Norton

College a la carte

BY MATT ROCHELEAU FOR THE SUN CHRONICLE Saturday, September 6, 2008 2:51 AM EDT

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Remember those college days when you visited the campus dining hall to enjoy the open-air Mongolian Wok, where students had their choice of fresh vegetables, beef, pork, sauces and rice cooked to order?

Or, maybe you ate from a selection of locally grown, organic foods, or snacked on freshly baked cinnamon sticks.

Whatever you were craving, you felt comforted knowing your food was trans fat free, of course. Right?

Maybe not.

Yet, local colleges and universities say those types of options are becoming common in many campus dining halls as part of a nationwide trend to accommodate current students and lure others. "I've had students tell me they chose Northeastern because of the food," said Maureen Timmons, director of dining services at Northeastern University in Boston, where incoming students get a taste of their future dining hall meals during orientation.

"Food services is definitely something students consider," said Gail Rotondi, operations manager for Sodexho Food Services at Bridgewater State College. "Students are more sophisticated customers looking for a more retail approach."

Bridgewater State has so embraced the retail approach, its cafeterias are designed to resemble mall food courts, Rotondi said.

Students were welcomed this past fall with a new, green dining center. Crimson Hall features fresh smoothies, an open-air Mongolian wok and a gas-powered pizza oven that cooks popular flatbread pizzas and cinnamon sticks, she said.

"Food entertainment" is available at Northeastern's dining hall.

Patrons can watch cooking demonstrations by professional chefs at the Exhibition Kitchen, which resembles the type of set-up seen on TV food channels, Timmons said.

Two plasma screens display close-ups from three different cameras of the food while it is prepared to give the audience a better view, she said.

College students also are increasingly able to choose from a variety of food types to fit their unique diet. Vegetarian, vegan, food allergy, trans fat-free and kosher menus are being initiated, if not expanded upon, at many local schools.

There is also a movement towards providing organic and locally grown produce.

About 23 percent of last year's produce at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst came from local farmers, up from 8 percent four years ago, head of dining services Ken Toong said. UMass issues about 13,500 meal plans each semester and is currently the third largest dining service in the country in terms of revenue.

The school leads national colleges, serving more than 15 types of cuisine, including Turkish, Thai, Indian, and Japanese, Toong said.

"UMass offers lots of options when it comes to food. They always have pasta, sandwiches, cereal and salad, along with a few main courses for each meal that change daily," said Giuliana Castagnola, a junior at UMass-Amherst.

And, to reduce waste and promote healthy eating, the school has reduced portion sizes and lists nutritional facts for every serving of food, Toong said.

At many schools, flexible hours provide access to food through much of the day and night.

Students can eat from 7 a.m. to 2 a.m. at Wheaton College in Norton to accommodate more varied student schedules than in the past, spokesman Mike Graca said.

At Northeastern, a full breakfast menu will be offered all day starting in fall 2009, when the construction of a new dining hall is complete said Timmons.

"When I went to school 20 years ago, sun-dried tomatoes would have been considered exotic," Graca said. "The big trend in dining services for students is the increase in the kinds of choices they are looking for."

And, more choices have resonated well with some students.

"I like being able to make my own waffles," said Mellissa Burkhart, a junior at the University of Hartford in Connecticut. "We have five different kinds of juice, every kind of soda, Gatorade, four different types of milk and different kinds of flavored water."

But, not everyone is satisfied with the smorgasbord approach.

"For me, all the food choices aren't necessarily a good thing. They try to do too much and they don't always have the resources to make good-tasting food," said Mike Mirarchi, a junior at Fordham University in New York City.

And despite the many offerings at Northeastern, Timmons said, "grilled cheese, chicken fingers, and mac & cheese are still the favorites."

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