

Made-From-Scratch Foods

Promote Better Health

CULINARY CONNECTION



Made-from-scratch foods provide residents with healthier menu options

Few people would argue with the idea that the foods we eat impact our health. Where the differences of opinion come in is about which foods are good, which are bad, and which are just plain ugly. It doesn't help that the experts seem to alter their opinions frequently enough to lead a reasonable person to question how much they should incorporate any current guidelines into what they actually consume, or serve to their constituents.

This is not to imply that the specialists and agencies that express their views and advice are not using the best information available at any given time, or that they don't have our best interests at heart. And it's safe to say that the changes they make to their recommendations are typically minor or tangential, not complete about-faces. Anyone waiting for the USDA to

announce that the healthiest diet should consist of deep-fried bacon, root beer, and convenience store snack cakes probably has a long wait ahead of them.

I'd like to propose an easy way to offer our residents healthy food that, I believe, any expert in nutrition would readily get behind at any time, regardless of how the current nutritional winds are blowing.

The plan I'm suggesting is simply to offer our residents more made-from-scratch foods using fresh, non-processed ingredients. Menu items made this way inherently contain less sodium and trans fats than pre-made convenience foods. They contain more easily-digestible nutrients, more welcome fiber, and just "sit better" than the canned, packaged, or frozen items



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that can be so attractive to foodservice managers, but less so to our residents. No matter the specifics of the best practices *du jour*, less sodium, fewer trans fats, better nutrient absorption, and more fiber will always be in style, healthwise.

Another no less important feature of made-from-scratch foods is that they just taste better and are more enjoyable to eat. It's been said that humans don't eat nutrients, they eat food. It doesn't matter how "healthy" food is if no

physical layout, equipment, budget, overall staffing, culinary know-how, and inertia (inertia, perhaps, being the hardest to overcome). Very few communities are in a position to totally revamp their dining operations to produce and serve only made-from-scratch items for every part of their menu: soups, salad dressings, appetizers, entrées, vegetables, starches, modified diets, breads, and desserts. I'm not suggesting anyone do so. But in the same

product. Depending on your distributor, you can probably buy items like celery, onions, and carrots pre-cut to your specifications, vacuum-packed and ready to cook. You'll pay more on your food invoice, but it will be offset by reduced labor costs. You'll also need to be aware of any adjustments to your recipes that might be necessary. It will be worth it in many ways, including in the attention and thought that your cooks will need to pay to what they're doing. This is also

ASSEMBLING ITEMS TO MAKE LASAGNA

takes a little time and effort, but maybe not more than your crew can handle—especially if they do it the day before and refrigerate it until it's time to bake.



one is interested in eating it. If we serve our residents food that they really want to eat, we're half way there. If it's good for them too, we've hit a home run.

Obvious to anyone who would actually be responsible for implementing this plan, there are genuine, practical limits as to how this might be accomplished. Any particular operation will have real constraints in terms of

way that it's unlikely that any community would be able to produce 100 percent "home-made" overnight, I'd bet there aren't any that couldn't do 5 percent as a start.

One easy way to begin is to take a look at how you're currently using frozen or canned vegetables and fruits. Substituting fresh produce in the same recipes you're already using will make a big difference in the final

a great opportunity to share some cooking knowledge and techniques with your staff.

Another relatively easy practice you can incorporate into your operations is to cook those fresh vegetables in small batches as service progresses as opposed to cooking them all at once at the beginning and holding them on a steam table. Why bother to buy fresh

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broccoli or snow peas if half of your guests will have it served to them an hour after it's been cooked? Some things *don't* improve with age.

Accept the fact that there are certain menu items that you will never make from scratch. There's no shame in admitting that you don't have the culinary expertise, staff, time, and equipment to do everything. Who does? Figure out where you are, be honest with yourself about it, and make an effort to move in the right direction—baby steps count. Lasagna made from scratch is better than frozen lasagna. Can you make the pasta from scratch? Probably not. But frozen, pre-cooked dough sheets are an excellent product and easy to work with. How about homemade marinara? Maybe, but if not, there are some good canned products available. Most kitchens can mix together ricotta, eggs, mozzarella, and grana cheese for the filling. Assembling the lasagna takes a little time and effort, but maybe not more than your crew can handle—especially if they do it

the day before and refrigerate it till it's time to put in the oven.

Pick your battles. If you decide that semi-cooked-from-scratch lasagna is worth the resources you have in terms of customer satisfaction and kitchen pride, go for it. Maybe, depending on your locality, chicken and dumplings or étouffée might resonate more with your audience.

Keep an eye out for items that are relatively easy to make yourself. Salad dressings are a good example. Your homemade blue cheese dressing, ranch dressing, or balsamic vinaigrette will be much tastier and less expensive than what comes in a plastic jug. And it usually won't even require any cooking, just using a good recipe and mixing a few ingredients together. Instead of buying salad croutons, dice up some day-old bread, sprinkle with a little decent olive oil and salt, and put it in the oven for a few minutes. Your salads will immediately seem more like they come from a good restaurant instead of an average

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lunchroom— especially if they have fresh dressing on them, too. Speaking of bread, see if a local baker can supply you with product that contains little more than flour, yeast, salt, and water. You won't have to make it yourself, but it will seem like you did. There are also some very good par-baked items available that are a big improvement over what is frequently served.

Soups are another category to seriously consider making from scratch. They're a little more work than salad dressings, but worth the effort. A good compromise is to continue serving

your residents' favorite frozen or canned soups, but augment that selection with a few you make yourself.

Don't forget about your residents who are on modified diets. With some extra effort—and input from a registered dietitian—you can frequently serve them variations that are as close as possible to your regular homemade fare. They will appreciate it more than you can imagine.

A menu with lots of variety, containing as much made-from-scratch food as feasible, provides some of the best medicine available. **E**

CE Questions | CULINARY CONNECTION



This Level I article assumes that the reader has entry level knowledge of the topic. The desired outcome is to ensure a foundation of basic concepts of the subject matter.

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1. Do the foods we eat impact our health?
 - A. Absolutely
 - B. No, they don't
 - C. Studies are inconclusive
2. A made-from-scratch initiative in your dining program
 - A. Is an all or nothing proposition
 - B. Can mean that only certain, select items are homemade
 - C. Requires a 30 percent increase in staff
3. Compared to processed foods, made-from-scratch foods
 - A. Contain less sodium and trans fats
 - B. Contain more easily digestible nutrients and fiber
 - C. All of the above
4. Substituting fresh vegetables for canned or frozen varieties
 - A. Is a good place to start a made-from-scratch program
 - B. Will make your dry storage obsolete
 - C. Will change your distributor's delivery schedule
5. Cooking fresh vegetables in smaller batches as needed
 - A. Will double your staffing requirements
 - B. Is a great practice and absolutely worth the effort
 - C. Is impossible for any kitchen to accomplish
6. Including modified diets in your made-from-scratch program
 - A. Is the right thing to do
 - B. Is way too difficult
 - C. Would require much specialized, expensive equipment
7. A menu with a lot of variety and made-from-scratch foods
 - A. Has never been attempted
 - B. Is not permitted in all states
 - C. Provides some of the best medicine available

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