

Navy Food.¹

After wracking my brain for three weeks, I finally came up with an answer to Tracy's question: "What makes navy food unique?"

There were lots of things. Many probably no longer apply – I was in the Navy forty years ago. The most striking thing I recall making a note of at the time was that the Officer's Mess wasn't as good as the Enlisted Mess. I put that down to my having been raised on a farm. Maybe I should've been enlisted, but I wasn't. I still liked to eat with the men.

When I finally settled on a word was the day that I remembered being in a big storm. The ship was rocking and rolling but since I was on an aircraft carrier, it took about twenty seconds for it to roll one way before starting to roll the other. In the mess hall, this created problems: especially for things like soup and coffee. When the ship got to rolling, coffee and soup climbed right out of the cup or bowl and ran across the table like an escaped convict. The solution was to fill the cup or bowl only halfway. But that only solve half the problem.

As you may have heard, Navy ships are kept spotlessly clean. At least that's what we all told mama when we wrote home. Decks and table tops were highly polished, partly to keep the men occupied and partly to keep things from rotting in the sea air. Putting your bowl of soup down on the table, even when half full, would sometimes result in something called "Split-Pea Shuffleboard." When the ship rolled and reached somewhere around ten degrees, the soup bowl, coffee cup, silverware, and dinner plates would start to scoot from one end of the table to the other. To the credit of some ancient mariner, tables were arranged so that they ran lengthwise perpendicular to the ship's keel. That way, if one did get away, it slid down the table and not into your lap. We call that alignment "athwartships."

Not everyone liked split-pea shuffleboard, so we all put a wet napkin under our cups, bowls, and plates. The napkin wouldn't slide and the dinnerware wouldn't slide off of it.

Problem solved.

Now, I already mentioned the split-pea soup. That was part of the other solution and my segue for telling you the one word I came up with for navy food: thick - thick soup, coffee that you had to cut it with a knife, and no au jus on anything.

Submitted by Thomas R. Cuba

¹ This is the text of what I wrote when Tracy asked me for a piece on military cuisine. It was published in Homefront Cooking.