

HUMDRUM MEATLOAF NO MORE

Senior living communities transform dining

By Lori Iller



Craig Hamilton



Locally sourced ingredients. Modernist cuisine. Chef's table specials. These sound like the fixtures of a fine dining establishment.

Except they're not.

They are elements of a major dining trend taking place in senior living communities across the United States, where the notion of humdrum, unexciting food is once and for all being laid to rest.

The growing number of aging baby boomers and their demands for improved meal quality and choices have led operations, dining, and culinary chiefs in the senior living world to reimagine the entire dining experience.

A recent finding by the Nutrition and Foodservice Education Foundation (NFEF) gives even more credence to the importance of satisfying the nuanced tastes of today's senior living residents. According to a study commissioned by NFEF, foodservice is one of the most important factors that residents and their families consider when choosing a senior living community. The NFEF study also

discovered that senior living residents desire more snack, fresh food, and grab-and-go items, as well as more flexible dining hours.

Speculating on future foodservice trends within senior living communities, members of both NFEF and the Association of Nutrition and Foodservice Professionals indicated in a report, "Emerging Dining Trends in Long-Term Care," that they expect residents to find more and more innovative food offerings, authentic ethnic foods, and food derived from organic or local producers.

In our own region, there's compelling evidence of these rapidly growing trends. Craig Hamilton, executive chef at the State College senior living community the Village at Penn State, says he enjoys featuring modernist



such as compressed watermelon, coconut foam, and drunken watermelon rind.

"I'm a firm believer that creative expression drives chefs. In addition to modernist cuisine, my team and I like to present dishes from varied regions of the world, as well as wild game dinners and even 'deconstructed' classic kids' favorites," he says.

But how does this really resonate with residents?

cuisine — a culinary style, also thought of as an art form, that transforms ingredients into new, interesting, and artistic creations.

With more than a decade of experience and a formal education in culinary arts, he expertly constructs dishes such as duo of beef, truffle potato cannoli, and foie gras butter. And for dessert, he has made dishes

Extremely well, according to Hamilton.

"These special dishes are presented at monthly chef's table events that fill up every time," he says.

A peek at a recent chef's table menu includes a first course of chicken lollipop, avocado vichyssoise, cheddar grits, and tomato jam, followed by second, third, fourth, and fifth courses that sound as if they are coming out of a

kitchen with Michelin-star status.

Hamilton also stresses that fresh ingredients are all the rage, concurring with the NFEF and ANFP report that a "green" approach to dining is paramount.

"I've found that residents desire farm-to-table selections. Locally sourced, seasonal food is a really hot topic. At the Village we use the freshest local ingredients because residents want to know where their food comes from," he says.

Ron Coder, who has lived at the Village at Penn State for more than a decade, says, "What we're getting is some of the best [food] around — from taste, to selection, to how it's presented on our plate."

The senior living dining experience is becoming unrecognizable — in the best sort of way. In Coder's estimation, it's "better than a restaurant." **T&G**

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