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Elevating senior dining

At a senior living community in Vermont, veteran foodservice staff creates elevated menus.

Jennifer Crain | Sep 08, 2017

At Wake Robin, a continuing care community in Shelburne, Vt., residents make maple syrup and harvest honey from their own hives. Once in awhile, a resident will offer the dining services staff bumper crops from the garden, to see if they can be incorporated into the menu.

The dining team, led by Executive Chef Andrew Ryan, is used to local ingredients and the flexibility required to use them to their full potential. They build their five-week rotating menus around a variety of local ingredients, including produce, breads, poultry and dairy products.

For a decade, they've also purchased whole animals and butchered them on site, to save money and control the quality of the food for the community's 335 residents. Soon, they plan to purchase their first whole goat. A number of residents have attended the dining staff's interactive butchering workshops to learn how it's done.

"They're excited to watch and be part of it," Ryan says.

Kate Hays, director of dining services, says the high level of community engagement makes it an attractive place for a chef to work. The openness of many of the residents to new flavors and culinary experiences has helped the community bring in people with high levels of experience in fine dining and foodservice.



Hays is one of them. Before starting in the position in January, she oversaw 12,000 daily meals at the University of Vermont. Prior to that, she spent years in catering.

Hays couldn't fathom the move from a diverse campus where she was responsible for feeding thousands to a smaller community of aging citizens. But it's been even more rewarding than she anticipated.

"People have preconceived notions about food with seniors, that it's the most grim food you could ever encounter," she says. "That's not the way it is at all."

Ryan agrees. After an American Culinary Federation apprenticeship, he worked in a string of high-end and chef-inspired restaurants for 15 years. He started at Wake Robin more than five years ago. He stayed because it's a forward-thinking environment.

"We try to do all our production in house," instead of buying premade items, he says. "It's anything but your traditional nursing home menu."

The 60-person dining staff plans, prepares and delivers three meals a day with a deftness that results in little waste and creative ingredient combinations.



Ryan rattles off the options for their fine-dining room on a typical Tuesday evening: grilled pork tenderloin with roasted pear and shallot, veal saltimbocca with mozzarella, sage and Marsala, and a grilled portobello mushroom with tabbouleh.

“It’s beautiful food,” Hays says. “You’d be happy to see it in a restaurant in downtown Burlington. We have captured some incredibly talented staff here.”

Not every dish is so high-flying. Ryan says they also serve classics such as chicken noodle soup, marinated lamb roast with mint jelly, and liver with bacon and onions. But the freedom to innovate using the local harvest is what anchors the whole operation.

The dining team works directly with most of their local farm partners, who deliver their products to the door. They also use a local distributor, Black River Produce.

The dining team plans ahead with farmers so they will have local ingredients throughout the harvest. It also strengthens their relationships with individual farms. Ingredients such as Pomykala Farm’s vegetables and Farmer Brown’s pasture-raised pigs have been on the menu for the past five years.



Residents and staff also know the farmers. Every Thursday Wake Robin hosts a farmers' market where residents can purchase local produce, meats, breads and cheeses and sample dishes made with those ingredients. As they serve residents the samples, such as meatballs made with a blend of lean beef and mushroom duxelles, staff can educate them about eating for health and sustainability.

This summer, dining services launched a two-and-a-half-year renovation project to streamline production and upgrade the dining rooms. Wake Robin has a variety of dining venues for residents, including two dining rooms for independent living residents and three intimate “neighborhood kitchen” dining rooms in the health center, where residents receive more care.

The program currently serves all dining areas out of one central kitchen. After the renovation, they'll work out of multiple production kitchens, reducing the need for satellite food delivery. Renovated dining rooms will have an open kitchen format to allow opportunities for residents to connect with the chefs even more deeply.

“People love talking over food,” Hays says. “It’s a really nice way to connect with the residents and cement that relationship.”

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