

# 1,000 guests expected for holiday feast

## ■ HUTCHISON

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Vargas has worked at a couple of restaurants in the Menlo Park area, but it took a while to get used to doing a command performance for thousands, day after day.

"I'll tell you one thing I've learned," he said Thursday as the last few diners finished their chicken and rice. "Spaghetti.

"When you have a lot of people and there's not much in the cabinets, you can always count on spaghetti. Even if you can't work up a meat sauce, it's still something. Believe me, I have trouble with fish. People never seem to want to eat that."

Every day, Vargas consults a food schedule posted on one of the kitchen's three walk-in refrigerators to plan the daily menu. "But it changes like the weather," said Max Torres, an administrator at St. Anthony's. "We have to make do with what we have."

On Thanksgiving, Vargas, Torres and St. Anthony's administrator Sam Acuff will marshal a crack staff of 65 volunteers who will descend on the kitchen to mash 320 pounds of potatoes, peel 255 pounds of sweet potatoes and ladle 35 gallons of gravy. ("People like my gravy," Vargas said, gesturing toward 10 plastic gallon spice containers and two huge vats. "But it's hard to keep it from getting lumpy.")

A well-drilled squad of table-clearers and dishwashers will rotate the dining room's 350 trays, plates and cups through the table-to-sink assembly line — more than three times.

But much of the work for the Thanksgiving feast will begin Monday. Thirty volunteers will spend hours chopping 280 pounds of vegetables and cook-



Sam Acuff accepts Mountain View resident Mae Shearer's annual Thanksgiving food donation.

LLOYD FRANCIS, JR. — MERCURY NEWS

ing 1,500 pounds of ham and turkey in the dining room's kitchen. Vargas will supervise the concoction of 240 pounds of stuffing. "We don't take any chances," Acuff said. "We don't put the stuffing in the birds."

Vargas understands the desire not to risk poisoning hundreds of diners with ptomaine, but he doesn't want to cheat them of the true "stuffing experience."

"I boil the (turkey) bones and get a lot of juice from the bird and the gizzard," he said, soberly. "And, like in the spaghetti, I use lots of spices. Believe me, this is real stuffing."

The St. Anthony's crew depends on the kindness of strangers for most of the food donations. That includes the Thanksgiving dessert smorgasbord; they

collect dozens of pumpkin and apple pies. "We're hoping for more donations," Acuff said. "If the last several years have been any indication, we'll have more people this year than ever. And that means a lot of families, too."

Torres said he is always moved by the gratitude of Thanksgiving diners. Poignantly, some who were toddlers when they came to the dining room years ago are now teen-agers and young adults with children of their own. And they still celebrate Thanksgiving at St. Anthony's.

"One guy even left us his keys as a token of appreciation," Torres said. "I can't imagine what doors they opened."

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