

Food Glorious Food

Food may be a passing thought to some of us, just fuel for the body, but to other's it's an important part of culture, sewed deep within us; we seek comfort, inspiration, aspirations from our daily consumption. Especially in the last year of increased time at home, with many taking to baking or preparing elaborate meals a source of comfort and to help pass the time. But what happens when you're offshore and your meals are provided for you? That choice is removed from your control and it can be limiting.

As a vegetarian of over 12 years, when I first started going offshore there used to be very few choices for me, quite a few trips I was limited to Omelette, pasta or Chips/Salad. One particularly odd occasion on a shutdown barge I was told "You can have the sauce out of the chicken curry" – with bits of chicken floating in the sauce (I declined and had the naan bread and chips).

Having to explain your food choices or even answer the ridiculous "but where do you get your protein from" whilst trying to enjoy your lunch can be uncomfortable at best, especially in a mostly male environment. However, things have greatly improved over the years, and on my most recent trip offshore there was an avg. of 2 vegetarian choices most meals as standard, not just because I was on the platform.

The Camp Boss is normally the position who is charge of the Catering and Stewarding crews on most platforms, with menu choice responsibilities sitting between them and the Chefs onboard. With access to their onshore companywide menu systems, they have a large choice of recipes to choose from all of which include a full list of allergens and ingredients so they can confirm for the consumers. During my last trip, I caught up with the Judy Platform Camp Boss & some of the Chefs, Allan Gemmell "Archie" to chat all things food and why the teams are diversifying their food options.

Offshore meal planning is on an industrial scale for the numbers you are servicing (anywhere from 8-180) but let us not forget the added logistical difficulties that anyone who has worked in the North Sea would be aware of. You can't just nip to the shop if you've forgotten the cumin for the carrot soup! Food is shipped out along with maintenance supplies once a week (for bigger platforms). Organisation and scheduling are critical; diversification of meal planning is therefore key.

There are 3 meal servings per shift, breakfast, lunch, and dinner, typically with 3 or 4 meal choices per sitting, plus lighter options including cold salad bar, and soups. If you like a sweet treat, there is ALWAYS desert available. Let us also not forget the tea breaks; consisting of a bacon or egg roll in the morning or a "fancy piece" aka traybake in the afternoon, there is also a solid supply of fresh fruit available too. With 24-hour workings this service goes on both days and nights, which takes a small army to coordinate timings and the different types of food required!

Meal choices of course do not always come from dietary requirements or the preference to be healthy. Religious reasons for meal choices are commonplace in society and it's not uncommon to see Halal or Kosher meat choices on a menu, however, with the current demographic offshore this is less prevalent, and with increased vegetarian options, there is a nutritious workaround.

It can be difficult for those offshore during religious periods, for example, Ramadan. Ramadan is a period of fasting, reflection and prayer observed by Muslims worldwide. From Sunrise to Sunset the period of fasting is observed, this can be a very long day if you are in the Northern Hemisphere with daylight lasting over 12 hours. The fast is traditionally broken with a meal after sundown (called Iftar). If you are working offshore mealtimes are often set which could be difficult to work around. During a recent Ramadan celebration on Judy, Archie was able to set up a table with Iftar to accommodate the Muslim workforce who were offshore during the period. Outside of the normal mealtimes.

Archie mentioned “*A more diverse workforce creates opportunity to try out new meals and present more exciting choices if they’re being eaten, it’s a good thing*”. Which sums up nicely changing attitudes within the North Sea.

If you’re heading offshore normally during your induction, the Safety Advisor will mention you can speak to the camp boss if you’ve any allergens/dietary requirements. If this is you, I encourage you to **Speak Up!** There is an option to cater for you, you are not being awkward by saying something. The Camp Boss will ensure that an option is adjusted, or an alternative is prepared accordingly. We at AXIS Network feel this is where inclusion starts to be effective, from the moment you arrive onboard, so you don’t have to worry about what you’re going to eat and can concentrate on your role offshore.

Some simple suggestions for inclusion offshore are to listen to your workforce around what dietary requirements they have. Ensure there is always an option to speak up (in private or at the start of your trip) if they’ve had a chance in diet. And encourage healthy eating through choices with a variety of meal types available.

Traditionally the meal choices Offshore revolved around anything that was deep fried, severed with chips and beans, some form of hot traditional pudding with enough custard to drown your sorrows. Nowadays, people are embracing change, choosing to go the "meat free " a few days a week either for personal or ethical reasons; allergies and other dietary requirements plus with widespread healthy eating campaigns. Organisations have had to adapt too, and this has promoted a big culture change with the way the offshore catering crews plan, budget, and present their meals.

Although at times change may seem slow or non-existent within the industry, I would argue it’s happening, albeit in a subtle way, through meal choices and the personnel you’re seeing offshore in comparison to just 10 years ago. All of which contribute to more inclusive environment, welcoming to a future diverse workforce, which ultimately leads us to a safer workplace for all.

This piece was written by Katy Crawford, and input from Allen Gemmell "Archie" - Camp boss, Judy Platform, as part of the Inclusive Offshore Working project.