are nearby and able to help them with any special needs like a special order or slicing a loaf of bread. This process allows the staff to be baking, arranging and stocking at the same time the customer is reaching for their morning croissant or lunch sandwich roll.”

Customers can handpick their sandwich roll and walk just a few feet to the deli to have a custom sandwich created while they wait. In a large store such as Lakenheath, England, where the concept was first installed, as many as 156 different breads and pastries are available for ordering, making it easy for stores to vary their selection.

“Lakenheath had the self-service bakery before their renovation was complete, and then I made more changes to prepare for the grand reopening of the store,” says Rose, who currently serves as deputy store director. “We’ve learned a lot since this first test, and the Lakenheath store is always in the top two stores for increased sales due to the concept. The other really strong store is Vogelweh, Germany.”

Customer reception has been positive. From April 2005 to April 2006, the Vogelweh Commissary posted a 43-percent increase in bakery sales.

Since 2004, the first full year under DeCA direction, bakeries throughout Europe have shown steady increases in sales. Cumulative sales for all bakeries from 2004 to May 2006 show an increase of 43.8 percent. As more stores are converted to self service, more increases are expected.

With Rose back in the field at Lakenheath, further expansion of self-service bakeries falls to Disch. Along with monitoring the process at Vogelweh and Lakenheath, she also assists the stores at Wiesbaden, Spangdahlem and Wuerzburg, Germany; Lajes Field Azores; and Schinnen, Netherlands. In June 2005, she opened the first self-service bakery under her guidance in the commissary at Heidelberg, Germany.

“I think Heidelberg is the finest looking bakery operation we’ve opened thus far,” says Fox. “It is a very professional looking case and the merchandise is well presented.”

The goal is to convert as many bakeries as possible to self-service, according to Disch.

All the bakeries will use a combination of American and German products, says Disch. “American customers can still get their favorite doughnut and enjoy some of the wonderful German pastries and breads as well.”

Augmenting the traditional birthday cakes available in all European commissaries, DeCA Europe now carries the successful Carvel ice cream cakes. Added last year, low order quantities were tested to see how well they would sell, and the quantities were quickly increased due to popularity.
Tapping into customer psychology, McGuire Air Force Base Commissary, N.J., Store Director John Zoubra makes sure that the commissary bakery continuously emits warm, enticing smells to lure customers in by their noses. First they bake the main breads, then the foccacias and then the pies. Call it the “olfactory advantage.”

“The baking starts first thing in the morning,” explains Zoubra, “and continues throughout the day, winding down after lunch. At 4 p.m., we begin the afternoon bake to make sure there are fresh, hot bakery products for customers who shop after work and later into the evening.”

“Bakery sales are just icing on the cake, so to speak, but store directors worth their salt know every percentage point counts!” says Zoubra. “The McGuire bakery averages nearly $42,000 a month in sales, or just over 1 percent of total monthly sales.”

An efficient little microcosm within the commissary, the bakery has its own schedule and cast of characters. Zoubra says the baker arrives at 4 a.m. to crank up the ovens and bake the first batch of bread. Cake decorators arrive two hours later to make cakes for the day. At 7 a.m., bakery workers are busy stocking and merchandising the fresh bakery items. An hour later — at 8 a.m. — it’s show time!

“When the store opens, the bakery team leaders find themselves busy meeting different demands and wearing different hats,” explains Zoubra. “They are a talented lot who help customers, train and monitor staff, make sure their department shelves and cases are full, check product dates, roll up their sleeves and help with cake design, order products and monitor sanitation.”

McGuire’s fantastic bakery sales are the result of cleanliness, a well-merchandised department, quality products with a nod to cultural diversity and, perhaps most importantly, personalized service. “We
have a good group of hard-working employees,” says Zoubra, “and a family-type atmosphere that fosters teamwork and cooperation. It is our goal to provide the best and widest variety of products for our customers, and to beat the grocery retailers outside the gate.”

Speaking about their commitment to personalized service, Zoubra shares a story about how the staff overcame recent scanner troubles to meet a customer’s bakery request. “Our Confection Kopykat scanner died,” he explains. “We had several pictures to scan and no scanner. Our bakery manager took all the pictures to a grocery store outside the gate and paid to have them scanned. The customer got his personalized cake and was very happy with it.”

