There's a Lot Going On Behind the Counters: Altamont's New Food Service

By Payton Daniels

Altamont had the same in-house dining service for decades, with the school's own employees providing food under the leadership Mrs. Jennifer Grissom, but this year is the first under a completely new team from FLIK Independent School Dining. On the company website, FLIK describes itself as a premier dining service provided for private and independent schools, focusing on nutritious meals made from scratch, sustainability, and nutrition education.

Altamont's new Head Chef James Hardin typically comes up with a basic menu near the beginning of the school year, which can be updated based on student needs and preferences. He also uses a suggestion box, but meals must be nutritious and fit national health guidelines. He says he hopes that next year, representatives from each grade can meet with him about what students want for lunch, and that he hopes to feature a lot more "fan favorites."

Hardin is also planning to add new appliances, including better panini presses and two microwaves, one specifically for students with allergies. Hardin also said he tries to make sure that the Diner always has a gluten-free option. There is a vegetarian option every day, and the use of beef and pork is limited as much as possible for religious reasons. The staff tries to stay away from seafood because some students have serious allergies, and even cooking it in the kitchen could impact them. Shrimp is mainly for special occasions.

FLIK has a regional Dietitian and a District Chef who help with planning meals. The dietitian shows up every few weeks; she works with about 50 other schools. Hardin submits the menu to the District Chef and Dietitian to make sure, for example, that he's not serving nuts, there are many options, and there isn't too much fried food. The staff do sometimes rely on frozen foods – hamburger patties, bread, and most of the vegetarian meat-substitutes – but most everything else is freshly made. They don't use much canned food, except for things that are pickled, like olives and artichoke hearts, and some sauces.

In the big picture, the new FLIK lunch staff have faced challenges this year, being the new face of change after about 30 years of much-loved campus-cooked food. So *The Acta Diurna* conducted a poll to collect questions from students about the new service. Below are some of the questions and Hardin's answers, some of which are paraphrased.

Why do the lines take so long?

The lunch staff is timed for how long it takes to serve food, and [Business Manager Iris] Fischer will come down to time them occasionally. The average time of students getting in and out of the line is about seven minutes. The clumping of students can also make the time perceived to be longer.

Is there a way students can get nutrition info from menu items without coming down to the Diner to look at the board?

No, it's on the board because there might be delivery issues … They might have to change what they were planning to serve that day. They try to keep the menu as close as possible to the selected menu.

How far ahead do you plan meals? How much time does it take to prep food?

[We do] a four-week menu, repeating about three times over the course of three months. [We] get to school at about 7:00 AM and make food until about 11:00 AM, so that if anything needs re-seasoning or isn't working, we have a window when we can still change.

Do you use leftovers?

Yes. We don't save starches because there's concern for food-borne illnesses. It depends on what it is that it can be used in a soup, and some of them will be reused or added into pasta or something. Though we try not to have too many leftovers because there's not much space to store them.

Does someone taste the food before serving?

Yes. Kitchen staff all should be tasting it.

Do you feel pressured by student feedback?

No. We are here for y'all, so we want you guys to tell us what you want from us … I want to make sure y'all like it!