



# Healthcare Chefs

Bringing

**Basics**

Back

*by Rocky Dunnam, CDM, CFPP*

A decade ago chefs in non-commercial food service were considered anomalies. They were the chefs that got burned out in the restaurant industry, or were too old to keep up, so they decided to pursue the new title of Director of Food Service in the nursing home just across town. What happened, though, is that the first chefs to make the move to health care began to elevate the entire nursing home experience in areas ranging from dining room models to the actual plated dish. The cuisine began

resembling restaurant-quality fare, and residents responded really well. This transition is apparent in the popular Culture Change movement championed by the Pioneer Network.

Fast-forward to today, and you'll see a definite spike in the demand for classically-trained chefs in the healthcare industry nationwide. But unfortunately, many facilities cannot employ a professional chef due to issues like budget

## NEW THIS MONTH!

Edge will now feature a **Culinary Connection** article five times annually, focusing on culinary-related topics. Earn 1 CE hour for completing the CE questions at the end of this article.

# ELEVATING THE DINING EXPERIENCE IN HEALTH CARE



constraints, geographic location, job pool, or any other number of feasibility reasons. These facilities face uphill battles in terms of cost, quality, appearance, and function that leave even the most experienced foodservice supervisor wondering *why?* and *what if?*

What makes healthcare facilities want to pursue and hire chefs? What if your facility can't afford a trained chef? What about your current staff – can they elevate the dining experience?

These questions can be addressed with one simple answer: culinary fundamentals.

Chefs bring a wealth of knowledge in areas that are either never taught, or are simply forgotten in the day-to-day operations of this industry. Look at other occupations. In sports, athletes must train and perform necessary drills on a continuous basis. Writers all have basic knowledge of grammar principles. Doctors understand the fundamental human anatomy. But until recently, many healthcare facilities (i.e. nursing homes, hospitals, assisted living facilities, adult day care centers, etc.) staffed personnel without the essential knowledge of culinary fundamentals.

## COOKING 101

Probably the most notable skill that a chef brings to the table is the knowledge of basic cookery. The aspects of flavor and appearance often get pushed to the back burner in favor of nutrition because previously, the head of most dietary departments was a registered dietitian. When we began working together, combining an RD's food science knowledge with a chef's art, wonderful things started happening.

Following are a few 'Chef Notes' you can apply today to elevate the level of cookery in your kitchens with minimal cost, and using the staff you already have.

**Mise en place:** (or "Meeze" for short) translates to *everything in place*. This literally means to prepare yourself to cook before you begin, so that when you actually light the fire you're fully ready to devote your attention to the food.

- Read the recipe first, even before gathering any ingredients.
- Prepare all of the ingredients before cooking any of them (dice onions, chop herbs, etc.).
- Look at tomorrow's menu and decide what can be done today to set you up for success.

Remember: to be successful you must imitate success. This means learning how the best chefs prepare, and then copying them.

**Mirepoix:** (meer-pwa) is a timeless term for a mixture of vegetables used as a vital foundation of many recipes, and is one that every cook (even home cooks) should know. It is used as the base flavor for many soups, stocks, sauces,

*Continued on page 19*

# The *Art* of Plating

In my opinion, 80 percent of a dining experience is visual. Many chefs will debate the exact percentage in terms of appearance, taste, cost, ambiance, etc., but will undoubtedly rank appearance before any of the other factors. Let's look at the basic elements of plating a dish in a simple, elegant manner:

## 1. K.I.S.S.

Keep It Super Simple...this is probably the most vital aspect in plating. Oftentimes people try too hard, and the plate looks crowded and messy. Stick to the methodology of plating only four or five things. Protein, starch, vegetable, sauce, and garnish are your basic go-to items.



## 2. BALANCE

View each plate like a clock and plate accordingly. Try to keep a good amount of negative space on the plate itself (negative space is the amount of clean plate that is showing around the rim). Then use these basic guidelines that almost always apply:

### Clock Plating

**9-11 o'clock:** Starch (plate this first)

**11-3 o'clock:** Vegetable (plate this second)

**3-9 o'clock:** Protein (plate this third)

### Sauces

Place sauce directly over the top of the item it is meant to sauce or to accompany on the plate. For example, when serving Pork Chops with Red Wine Reduction, pour the red wine reduction directly over the chop.

### Garnishes

Every plate needs a good garnish. The garnish brings flavor, color, and class to even basic dishes. Garnishes should always be edible. Try garnishes like sprigs of parsley and cilantro, or fruit wedges to bring this basic element to your next plate.

*Remember: garnishes should always complement the dish: "If it's swimmin', it gets a lemon!"*



## 3. HEIGHT

Too often I see staff try to plate an item without touching the other components on the plate, leaving the completed dish flat.

Note that we live in a three-dimensional world and must bring all three to the plate. Don't be afraid to let your vegetable and starch hold hands in the center of the plate. Then lay the protein directly on top of them both. This will bring a third dimension (height) to every dish, and provide a more negative space.



casseroles, and flavorings. This is one aspect that is simple to remember and easy to execute, but is crucial in separating “good” from “great” in the flavor of a dish.

Mirepoix consists of three ingredients: carrots, celery, and onions.

The accurate ratio is simple:

25% carrots – 25% celery – 50% onions

**Base Flavors:** while mirepoix is the undisputed champion of base flavors, a few others are worth mentioning here. Some of these ingredients include garlic, leeks, tomatoes, herbs (try a blend like *Herbs de Provence*), wine/vinegar, and of course black pepper and kosher salt. These are all inexpensive items that bring a powerful depth of profile to a dish.

out any formal culinary training. Each concept has stood the test of time (literally hundreds of years). So with or without a classically trained chef, these fundamentals can be the catalyst that propels your foodservice operation to the next level simply by *bringing basics back*. **E**



**Rocky Dunnam, CDM, CFPP** is Executive Chef at the Bivins Foundation, Childers Place, Bivins Memorial Nursing Home, Elizabeth Jane Bivins Culinary Center, and NINETEEN49 Catering in Amarillo, Texas.

[rocky.dunnam@ejbcc.org](mailto:rocky.dunnam@ejbcc.org)



### PLATING 101

Proper plating of food is key to delivering an attractive, appetizing presentation. See accompanying sidebar for plating fundamentals.

### SUMMING IT UP

These culinary fundamentals are showcased in restaurants around the world by some of the industry’s top chefs, but each one can be incorporated into your kitchen today with-



**The world’s turnkey source for foodservice equipment.**

Foodservice equipment quality, innovation, and global leadership... more reasons to do business with the Ali Group.

**OUR NORTH AMERICA BRANDS**





















To learn more about the Ali Group and our brands  
[usa@aligroup.com](mailto:usa@aligroup.com) | [www.aligroup.com](http://www.aligroup.com) | 847-215-6565