

Patient Meal Service Redesigned from the Inside Out

By Eileen Silva | December 01, 2015

The term “hospital food” doesn’t usually conjure an image of a gourmet meal, garnished with an edible orchid. Thornton Hospital and Sulpizio Cardiovascular Center at UC San Diego Health have transformed their menu and service to offer locally sourced meals to patients and visitors alike. Executive chef Rodney Fry creates the seasonal recipes and uses “scratch cooking” – everything except dessert is made to order and produce is delivered daily, more than 50 percent of which is from local farms.



Executive chef Rodney Fry.

According to Jill Uhlman, assistant director of Nutrition Services, “The menu is built around a heart-healthy diet and the idea that food can be medicine too. We source fresh, whole food that is nourishing instead of prepackaged, diet foods. In doing scratch cooking you can adjust your recipes and allow the menu to be tasty but still cross many needs.” For example, Fry uses more herbs and spices, such as caramelized

onions or fresh celery, instead of sugar, salt or butter to bring out natural flavors. Fry previously worked at Hotel Del Coronado and La Jolla Beach & Tennis Club, among others, before joining UC San Diego Health in 2012. “We are at the forefront of a trend – clean and simple plate presentation similar to a fine restaurant and quality ingredients,” he says.

Innovation and Renovation

Fry, Uhlman and the Nutrition Services team designed the semi-traditional menu with a contemporary twist and streamlined the service process to offer more patient interaction. Two

years in development, the kitchen was also modified to accommodate line cooking and to provide meal service when the new Jacobs Medical Center opens in 2016. They currently serve about 600 patient meals per day.

“We had the opportunity to survey our patients and create everything the way we wanted it for UC San Diego Health. Patients may order when they want and eat when they want – giving them that choice has been very liberating,” says Uhlman. She conducted an informal survey during the first week the new menu was offered in early November. Here are a few comments:

- → “I love that you can order when you want – a feeling of control is important as a patient.”
- → “It is marvelous.”
- → “I think the new menu helps my appetite.”

Room service attendants (RSAs), most of whom hold nutrition degrees, are part of the new patient service. An RSA is assigned to a patient once the physician has prescribed the diet order. The RSAs describe the process, answer any dietary questions and order the food using iPads. They write their name and phone number on the white board in the room just like the nurse so the patient can contact their RSA at any time. This process also allows nurses to devote more time to clinical issues and patient care. Guest trays are available for a fee, thus a family member or guest can also place their order through the RSA and have their meal delivered at the same time as the patient’s so they don’t have to leave the room. Delivery is guaranteed within 45 minutes, and usually arrives within 30 minutes or less.



Hoisin-glazed salmon with apple chipotle chutney, edible orchid garnish.

Meal service is available from 6:30 a.m. to 8 p.m. In addition, breakfast is served all day and lunch/dinner begins at 11 a.m. Examples of entrees available for lunch/dinner (depending on the daily special) include BBQ blueberry braised short-ribs, grilled swordfish with mango salsa, and pesto penne pasta with a choice of grilled chicken or Portobello mushrooms as a vegetarian option. A big seller is the barbecued pulled pork

sandwich. Many of these items are available at Thornton’s Cove Café as well.

Says Uhlman, “Not a lot of hospitals have an executive chef with Rodney’s background and abilities to not only write the recipes but also train the cooks in how to prepare the fresh food. Patients who weren’t eating much or didn’t have an appetite before are much more excited and eat more now.”

This service will be offered at the UC San Diego Medical Center tentatively in late 2016, once their kitchen is remodeled.

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