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Changing senior tastes, dining preferences at heart of expansion project

Harbor's Edge, a CCRC in Norfolk, Va., is building up into a 27-story tower as the dining program evolves into the kind of engaging venues and versatile back-of-the-house needed for tomorrow's senior population.

Tara Fitzpatrick | May 24, 2017

The change in seniors' dining preferences is coming, and faster than you might think. At Harbor's Edge, an upscale CCRC in Norfolk, Va., with 210 residents on the independent living side, a major expansion is underway, with plans that reflect the demographic changes to come.

Currently, many seniors there are still part of the pot roast-meatloaf-mashed potatoes era, but the change is coming, says Richard Russo, director of foodservice.

"The demographic is shifting and taste and preference are changing dramatically," says Russo, who built his career in fine dining and prestigious East Coast hotels and resorts. "A lot of the residents we have now came from a time when food wasn't so ethnically diverse. They want more casseroles and things they grew up with."

But as more and more baby boomers reach retirement age, the meatloaf and pot roast will go out the window.



Those reaching retirement age are into destination dining and fine wine, and have had the opportunity to try global cuisine like no generation before them.

"This is the emerging trend that the baby boomers will really start hitting the retirement market and enter that epoch of their lives in the year 2020," Russo says.

This is the generation that entered young adulthood in the 1970s cooking alongside Julia Child and later kicked it up a notch with Emeril at the dawn of the Food Network. They're into destination dining and fine wine, and have had the opportunity to try global cuisine like no generation before them.

"The whole new dining concept going in there is a well-designed kitchen that can meet those growing expectations," Russo says.

The kitchen build-out and new dining venues are part of the larger expansion that will add more living spaces and more height to the main tower. Ground is set to break next spring, but preparations and plans are well underway now.

Currently, residents at Harbor's Edge eat breakfast and lunch at the Café Norfolk, a casual spot, or at the River Terrace Dining Room, which overlooks the Elizabeth River. On Fridays and Saturdays, the Harbor Room offers a fine-dining option with a thoughtfully crafted five-course meal. The expansion looks to build on events like that, with more display cooking and possibly even a hibachi option.

Bringing cooking to the forefront is a trend in senior dining that can keep residents engaged.

"With all the activities in senior living, food and beverage is so closely related to everything that occurs on a daily basis in the community," Russo says.

The expansion will add a European bistro-style lounge for lunchtime dining and a new 100-seat restaurant, both with a focus on regional cuisine and experimentation.

Harbor's Edge's Executive Chef Willie Moats, a sought-after veteran chef from the area, is known for fine-dining versions of New Orleans food and steakhouse cuisine.



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“The success of the marketing they’ve had so far is largely due to Chef Willie and the food,” says Carl Ede, principal and director of design at three: living architecture, an architect who’s consulting on the project. “The kitchen is the heart and soul; when people break bread together it’s the bonding experience that becomes the big event of the day.”

To allow Moats to keep experimenting and growing the dining program, the expansion will double the kitchen in size and add the latest wave of kitchen equipment in which “versatility” is the buzzword.

“We are building out the kitchen to meet the demand for more ethnic cuisine, more specialty cuisine,” Russo says.

Modern advances in equipment will allow for “not just specialty restaurants, but the ability to change quickly.”

Rotisseries, pizza ovens, sous vide machines, super high-heat ovens and other state-of-the-art equipment will be able to move from place to place, connected via columns in the kitchen. This means production of new items can happen easily.

“Variety is everything,” Russo says. “We’re preparing to be able to change our menus and be equipped to offer food at the highest level of cooking.”

The kitchen now has separate lines for each dining room, but the expansion will bring a central production kitchen, which will also be able to produce food for the memory care and assisted living sides of the operation.

On the dining side, several senior dining trends will come into play, such as doing away with the “sea of tables” associated with a cafeteria, using varied ceiling heights, room dividers, artwork and lighting to organize the dining space.

Ede recently attended a senior dining seminar in which virtual reality headsets, gloves and even shoes were used to illustrate what an individual with dementia and arthritis may be experiencing visually and physically. That included deafening noise.

“Sometimes when you’re at a restaurant and if you pause for a moment, you realize how loud the ambient noise is. You’re screaming at your table,” Ede says. “What happens with dementia is that they lose the ability to filter. It’s like chaos. They simulated that by putting really loud static and noise on. It becomes shocking to them.”

Ede, as an architect, theorizes that design—especially senior dining design—will be more successful “if you work side by side early on with the interior designer.”

Ede also is working with a landscape designer to incorporate the top of a parking deck that’s a green space with a windswept look. Right now, it’s pretty to look at, but doesn’t function as a living or dining space.

“The grass lawn is used for events sometimes, but it’s really seldom used,” Ede says. “We’re looking to expand al fresco dining around the edge of the dining room. Our challenge is how do we make it appealing and welcoming.”

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