



Operator Profile: Healthcare Foodservice Goes to College

Healthcare foodservice, one of the last bastions of bland and boring cafeteria food, is changing with the times--much to the delight of patients, staff and visitors, alike. At the Oneida Healthcare Center, Oneida, NY, for example, foodservice has recently taken on a more “collegiate” approach, according to chef Joe Bambino.

The 160-bed long-term care and 110-bed acute-care center has debuted a \$4-million dining facility, called the Station Break Café and Grille. Operated by Sodexo, the new facility replaces two separate operations, one for long-term care residents and staff; the other for hospital staff, patients and visitors. The original, 30-year-old nursing home dining center was expanded, kitchen revamped, and six different food stations installed to achieve the new effect.

“We have gotten away from the traditional line service style of healthcare foodservice and gone more to a station theme, such as in a college setting,” explains Bambino, who hails from a college foodservice background. He sees the new style as a “fast-paced” trend for healthcare. “It’s easier for employees to get in and out, rather than standing on line, since they have limited time for breaks,” he explains. “They can go directly where they want.”

Even more to the point, the need for quality has grown in healthcare foodservice, says Bambino. “Food is an integral part of care, and that’s especially true for long-term care. It’s the one thing residents have control over. The more choices we can give the better.”

The new Oneida operation boasts a 3,400-square-foot indoor dining area with six food stations, as well as a patio for outdoor dining. Décor includes booths along the walls, round tables throughout the dining area, and a floor-to-ceiling window that overlooks the hillside. The six service stations comprise: a grill for breakfast sandwiches, burgers, fries, and similar fare; a deli for New York-style sandwiches; a soup and salad bar featuring house-made soups and specialty salads; a self-serve station with pizza and hot entrees; a beverage station offering gourmet coffee and cappuccino, herbal teas, fountain and bottled drinks; and a “grab-and-go” station providing items packaged for takeout.

The refurbished kitchen also is more typical of a college environment, says Bambino. It features equipment such as a combi oven, melding steam and heat, which enables fast

production of large quantities. “We can finish a roast in half the time of a typical convection oven,” Bambino points out.

Since the grand opening, the Station Break Café and Grille has counted an average of 600 customers a day for lunch and dinner, including repeat business from the community, Bambino notes. “Word has gotten out, and we are seeing repeat customers, including members of the community, as well as families of staff members.”

The same quality orientation has been applied to acute-care patient service. The hospital offers patients a selective menu and a dining coordinator visits them each morning, offering different choices, depending on diet. “Giving customers a choice and having someone there to explain the selections on a one-to-one basis provides an additional element of service,” Bambino comments. “Again, it’s necessary to be more customer-conscious. It’s part of the quality image that a healthcare operator provides.”