



Food and Society Policy Fellows

Healthy, Tasty Food Selections on the Menu at Local Hospitals

By Barbara Marquand, Quotes Preston Maring
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Gourmet hospital food might sound like an oxymoron, but at a growing number of medical centers, the food isn't just edible -- it's downright tasty.

At Methodist Hospital in Sacramento, patients choose from a restaurant-style menu that includes such fare as coconut-crusting tilapia file with pineapple salsa served with rice and broccoli florets.

Forget Jell-O and bland pudding for dessert. Instead, there's chocolate mousse in a chocolate cup, fruit of the forest pie and six other tempting treats.

The movement to improve the taste and quality of hospital food is growing nationwide as well as in the Sacramento area. Hospitals are revamping their menus, serving more fresh produce and catering to an increasingly diverse population.

"We don't serve unidentifiable stews anymore," said Methodist Hospital executive chef Tony Ettlin.

Methodist hired Ettlin, a Swiss-trained chef, in January 2006. Since his arrival, the kitchen has stopped using frozen foods and started making everything from scratch. The hospital serves more seasonal and fresh produce as well as fresh fish, and cooks with a wider array of ingredients. The kitchen uses eight varieties of rice, for instance, to serve a diverse population that includes large numbers of Hmong, Filipino and Korean patients.

Each day, hosts and hostesses bring menus to patients, who get to choose what they want as long as their doctors approve. Lunch and dinner menus each feature seven different entrees, three or four appetizers and eight desserts.

A pediatric menu includes kid-friendly comfort foods, such as peanut butter and jelly sandwiches cut into animal shapes, chicken strips and macaroni and cheese.

"We're trying to be more in touch with patients to help make their stays more enjoyable," Ettlin said. "Meals are often the only thing they have to look forward to."

The effort is paying off. Patient satisfaction scores are up. And the staff is happy, too. Ettlin does regular exhibition cooking in the cafeteria, producing such improbable hospital dishes as shrimp scampi and risotto.

UC Davis Medical Center is also expanding its menus, serving more fresh vegetables and fruits and testing new recipes, such as Russian borscht and chicken curry, to please a variety of palates.

“There’s so much diversity of cultures and ethnic groups, you really can’t have one menu item to meet all the needs,” said Marty Gothard, food and nutrition service manager at UC Davis.

The medical center also started a snack cart service for patients between meals, and Gothard hopes to offer a full a la carte menu later this year to give patients even more choice.

Once the food service department moves to a new, larger facility in 2010, the hospital is looking at offering a restaurant-style service that would allow patients to order meals whenever they wanted them, similar to room service in a hotel.

“We want to restructure the whole menu system so patients can choose whatever they want,” Gothard said. “This is a really exciting time for us.”

Creating a menu for diverse tastes is no easy recipe. UC Davis gets ideas from nurses, doctors, dietitians, trade magazines and patient surveys. Fifteen to 30 people taste-test proposed menu items. Like many other hospitals, UC Davis offers a special menu for new moms that includes a choice of gourmet entrees, such as filet mignon, served on crystal dinnerware with sparkling apple cider.

Sutter Memorial and Sutter General hospitals, meanwhile, stopped using the much-maligned trans fats. Now the chefs use olive oil instead of margarine in the cafeterias and for patient meals, said Sheila Fard, operations supervisor for Sutter Medical Center’s nutrition department.

To promote wellness among the staff, the cafeterias now feature a heart-healthy meal of the day that meets American Heart Association guidelines. Cafeteria menus also list fat content, calories, fiber and Weight Watchers points for each item.

Kaiser Permanente is using more locally grown fruits and vegetables at its 19 Northern California medical centers as part of an innovative pilot project that supports sustainable farming.

“What people eat is the most important determinant of their health,” said Dr. Preston Maring, associate physician-in-chief at the Kaiser Medical Center in Oakland. “The more we can encourage people to eat high-quality, locally grown food, the better it is for them, the better it is for our program, and the better it is for the land and the farmers.”

The pilot project stems from another idea the doctor had several years ago to bring farmers’ markets to work sites. The first farmers market opened at the Oakland medical center four years ago, and the idea has sprouted all over. Now 35 Kaiser hospitals in six states and Washington, D.C., sponsor on-site farmers’ markets every Friday where employees, patients and their families can buy fresh, locally grown food. Locally, Kaiser’s Sacramento and Roseville medical centers have Fresh Friday Markets. With the success of the farmers’ markets, Maring then wondered how the giant healthcare system could incorporate more locally grown food in the meals it served.

But first he had to learn how the healthcare system’s food services worked. He went to Kaiser’s director of national nutrition services, Jan Sanders, who gave the OK for the pilot. Kaiser then gave a grant to the

Community Alliance with Family Farmers to study the healthcare system's produce-buying patterns and needs.

Food Service Partners, which prepares most of Kaiser's meals in Northern California from a single commissary in South San Francisco, also came on board.

In August, Kaiser began serving eight sustainably grown fruits and vegetables, such as strawberries, kiwis, cantaloupe and broccoli, produced locally by small, mostly minority farmers. Of the 250 tons of produce used by Kaiser's Northern California hospitals this year, 60 tons will come from local farmers, Maring said.

This year through the alliance, Kaiser will help farmers with pre-production planning, so they will know how much to plant. The healthcare system is also looking at expanding the program to hospitals in Southern California.

A cup of sweet, red strawberries on a patient's tray might be a small step, Maring said. "But if we don't take the small steps, we'll never get to the big picture."