



DARE TO REIMAGINE

Dining Operations While Keeping Costs Under Control

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With all the challenges that operators and residents have been through the past two years, many dining directors find themselves immobilized by the cost of raw food, labor, and staff shortages.

At the same time, there seems to be an openness to change. Residents are more willing to try new things and adapt to new protocols. Now is the time to engage staff in new ways and draw out new ideas to reimagine the dining experience. Take a look at the following ways you can put your creativity and passion to work to create an enticing dining program for current residents, make sure your program is designed to attract new residents, and help create a more interesting work environment for dining staff.

Menu Engineering

Variety does not come from the breadth of a menu, it comes from engineering and evolving the menu so that new and creative meals appear regularly. Frequent menu changes allow for creativity, seasonality, and the ability to take advantage of market “specials.” In addition, designing menus to match your staffing levels will help to control costs and build kitchen morale. Make sure that menu items with higher levels of prep time are balanced with those that require less prep.



Request ideas for “freezer meals” once a month to push your culinary team’s creativity and use up excess proteins in the freezer. Some great meals come out of this exercise!

Menu engineering can also involve the way that meals are served. For instance, you can incorporate action stations in the dining room on a regular basis. Action stations done right can be surprisingly cost-effective in both food and labor. Diners are naturally drawn to a featured item, reducing the need for a lot of choices. You can even create new excitement over tried-and-true options, such as a hot sandwich carving station with whole turkeys carved to order, plenty of bread and condiments. The chef has a chance to interact with the residents and the action station can be as varied as your imagination will allow—carving stations, salad construction, or dessert creations.

Make even the simplest meals exciting! Breakfast for dinner becomes an engaging event for all when managers are serving the meal in pajamas.



Purchasing Priorities

It’s easy to get caught up chasing pennies while wasting dollars on what really matters. Staying focused on purchasing priorities gives the dining director the ability to focus on what matters. A couple of valuable tools to accomplish this are usage reports and a well thought out and defined order-guide. The usage reports provided by distributors list products in order of sales volume. This allows dining managers to focus on the top 25 items that really drive your costs each month.



Now, more than ever, stay aware of the prices of the proteins used.

While the vendor supplies the usage reports, the dining director must be the owner of the order-guide. Take the time to create an order-guide that fits the budget, fulfills residents’ expectations, and allows the flexibility to make sound decisions. There should be little place for pre-made products, frozen vegetables and fruits, or pre-made desserts. Be flexible and make substitutions when necessary to keep the costs down.

Tightening the Menu

Enhance the dining program by tightening the menu. This statement might seem counterintuitive but there is value in reducing the number of items on a menu. A tighter menu means:

- Enhancing presentation and having more time to garnish and “create the plate”
 - Making it easier to add residents’ last-minute requests
- Taking advantage of seasonal items
 - Increasing the quality of each dish and taking the time to “get it right.”

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Creating a WOW Factor

A WOW factor is an opportunity to surprise and delight residents, to create an experience and a memory that lasts.



Photo courtesy of Strategic Dining Services

Gather staff and discuss how best to do this in your community. Consider food delivery methods and presentation. How does the food look when it arrives? Are staff members trained to present it in an appealing way? Think about dining room options as well. See the community with fresh eyes and utilize unconventional areas of the community to create an “event” feel.

Presentation is critical. Each plate—even the beverage station—should be presented with the goal of delivering a WOW moment.



Imagining Dining Excellence

Reimagining the dining program in the areas highlighted above can lead to a number of benefits for dining team members. As everyone works to create the best dining experience, department engagement as well as inter-department engagement increases. With direction and goals to accomplish, team members learn and value the results that leadership skills bring. These strategies also help promote innovation as team members learn to step out of their comfort zone and try new things.

Done right, it should not break the bank. The team can have fun bringing innovation to their daily tasks and contributing to the success of the community. Engaged staff using their creativity to create WOW factors gives residents bragging rights regarding the community they choose to live in. When the residents are surprised and delighted on a regular basis, they attract more residents to the community through their enthusiasm and storytelling.

This is the perfect time to reimagine your menu, purchasing priorities, and menu streamlining. Focus on creating a WOW through dining innovation and throughout the community. ■

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