



Culinary-Focused Meals for Guest Satisfaction

CULINARY CONNECTION



INCORPORATE CULINARY-FOCUSED MEALS INTO YOUR OPERATION TO INCREASE CLIENT SATISFACTION

The old days of noncommercial food service are associated with negative images. “Cafeteria food” conjures up thoughts of elementary school casseroles and mystery meat, while “hospital food” brings to mind dry chicken breast, overcooked veggies, and salt-free entrees. We can all think back to the not-so-distant past and remember having meals that were prepared under strict restrictions by well-meaning mediocre home-cooks. Whether you’re picturing countless meals in the school cafeteria growing up, or possibly in a hospital where the chicken and rice tasted like they were boiled together in plain water for hours, we all can remember our experience with “institutional” food service. The point is, the common perception of noncommercial cuisine is extremely

negative. It’s no surprise that the data from satisfaction surveys across the country reflect that negative pattern.

Fast-forward to today. What does dining look like for us? Learning from the past allows us to transform our operations and change those patterns. Over the past few years, we’ve begun to really see upward trends that yield much improved satisfaction rates. So what’s changed?

CULINARY-FOCUSED MEALS

Today, we have to look at the habits and trends in our community. This sounds like a simple concept, but it’s very important. When we acknowledge several facts about our current and future clientele, we begin to see



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patterns form that allow us to anticipate possible solutions to problems we've maybe not faced. For example, according to www.statista.com, the average American eats out 4.7 times per week—up from 4.4 times only a decade ago. This means that the average consumer today has an expectation parallel to what he or she sees in the restaurant setting...a culinary focus. Let's be honest—if the same Chicken Tetrazzini you had in the school cafeteria when growing up was served in a casual-fine dining restaurant today, chances are slim that it would be a top-seller. We are all looking for elevated cuisine from true culinary professionals when we spend our money in restaurants. The trend carries over into the noncommercial sector as well. Our guests demand a similar culinary-focused approach when they dine.

CULTURE CHANGE

Thanks to the work of organizations like the Pioneer Network, we are making strides in the knowledge of how we apply nutrition principles to our previously restrictive settings. Research indicates that the negative images we discussed earlier may have been the result of

over-regulation in these settings. What we've seen is simply this: when the food isn't culinary-focused and full of flavor and finesse, the guest simply won't eat it. Constrictive regulations prove not only counterproductive for food service, but as the tell-all when analyzing satisfaction reports.

TRENDING CONCEPTS

We've established that the direction commercial food service takes, so too goes noncommercial food service. To then develop a pattern that will allow us to adapt to the demands of our clientele, we must analyze the status quo. The past five years have resulted in an explosion of new ideas and concepts in cuisine. Let's look at a few of the trends that lend to the idea of culinary-focused meals.

Chef-Driven

A term that you have undoubtedly seen popping up on restaurant menus lately is "chef-driven." This term simply establishes the idea that a chef (or culinary professional) is the driving force for the menu, and likewise its cuisine. Typically these establishments are small, focused eateries that allow the chef to procure fresh, seasonal,

and sustainable ingredients. Much like any artist, when the love for every detail in the process is expressed, the result is as beautiful and well constructed as any painting, sculpture, or other work of fine art.

Seasonal

This self-explanatory concept is one that only recently began to take hold in all facets of food service. Those that take pride in what they do (be it chef, cook, CDM, CFPP, etc.) surely understand the flavor profiles that come to life when an ingredient is in season. This is why stews taste so good in the wintertime, or the light profiles of lamb and mint work well together in the spring. It's all about seasonality. When an ingredient is in season it looks better, tastes better, and satisfies clients better.

Ethnic

Another overlooked idea that is gaining popularity in noncommercial food service is ethnic cuisine. Think about it. If we dine out more than four times each week, chances are we eat different types of cuisine regularly. As more restaurants of varying cuisines begin to emerge in America, our palates will

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likely continue to expand in complexity, and authenticity of ethnic foods will be demanded. Therefore, we must embrace other cultures in our operations.

I recently had the opportunity to spend a few days with Executive Chef Frank Turchan at the University of Michigan. Turchan and his team are truly on the cutting edge of noncommercial food service in all regards. The renovation of one of their student dining halls is a true testament to this very movement. On any given day, students and other diners have options including brick-oven pizza, sushi, vegetarian, even a restricted area dedicated to the gluten-free diet. It's clear to see how the demands of culture drive their response, and ours should also.

Local

When was the last time you saw this term on a hospital menu? It's definitely far more common in restaurants and private clubs, but is more actively appearing in healthcare facilities. Why is this important? It all boils down to transparency. Our clients want to know where their food comes from. You may be surprised that the sustainable lake

perch that is a mainstay on menus in the facilities I've worked with in the Detroit area (a high-end option even), will rarely if ever be ordered in the Oklahoma panhandle when offered to the same demographic. It's all about what's locally available. The perception of lake perch to a client in landlocked Oklahoma is that it's not fresh and not readily available. There will be some time still before that perception becomes realistic in all ways. Until it does, we are charged with developing menus with a local or regional focus.

We must always be on top of the trending ideas and concepts in this industry. When we take a look at the past decade, the past five years even, we see a steady increase in culinary-focused meals and guest satisfaction. In the same time span we see a decline in regulation and restrictive therapeutic specifications. This is not an unpredictable tendency, but rather an accumulation of years of research, data, and growth (and possibly due in part to the rise of the popular Food Network). Our guests have knowledgeable palates that spend years experiencing wonderful flavors



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prepared by skilled hands. More than ever our guests are demanding a culinary focus. They are demanding that we devote to the art and craft of the culinary arts in all forms. The beauty of ingredients, the precision of sound techniques, and the intangible flavor of passion are present in many culinary-driven establishments throughout the country.

Wolfgang Puck once said, “When you have made as many mistakes as I have, then you can be as good as me.” We must learn from the mistakes of the past in foodservice operations that have yielded poor satisfaction scores and cultivate a culture of growth and maturation just as Wolfgang Puck himself did. We must now follow the trending movements and shift our focus to a culinary-minded outlook to increase guest satisfaction. ■

CE Questions



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1. What feeling do most people associate with hospital food?
 - A. Negative
 - B. Positive
 - C. Amazement
2. How many times per week does the average American dine out?
 - A. 2
 - B. 3.3
 - C. 4.7
3. What is one organization that's leading research and promoting culture change in noncommercial food service?
 - A. Texas Agriculture Association
 - B. Doctors Without Borders
 - C. Pioneer Network
4. Which one of these is *not* a trending culinary term?
 - A. Chef-driven
 - B. Color-coded
 - C. Seasonal
5. Who said the following? “When you have made as many mistakes as I have, then you can be as good as me.”
 - A. Wolfgang Puck
 - B. Bobby Flay
 - C. Mother Teresa
6. Why is ethnic cuisine becoming more popular?
 - A. American cuisine is boring
 - B. It's not becoming more popular
 - C. Americans love to dine in a variety of restaurants and experience many flavors
7. What are culinary-focused meals?
 - A. Meals prepared by professional, passionate culinary minds like chefs
 - B. Meals that look good on Instagram
 - C. Meals that are prepared focusing on only one ingredient

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