



ALPHA GAMMA RHO

COLLEGE OF MASS COLUMBIA

Sweet Roles

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AS A FRATERNITY HOUSE DIRECTOR AND EXECUTIVE CHEF, LESLIE "MOMMA" JETT HAS A LOT ON HIS PLATE. IF YOU'RE IN THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME, JETT MIGHT FEED YOU, MEND A BUTTON ON YOUR SHIRT, TEACH YOU, PHOTOGRAPH YOU, SEE THAT YOUR CHAIR GETS FIXED OR TAKE YOU TO THE HOSPITAL FOR STITCHES.

ONE FRIDAY NIGHT BACK IN 1996 when Leslie Jett was a sophomore in the Alpha Gamma Rho house, a bunch of the guys invited him to go out and party, but Jett just wasn't in the mood. He was a strong student who intended to go to law school, but this time he wasn't sticking around to study. Instead, around 9 p.m. he headed into the house kitchen for a hot date with a commercial mixer he had dubbed Bertha. Jett was going to tackle the recipe for his mother's cinnamon rolls, which are popular all around Pomona, Mo., where she lives. He'd tried a time or two and never succeeded with mother Mozella's recipe, but that night he was going for broke with a batch of about 180 rolls as big as bear claws. Soon the flour was flying and Jett was on his way to an all-nighter in the kitchen.

Sometime before 7 a.m., the house-mother was the first to poke her head into the kitchen and find him. He could

Leslie Jett and Titus the dog are fixtures at the Alpha Gamma Rho house on College Avenue. Jett is house director and chef at the house, where he sees to the needs of the fraternity brothers.

tell it was still early because she never put her teeth in before breakfast, and she was all gums. "At first she saw the mess, and she was really mad," he says. "But when she saw all those rolls — they came out great — she got so excited that she went back to her room to get her teeth." From then on, Jett knew he wanted to be a chef.

As it turned out, a single batch of rolls has led Jett into a raft of new roles.

Since then, Jett, BS BS '99, M Ed '01, has earned an associate's degree in culinary arts from Johnson & Wales University and has become a certified executive chef. He now works as the executive chef at the Ag Rho house. He is also the house adviser, director, chaperone and nurse. He is a doctoral student in agricultural education studying for a college teaching career. To earn his doctoral stipend, he works part time teaching a course in food preparation in the Hotel and Restaurant Management program. He was voted House Director of the Year in 2003.

A common thread runs through Jett's many roles. He's a caretaker at home in a big family. "They call me Momma Jett," he says.





Clockwise from left, Jett plans and prepares meals at the Ag Rho house, and he teaches a lab-and-lecture course on food preparation in the Hotel and Restaurant Management program in the College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources. That's on top of his doctoral studies in agricultural education. The student flaming a Bananas Foster with Jett is Lynsey Wilson.

Jett was one of three children growing up in the southern Missouri town of Rover, a village of a dozen or so people that he says is at least 15 miles from everywhere. Although his nuclear family isn't especially large, his extended family is tight. On a rotation, one branch of the family hosts each major holiday, and the relatives of both Mozella and father Lester attend, swelling the total to more than 75. The host prepares meat and rolls, and the rest is a potluck dinner.

Mozella has long been accustomed to feeding large groups, and she seems to have passed her talent on to Leslie. When he was in fifth grade, Mozella transplanted her small cake-baking business from home to a general store the Jettis acquired in

Rover. While his older sisters pitched in working on the farm with their father, Leslie spent time with Mozella at the store and learned to cook. The cake business grew into a larger catering operation that eventually landed a big job at one of Leslie's high school dances. "My entire family was at my junior prom because of the catering business," he says with good-humored chagrin. "My sisters came back from college. I had aunts and uncles there. We've shared a lot of nice moments together. It's made me who I am."

Who is he now? Among other things, he's a house director and adviser. "I take care of all sorts of stuff, like when one of the boys comes to me and says, 'I have a job interview in five minutes, and a button fell off my shirt.'" If something breaks, he sees that it's fixed. If one of the boys is sick, he's in charge of thermometers and pain relievers. If a cut calls for stitches, he drives the injured party to the hospital. Jett also keeps the house scrapbook, so he just might take the camera on hospital runs. He figures that a scrapbook photo of a doctor handing the smiling patient a lollipop does double duty if he sends it to calm parents who've just learned that their lad has received stitches.

The dutiful Jett hustles to keep the students in his course on food preparation engaged, if not in stitches. But the odds seem stacked against him, he says of the five-hour lecture-and-lab course. "On a Monday morning, who really cares about the temperature of sanitizer water? So we try to mix it up." Before lectures, he sets the mood with lively music. During lectures, he cracks jokes. He sometimes reviews material by including key words in crossword puzzles, and he has been known to revert to the elementary school technique of asking students to look at

drawings and circle the one in which people are performing a procedure incorrectly.

In the food preparation laboratory kitchen, 18 students in puffy white chef's hats huddle over stoves in small groups and cook according to their assignments. Jett cruises from station to station in a colorful African skullcap. As if by magic, he seems to be at the right spot when flames pop up too high. Luckily, he loves fire. In the lab, he looks grave at times, but the Momma Jett moments keep piling up: A student with wet hands asks him to pull up one of her sleeves. Another needs him to locate a bandage for a small

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cut. When a few students have finished frying the assigned blackened strip steak with brandy sauce flambé, he pulls out a container and calls out, "OK, when you're done, put your meat in the container, and I'll chop it up to make stew for the homeless people."

He doesn't cook much at the frat house these days. He misses it, but now that he's executive chef at the Ag Rho house, he works just two dinner shifts in the

kitchen. He spends a lot of time planning meals, ordering ingredients and negotiating menus with the brothers, who can be demanding, though not necessarily for the finer dishes. A house committee of students meets monthly with Jett to fine-tune the four-week menu cycle.

"They knock things out that they don't like," Jett says. "Last night they knocked out a salmon encrusted with cilantro and garlic. They ate 40 pounds of it, but they didn't like it. The boys eat catfish OK. But salmon?" He also has to please his 85 diners within a budget, an increasingly difficult task as the price of beef, their preferred meat, rises. "The house has about 90 percent kids from rural areas," he says, "and we don't have a lot of chicken farmers." Hence the house policy of not serving the more economical fowl more than twice a week.

Between all of Jett's jobs, he leads a more-than-full life. Preparing to teach classes and then grading the tests requires more time than he'd bargained for, not to mention his own doctoral studies. And things never let up at the fraternity, he says. "It's not like the house takes care of itself, and the price of beef requires some creativity."

Perhaps that's why Jett misses cooking so much right now. "When I'm in the kitchen, I get lost in the moment," he says. "It's like being a child and making mud pies. I fed my sisters a lot of really good mud pies." ☼

Jett makes evening rounds at the Ag Rho house to touch base with fraternity members, including juniors Josh Humphreys, left, and Darren Kritzer, center.

