



A pan-seared tuna plate shows the elegance of dining at Mather.

NEWS & TRENDS > HEALTHCARE

Senior momentum

Fine dining venue or senior living café? Increasingly, it's hard to tell the difference.

Mindy S. Kolof | Jun 23, 2015

You could say senior dining has come of age. Baby boomers who cherish their fresh herbs, free-range chicken and organically grown carrots will not have to surrender their contemporary tastes when they arrive at senior living facilities in full force over the next decade. They'll find chefs with roots deep in the hospitality world taking over the kitchens and stirring up senior appetites with today's highest profile trends—organic, locally sourced, healthier, fresher.

Heavy meats, boxed macaroni and cheese, canned green beans and a square of Jello are increasingly being replaced by soup made of handcrafted vegetable stock, empanadas with salsa verde, grilled salmon, cauliflower and roasted garlic, and a scoop of sorbet. That's an important distinction to long-term care residents and their families right now, 90 percent of whom ranked foodservice as very or somewhat important when choosing a facility, according to a recent Nutrition and Foodservice Education Foundation survey.

To CIA (The Culinary Institute of America)-trained Chef Joel Ingegno, who reigns supreme in the luxurious environs of Mather LifeWays, a senior community of upscale condominiums on Chicago's North Shore, it's nothing less than our what elders deserve. He believes seniors represent a uniquely underserved market in the foodservice world. "They are a captive audience you see every day, and that makes it crucial to keep it fresh and exciting, with menus that live and breathe and reflect what's seasonal."

Joel Ingegno is the chef of Mather LifeWays, a senior community of upscale condominiums on Chicago's North Shore. Photo: The Mather

Retirement living at the Mather is billed as anything but conventional, and it's evident in the facility's foodservice, overseen by the well-traveled Ingegno and a dedicated staff of 18. Justifiably proud of the gourmet-quality meals he offers 450 residents three times a day (except Sunday dinner), seven days a week, his approach is as creative and fresh as his menu.

"We're more hotel than foodservice," he asserts. "Everything is cooked to order and



locally sourced whenever possible, (he's forged relationships with area farms, and looking to ranches next) reflecting what's going on in the restaurant industry overall." With a culinary background that includes stints at Disney Theme Parks and Lettuce Entertain You in Chicago, Ingegno seized the challenge of senior living foodservice five and half years ago and has never looked back.

"It's a bit of a challenge, with menus that change daily and an audience that's becoming more educated, sophisticated and food-centric than ever before. We have Food Network to thank for that!" he laughs. His point is made as he leafs through his newest box of "goodies" that would be equally at home in a trendy university dining hall—gojo berries, quinoa and wheat berries. Ingegno is also playing with molecular food to bring a different texture and flavor to foods for a crowd that may well have dined at Alinea (a Chicago fine-dining restaurant known for combining food and science) last month. For example, he's used maltodextrin to change up olive oil to a granular, pebble-like consistency and intensify the flavor.

"I'm not looking at this from the typical senior living mindset, because our residents have 25 to 30 great dining choices within a few blocks from here," he says. For

Ingegno, it's about exciting choices and extraordinary ambience at The Mather's dining concepts, which include an elegant raft of Mediterranean-driven cuisine and an equally impressive Asian steakhouse.

“Residents come here to socialize, talk about their day, enjoy some wine...they're going out to dinner every night. We need to make that a real experience for them, from the minute they're greeted at the hostess desk to wait staff who respond to their every need,” he explains. The meals are generously portioned and accommodations for special requests are de rigueur. Ingegno seems to be doing well in residents' eyes—they've given a 96 percent satisfaction rate with the food.

“The change needs to be complete—scoop and dump no longer has a place in senior living. Even with mechanicals, it can be done. If I'm going to puree fish, I'll make it the best pureed fish I can.”

His advice to other senior living chefs looking to ramp it up: “Talk to chefs with hotel or multi-venue experience before making any changes. And go out to eat. Often.”

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