Zoubra says he and his staff make it their personal mission to give the customer what he or she wants, even if it involves a hunt. “A customer wanted a ‘tuxedo cake.’ We managed to find it and we brought it in for the customer. Over the years, we’ve finagled unusual ethnic products for customers who’ve asked for them. Communication with customers gives us the opportunity to expand our product line and meet their shopping needs. They appreciate our willingness to find and bring new products to the department upon request.”

Lately, Zoubra says, customers have begun asking for organic bakery products. “The McGuire bakery currently carries about 12 to 15 organic bakery items, including pastas and sauces,” he says. “Organic hummus will hit the shelves soon. We’d like to bring in gluten-free products and more organics, and we’re following up with different companies for organic breads.”

Tinker Air Force Base, Okla., Store Director Sharon Chai says they’ve added an uncommon product to their roster of bakery goods. According to Chai, assistant bakery manager Cindi Shelby strolls the local markets for clever and unique ideas to incorporate into the bakery. “Thanks to her enterprising research methods,” says Chai, “the Tinker bakery is now offering wedding cakes!” Once the product of months of agonized planning and consultation with a specialty baker, the wedding cake is becoming democratized and available in supermarket bakeries, and Tinker is on top of the trend.

“We did not have a bakery in the old store, a 26-year-old facility serving a customer base of 52,000,” says Chai, “so our customers are overwhelmed and excited about the new bakery with its modern merchandising format and large, colorful selection of products. Shoppers love the fresh baking of bread daily. The smell hits you at the front door and follows you around the store. The breads are merchandised in a special wagon display that stands apart from standard bakery shelving and catches the customer’s eye.”

Keeping pace with bakery trends, Tinker offers custom cakes with edible images. “The customer provides a picture,” explains Chai, “and we put it on the cake. These personalized touches are a huge success!”

Chai adds that having the deli as a neighbor is a great opportunity for cross-promotion. “Fresh-baked breads are used in the deli sandwich bar for sandwiches on the go during peak hours,” she says.

The Tinker bakery has 52 years of collective bakery experience. Shelby herself has more than 30. “Cindi has outstanding customer service skills,” says Chai. “She strives for perfection and keeps a vigilant eye on bakery cases, making sure they are kept full and that product is regularly rotated.” Working with Shelby are Kerry Williams, who has more than 10 years of bakery experience, and Teresa Welton, who has 12 years of experience and a culinary degree.

Chai, who says her ultimate goal is to be the best bakery in Zone 8, offers these tips to get the most out of the bakery department: Insist on strict adherence to sanitation rules and regulations. Don’t shy away from growth and expansion; customers are always looking for new ideas and products. Cake decoration is the perfect opportunity to unleash creativity. Purchase bakery books to boost creativity and ideas. Invest in airbrush and photo copying machines for customizing cakes.

For a bit of wisdom that can be applied anywhere in the store, she adds this: “Always spin a negative situation into a positive one, and never, ever abandon your professionalism!”

McGuire Store Director John Zoubra recommends the “golden rule” of the service industry: The customer is always right, even when he’s wrong. Zoubra suggests store directors also consider these tips: Treat your employees well, for a happy employee is more productive than an unhappy one. Get behind your department managers and give them the support they need for their initiatives to serve the customer and increase sales. Look for new products to meet customers’ shopping needs. Remember the customer comes first; make sure he or she always leaves happy. Communicate with bakery management and customers. And last but certainly not least, smile. A smile and a nice word can always deflect conflict.
Sushi sells like hot cakes at Camp Lejeune

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Sushi sales at the Camp Lejeune Commissary, N.C., are a smashing success. In fact, the store ranks in the top two for sushi sales. Store Director Mike Dunn says the staff contracted to stock and service the sushi bar is the biggest reason for the store’s “sushi success.”

“The main player on this team is a young man named Thet Wai Lwin,” explains Dunn. Lwin goes by the name of Johnson. “Johnson is the American name Thet took when he entered school in the United States. Also working the sushi bar are Johnson’s father, Oliver Chang, and his mother, Liu Lain Chin.”

When he first came to Camp Lejeune, Johnson was not familiar with the raving fans philosophy. Nevertheless, Dunn says, Johnson and his staff have quickly created just that kind of atmosphere by focusing on great customer service, making special orders a priority and providing a creative variety of super-fresh sushi products.

