

Five stars for Minnesota Vikings Chef Geji McKinney-Banks

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She is part of the NFL but does not tackle anyone, catch footballs or score touchdowns.

However, Chef Geji McKinney-Banks does play hardball and is very competitive. Her schedule is as intense as any football team's schedule as she is in bed before 9 p.m. and up before dawn Monday through Saturday as the director of food service operations for the Minnesota Vikings. McKinney-Banks manages chefs and other food service staff to ensure that food is prepared and ready for consumption when the Vikings players, coaches and front office staff arrive to work in Eden Prairie. Her grueling schedule encompasses the entire NFL season plus working 17-hour days during football camps and drafts.

Six days a week, McKinney-Banks changes into non-slip work shoes, an apron, and a chef's hat ready to inspect the entrees and other food items the various chefs have prepared.

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“What’s this? It’s burnt, would you eat that,” quizzed McKinney-Banks one of the chefs as she examines the breakfast entrees. “Take it out of here.”

It’s all about quality control, which is key to the success of the Vikings organization. With confidence McKinney-Banks tastes, stirs, and directs.

“The grits are too runny, tighten them up; and I don’t taste basil in the gravy,” directed McKinney-Banks.

“Yes, Chef,” her colleagues say with respect and without contention. However, it is not always that way.

Chef Ben Martancik, who has worked at Winter Park – the team’s training facility – said, “Her (McKinney-Banks) standards are very high for food quality and cleanliness. It reflects on me and the other employees. We bashed heads at first (because) we both are stubborn. However, it took awhile to work through that. You butt heads sometime. When everybody is stressed you might be snippy with people.”

Snippy is putting it mildly.

In the wide world of sports, the nature of the beast is to be competitive. Working in the NFL, whether one is a starter, coach or behind the scenes – as it is with culinary arts – one has to be tough mentally and physically.

Praises towards McKinney-Banks for flawless cuisine and food safety come from chefs and business people from around the world. When Food Network celebrity chef Guy Fieri toured the Vikings facility, he looked around the kitchen and exclaimed, “Who is in charge here? This is the cleanest kitchen I’ve ever seen.”

During a food service inspection by the Minnesota Health Department, one of the inspectors was heard saying, “This is one kitchen I would eat in.”

McKinney-Banks said she is a perfectionist, which fits ideally with the Vikings way of doing things – spare no expense on service, freshness, quality and presentation.

“I work to ensure that the last person in line at the end of the day gets the same freshness of the food as the first person who came in earlier that day,” said McKinney-Banks. “Every day, we work hard to enhance our food safety standards to help us increase quality and value to those we serve.”

The passionate chef’s likeness was recently used for the 3-A-Day campaign by the Midwest Dairy Association featuring former Minnesota Viking safety Darren Sharper. McKinney-Banks was also a guest celebrity judge at the Taste of the NFL for two consecutive years. She has been guest chef on television’s KARE 11, Fox 9 and KSTP 5.

For the Viking community program, McKinney-Banks visits elementary schools with guest

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Vikings players to talk to children about nutrition. She also received an honorable mention in a Sports Illustrated piece that featured her personal client, running back Adrian Peterson.

McKinney-Banks is the only African-American female in her role within the NFL.

Recently, when the Vikings traveled to play the Pittsburgh Steelers in London for its Sept. 29 game, McKinney-Banks was on the team's plane and served her role as team's chef while across the pond. This past May, McKinney-Banks ventured to the United Kingdom to learn of its food standards and procedures and then compared the culinary differences with the Viking organization's expectation so the players would feel at home even on foreign soil.

"The Vikings front office feels that it is imperative not to steer too far away from the same kind of food that we serve at Winter Park," said McKinney-Banks. "I am excited at the opportunity to lead the food program to London. It (is) a challenge, a learning experience, and definitely a blessing all rolled into one."

In addition to being the personal chef to Peterson, McKinney-Banks is also chef to boxer/ex-NFL player Ray Edwards and Timberwolves guard, J.J. Barea. She has also served as the personal chef to Viking Kevin Williams, former Vikings Darren Sharper, Bobby Wade, Tony Richardson, Tarvaris Jackson, Dwight Smith, Jayme Mitchell and Bethel Johnson, among others.

The chef, who has been with the Vikings for 18 years, is a North Community High School graduate, has an associates in culinary arts and a bachelor of science in culinary management.