

Why Health Care is Turning Toward Chefs

CULINARY CONNECTION



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Recruiting professional chefs can be an untapped value and a great asset to the healthcare industry. Current industry standards lean heavily towards prepackaged and ready-made products. This school of thought affords the industry a steady and predictable food cost. Foodservice workers are not required to have advanced cooking skills and the time spent in the prep kitchen is minimal, thus labor costs can be controlled. This seems like a great deal on paper, but what is the realized benefit to this business model? The overall menu is institutional, hospital-grade food that the consumer has come to expect from the industry.

Current food trends include farm to table or farm to fork, organic foods, locally sustainable products, Paleolithic diets, vegetarian options, non-GMO products, chef-driven menus, homemade options, and simplified menus.¹ More than ever, people are paying close attention to what they put into their bodies and how those things affect their long-term health. People associate their diet with illness prevention. Continuing to use premade and processed food in our menus gives the impression that health is not our top concern. The people in our nursing homes today are not like the residents of tomorrow. As baby boomers age and enter our facilities the current model

Continued on page 2



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Continued from page 1

will no longer be sufficient. The old business model and menu will not satisfy this generation, nor will it satisfy their families who are equally concerned with healthy food options and trends.

Nursing care and rehabilitation facilities have seen a decline in bed occupancy over the past five years, according to the Skilled Nursing Data Report by the NIC.² In the third quarter of 2017 occupancy was reported at 81.6 percent, compared to approximately 85 percent in May 2015. The majority of bed occupancy is from Medicaid patients, with a decline in private and Medicare patients overall.² This downward trend has been led by an increase in elderly patients receiving in-home care. As this steady decline is expected to continue, competition with in-home care will increase.³ With many baby boomers requiring nursing care over the next decade, the industry should consider ways to increase value for this generation of consumers. By 2030, about one in five Americans will be over the age of 65.⁴ This generation has

grown up in a consumerist society, yet at the same time has led the way for social, environmental, and political growth. They are well traveled and discerning consumers.

Professional chefs can bring added value to the nursing and rehabilitation industry, thus giving it a competitive edge over in-home care. Chefs will utilize similar programs as resorts and hotels that incorporate scratch cooking, food purchasing, and waste control. Working closely with dietitians, chefs can increase the quality of the food produced as well as the quality of the product purchased.

Professional chefs have the skill set to purchase, break down, and fabricate whole meats and poultry. The “waste” from fabrication is then used for stew meat or stock. Stew meat can be used for menu items such as chicken and dumplings or pork paprikash. Stock and

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sauce made from scratch is higher in nutritional value, lower in sodium, and better tasting than those constructed from premade bases simply by removing the additives and controlling the quality of product that goes into them. Purchasing a whole top round or gooseneck (bottom round) over a case of stew meat provides the same benefit. When these meats are deconstructed you end up with large muscles and smaller pieces that can be cleaned free of sinew, silver skin, and fat. When purchasing a case of stew meat, you are still required to clean the sinew from

Continued on page 3

Continued from page 2

each piece of meat. Food cost must be balanced with the high cost of labor—we must walk the line to be fiscally responsible. We have found that we can provide wholesome, from scratch food at the right price point. Fabrication and scratch cooking will lower food cost, lower labor cost, decrease waste, and increase product quality in these facilities. Utilizing fresh and even frozen produce over canned products increases the nutritional value and quality of the menu as well.

Chefs will employ proper cooking techniques such as braising, poaching, roasting, searing, and grilling meats as opposed to heat and serve methods commonly employed in these facilities. Chefs are also skilled in plating, presentation, and banquet style menus. Incorporating a professional chef on staff can provide added value in the form of special events and meals for patients like Thanksgiving dinner with their families, luaus, Oktoberfest, and cultural food tours.

Chefs are multifaceted professionals that are skilled in not just cooking but also purchasing, labor cost, food cost, back of the house, front of the house, and customer service. Just seeing a chef coat

walk through the dining room heightens the guest experience by tapping into the celebrity chef trend. Chefs are typically highly respected individuals, and people want to know the chef personally just like at their favorite restaurant. When the chef is involved in getting to know the wants and needs of the guests, they can adjust the program accordingly to raise satisfaction. The chef can speak directly to unhappy guests in the dining room, diffuse the situation, and turn a negative into a positive.

One thing we focus on with our chef program is developing a personal connection with the guest. We encourage chefs to be in the dining room to speak with each guest. If you develop these relationships they are more comfortable voicing their concerns, which gives us the opportunity to increase satisfaction. Our guests feel that they are taken care of and cared for. Having the chef be a substantial presence in the dining room can be a great promotional tool for the admissions director of the facility.

It is very important to have every resource available when families are selecting a facility to assist their loved ones during this stage



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of life. There is often a level of guilt involved with this decision. Family members want to make sure their loved ones are provided the best experience and are treated like they were at a resort or hotel. That is what we would want for our own parents. How can we do that? We can make an impact with their dining experience. We can treat long-term care, short-term rehabilitation, assisted living, and independent living like hotels as opposed to institutions. Chefs can help do this by providing top quality menu options, special dining experiences, and customer service while lowering food and labor costs and streamlining processes in the kitchen.

What we served traditionally in nursing homes will not be tolerated by the coming generations. We need to be fully aware of who our customers are and what their wants and needs will be. We want them to want us. **E**

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- Which of the options below correctly identifies current food trends listed in the article?
 - Heat and serve, bland, and low sodium
 - Imported produce, white rice, and braised meats
 - Farm to table, organic, and locally sustainable products
- Which of the following options correctly identifies traits of the baby boomer generation as consumers?
 - Uneducated in their health choices
 - Concerned with how their diet affects their long-term health
 - Not interested in social, environmental, and political growth
- What is one reason cited for the decline in bed occupancy over the past five years?
 - Patients no longer trust Medicaid to provide a benefit for skilled nursing care
 - People are healthier and no longer need skilled nursing care
 - An increase in elderly patients receiving in-home care
- Which of the options below correctly identifies a proper cooking technique cited in the article?
 - Microwave
 - Braising
 - Charring
- What are some benefits to fabricating whole meats?
 - The “waste” can be used to make soups, stews, stocks, and sauces
 - The chef can get a personal discount from the wholesaler
 - Purchasing whole meats instead of pre-cut can help save space in the walk-in
- Why is it important to build relationships between the chef and the guests?
 - The chef can help the nursing facility make a higher profit
 - When the chef is involved in getting to know the wants and needs of the guests, they can adjust the program accordingly to raise satisfaction
 - The chef can provide certain guests special treatment and make changes to their diet directly
- What are some ways chefs can improve the dining experience in nursing and rehabilitation facilities?
 - Providing quality menu options
 - Special dining experiences
 - Both of the above

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