“The best-selling items on the menu are the California rolls and Nigiri Sushi (raw fish fillets),” says Dunn. “We’ve increased sales from $500 a day to upward of $1,200!”

A typical day for the sushi bar staff begins with preparation of remote orders for nearby New River commissary (see related article, next page). Once that is complete, the team concentrates on what’s needed for Camp Lejeune customers: about 300 packs of sushi.

Johnson encourages product sampling to entice customers who might otherwise shy away from sushi and promote new products to sushi lovers who tend to stick with a favorite item. While sushi was once thought to have mainly an Asian appeal, Camp Lejeune Store Administrator Danny Fisher says, “Sushi is quickly becoming mainstream. Just the other day I saw young soldiers eating it for breakfast!”

Sometimes the best trade secret is no secret at all: “Johnson makes it his business to share a smile and a laugh with customers,” says Dunn. “Everyone likes dealing with people they feel they know, and our customers are no exception.”

Johnson and his family spent considerable time in Rochester, N.Y., where Johnson’s father first learned the sushi business, before coming to North Carolina. Johnson earned his credibility and experience while working for the Fort Bragg Commissary, N.C.

For store directors considering adding sushi to their inventory, Dunn offers these tips: Take care of your customer base. Gradually increase variety to appeal to a larger number of sushi lovers and people who have never tried it. Limited floor space is no reason to forgo a sushi bar; a good contractor can make the most of even the smallest spot. Customers should not sense that the sushi bar is serviced by contracted employees; work with the contractor to ensure seamless coverage of the sushi bar. Adopt an attitude of striving to please customers at every opportunity and find ways to mix it up and make things fun.
New River ‘remote’ sushi a big hit with customers

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No floor space for a full-size deli or sushi bar? Don’t have the budget to hire a contractor to prepare and service a deli or sushi counter? Tell that to New River, N.C., Store Director Patricia Tourish, who overcame these arguments with a remote deli-and-sushi operation.

Tourish orders fresh deli and sushi products prepared daily by nearby Camp Lejeune’s deli-and-sushi contractors. At New River, the salads, sandwiches and sushi go into a refrigerated case near the commissary entrance, a prime location.

“Before opening the remote deli-and-sushi in August 2005,” says Tourish, “a Grab ‘n’ Go section was all we had to offer the customers in terms of prepared food.

“On-the-go shoppers have definitely taken advantage of the quick and convenient service, and our sales reflect it,” she continues.

“Each day I stand in the front of the commissary near the entrance and watch as customers enter,” Tourish says. “It is amazing how many people head directly toward the deli-and-sushi. The location allows customers to browse, generating impulse purchases that might not happen if the department were located later in their shopping experience.

“Typically, customers are looking for a cost-effective, fresh-quality product. An article I read recently stated that deli department sales are increasing faster than grocery sales. Since deli-and-sushi departments are an established part of the outside market, it only makes sense that commissaries have them, too.”

Deli-and-sushi bars are indeed a great way to promote sales growth. If full-service deli-and-sushi is not available, Tourish says remote is the way to go.

“Not only do you get sales growth from the deli-and-sushi,” she says, “you will also see other departments, like produce and grocery, reaping the benefits. Word that the commissary carries lunch sandwiches and sushi travels among the ranks, creating a buzz, and when people are talking about the commissary, that’s the best advertising there is, and it’s free!”

Tourish says there are some tricks to getting the most out of a remote deli-and-sushi. “One of the biggest challenges is the daily estimation of how much product you will need,” she explains. “The contractor must be able to provide fresh product during all hours of operation. Customers are disappointed when product is not available at store opening, therefore the display case must be fully stocked and closely monitored throughout the day to prevent outages.”

Food quality cannot be compromised. “Store personnel must ensure expired product is pulled prior to opening each day,” says Tourish. “Product must be transported by the contractor at an acceptable temperature and closely monitored. This is especially sensitive when temperatures rise in the summer months.”

According to Tourish, remote selection can be limited by the portability factor; there will be some items that cannot be packaged and transported in a cooler. As sales grow in a remote operation, the contractor may have to make more than one delivery per day.

“With the sales growth that New River has experienced, the contractor sometimes has to make two deliveries a day.”

Tourish says it’s critical to understand that a remote deli-and-sushi is not a department that the contractor operates alone; it must constantly be monitored by management and store personnel.

The success of a remote deli-and-sushi involves close communication and coordination between the contractor and the store director, with one mission: Satisfy the customer.

Helping Tourish with New River’s remote deli-and-sushi are some of DeCA’s best employees. “New River employees,” says Tourish, “are dedicated to the military community and take pride and ownership in the commissary. They really work at giving the commissary a friendly, helpful and ‘at home’ atmosphere on a daily basis.

“I am proud of New River’s success in surpassing sales goals and earning recognition in contests,” continues Tourish. “There is a lot of satisfaction in these accomplishments. I am also pleased to have the opportunity to support and serve the military community in some small way.

“Many of the employees at New River are military-affiliated, either active-duty or retired, to include myself, and to be able to provide a positive shopping experience and a little personal communication with the customers really makes my job meaningful.”

“There are few restaurants on post and even fewer just outside the gate, so the store’s remote deli-and-sushi has been a big success.”

Store Director Patricia Tourish
hot foods
The lure of a piping hot meal without the effort is what makes the commissary’s rotisserie chicken, spareribs and soups such a popular draw for customers. During the summer, these meals are popular because people don’t want to turn on the oven and heat up the house. In colder weather, these meals “stick to the ribs” and satisfy both a physical and a psychological hunger.

So popular are the commissary’s hot foods that often service members will call in a special order. According to Anchorage Area, Alaska, Store Director Rena Dial, “Turkeys and hams are especially popular requests during the fall and winter holidays. We have prepared hot foods for Air Force squadron and Army unit parties.”

It’s this customized service that gives Dial and her crew the most satisfaction. “I am very proud of the certificate of recognition the 59th Signal Battalion presented us for preparing a holiday meal for them,” she says.

Like most commissaries, Anchorage’s hot foods are part of the store’s deli department. Along with rotisserie chicken, spareribs, soups and other hot meals, the department also offers deli favorites such as fresh sandwiches and wraps, cold plates and salads.

Dial and retail manager Kristine Ainsworth work closely with Military Deli and Bakery Service employees to make sure the hot foods are top-notch. Ainsworth says they have expanded the variety of foods in the deli to give customers what they crave — choice. “Customers like having plenty of variety to choose from,” she says. “The most popular item is the rotisserie chicken,” says Ainsworth, “with spareribs coming in second. Our customers tell us the hot foods are fresh and delicious, and since we really focus on customer service, they enjoy being able to get a hot meal without waiting in line.”

Dial says DeCA’s “It’s Your Choice, Make It Healthy” initiative plus a demographic shift toward healthier lifestyles has changed people’s eating habits. “People are definitely more conscious of what they eat,” she explains. “I expect we’ll be selling more sushi and salads.”

Employees who prepare the hot food are hard at work by 7 a.m. Deli selections are ready by 9:30 a.m. when the store opens, and the hot foods are ready just in time for lunch at 11 a.m. “MDBS employees follow rigorous sanitation and food service procedures per DeCA policy and that of military health inspectors,” explains Ainsworth. “Each employee is trained before being allowed to work in this area.”

Anchorage’s hot foods are always hot and fresh because they’re not sitting under a heat lamp all morning. Ainsworth says customers snap up the hot food selections soon after they are brought out, and employees keep the hot foods coming fresh out of the oven throughout the day.

“We work very hard on our customer service,” says Ainsworth. “And we work hard at providing the best hot food possible. It’s one thing to satisfy a need for prepared food, but it’s another to offer prepared food that’s really delicious. We pride ourselves on the latter.”

Dial and Ainsworth offer the following suggestions to keep customers interested in hot foods: First and foremost, look after your customers. Keep your area clean and well-stocked, and make sure each item is available and freshly cooked throughout the day. Take a close look at your selection. Can you offer a better variety? Educate your community on the service and selection available. Offer customers a fax number so large or special orders can be dispatched quickly and efficiently. Listen to your customers’ requests; there is always room for improvement. Be as organized as possible. Train employees so they know policy and procedure by heart.
MEAT AND GREET: Naval Air Station Jacksonville Commissary, Fla., Meat Manager Gregory “Andy” Anderson chats with a customer. Photo: Dennis