

## Dining with dignity

*Retirement community bringing upscale dining*

**B**ill and Betty Boyd's first meal at The Mather, a retirement community in Evanston, was a private rooftop meal with a view of the Chicago skyline and Lake Michigan.

Even with such an impressive beginning, Bill Boyd says months later the dining continues to impress them. "In broad terms we are astounded by the dining experience here. The food is delicious and attractive, the variety is appealing and exceeds any expectations we might have had. We have been pleased and impressed every step of the way," he says.

While food at a retirement community once conjured images of colorless scoops of mush, The Mather is among senior living communities changing the way retirees dine, meeting the

**Chef Chip Fegert** expectations of new generations and setting the bar exceptionally high.

### Choices

The Mather will have seven dining rooms, several are already open, and two outdoor dining options that will open when weather allows. Each dining



**Far from colorless scoops of mush, The Mather retirement community offers a menu that includes gourmet mini burgers and potato chips.**



room, or restaurant is a more appropriate description, has a different menu in an attempt to speak to the various culinary tastes of the residents, says Cara Baldwin, assistant vice president of dining.

One dining area has a stone hearth where the chefs cook in the middle of the room and everything is made to order. Another room has a more traditional menu with three different entrees daily or residents can choose the sampler with a small portion of each entrée.

"That's been hugely popular," Baldwin says of the sampler.

A third offers a build your own concept with a menu of proteins, sauces, toppings, starches and vegetables that residents can mix and match.

"This concept is relatively new and the residents love when they can make their own choices," Baldwin says. "We combine the experience of eating out with the comfort of eating in your own home."

Residents have several dining packages from a la carte dining that allows them to pay only for the meals they enjoy, to a 21 meals a month plan, or a 30-31 meal a month plan. All in addition to apartments that have kitchens with granite countertops and top-of-the-line appliances.

### Made to order

Executive Chef Chip Fegert has spent 20 years in the food service industry. He didn't originally respond when The Mather called because he was picturing "institutional-style food." But after a meeting he realized it was not what he had expected.

"I was really intrigued by it," he says of the different dining concepts. "It's more like running restaurants to me. That's why I joined the team."

He says the state-of-the-art kitchen is like that of a five star hotel and he is given freedom to create recipes and menus. The 90 percent scratch kitchen means the food doesn't go from a freezer to the oven, but is made from scratch daily.

The menus change daily and the kitchen prepares about 15 different sauces each day, Fegert says.

He says he creates dishes residents may be used to but with a twist—lobster pot pie instead of chicken, or veal meatloaf, Yukon gold mashed potatoes with truffles folded in. At first Fegert was concerned residents would be too set in their dining habits, but he talks with

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One of the seven dining rooms, or restaurants, at The Mather in Evanston.

them daily and after a few months began getting suggestions.

"Residents were a little intimidated by the menu at first," he says. "But they are starting to learn about food."

Baldwin says residents are like every restaurant owner's dream because they provide a captive audience, but it is a challenge to make sure they keep things interesting.

"It's like eating at your favorite restaurant every day of the year," she says. "I'll bet that can get boring as well."

Resident Mary Potts is a vegetarian and wondered how many food options she would have.

"It is better than I ever could have imagined," she says, adding that the staff is accommodating and Fegert goes out of his way to make sure she has items that interest her. "He totally sees it as a challenge and is extremely obliging. He goes out of his way to make special dishes for me. But not just me; he is that way with everyone."

In addition to being delicious, Potts says entrees are served in all their glory and are a "feast for the eyes" like small artistic sculptures.

Bill Boyd says they also like that there are no set times to be seated for a meal giving residents the freedom to eat when their schedules allow or when they are hungry.

Meals are offered from 7:30 a.m. until 7:30 p.m. and if someone wants breakfast at night Fegert is more than happy to cook some

eggs, bacon and hash browns.

### Cutting Edge

Baldwin believes the move toward more sophisticated dining in retirement communities is an influence of the Baby Boomer generation. While they may not be in retirement communities quite yet, they are helping their parents make decisions and have high expectations.

She says as the generations have changed so too have attitudes about aging.

"It used to be at 65 you were near the end of your life and now it means you are starting a whole new chapter," she says.

Baldwin says while they are starting to hear more requests for healthier choices in dining, residents still want to see their comfort foods and the foods they remember enjoying.

"We are seeing trends and changes in senior living and moved along with it and I'd like to think I've been a driving force behind that as well," Baldwin says.

### Beyond expectations

Bill and Betty Boyd say food did not play into their decision to come to The Mather, although the Evanston location appealed in the number of restaurants in the immediate area.

"We knew nothing about the food," he says. Bill Boyd says they typically only eat in the dining areas once a day and most of the time it is for dinner. He says they have enjoyed bringing friends to share a meal.

## Get some culinary creativity

**F**ood service in retirement communities used to focus on low sodium and low fat without thinking much about flavor.

"They'd think, 'is it getting the nutritional value?'" says Colleen Lammel-Hamor, wellness manager for the Chicago Park District and a registered dietician with experience working with older adults. "They didn't think, 'does it look appealing?'"

Lammel-Hamor says some of the same techniques used at The Mather in Evanston and other retirement communities with high end dining options can translate to anyone's kitchen, creating great tasting meals that are good for you.

### Setting the scene

Similar to the inviting dining rooms at The Mather, setting is important, says Melissa Joy Dobbins, Illinois Dietetic Association spokeswoman.

Rather than eating out of a container while standing at the counter, Dobbins says it helps to set the table, add some candles and music even if it is just for you.

Lammel-Hamor says it is similar to how you interest young children in new foods by adding color to the plate, making it more fun and eating more to get the nutritional value. How the food is presented can make food more appealing, she says.

### Variety is the spice

Lammel-Hamor says it helps to shop fruits and vegetables in season. Not only are they typically more colorful but that often means they contain more nutrients. Rather than having green beans each night it

helps to change it up and look forward to a meal.

Dobbins says sodium is often the first thing older adults need to cut down or out and it can be a challenge, but there are ways to keep flavor and cut salt. Rather than using salt and fats Lammel-Hamor says raspberry vinaigrette can add a burst of flavor, or add fresh berries to pancakes.

"The five to seven a day [of fruits and vegetables] is especially important for seniors because their immune system is compromised as they get older — especially in shared living spaces."

### Exercise some creativity

Chip Fegert, executive Chef at The Mather, says with a little creativity it isn't too difficult to eat healthfully without losing any flavor.

He says instead of sauces made with cream and butter there are options such as charred tomato vinaigrette or creating a vegetable stock that is reduced until it is almost the consistency of sauce.

Using varying cooking methods also can help, including using rotisserie or steamers, Fegert says.

Lammel-Hamor says the easiest way to add flavor is by using spices and herbs and fresh is best. Using flavored vinegars or citrus juices such as lemon juice result in less fat and added flavor.

Dobbins says to look out for hidden sodium in combination spices for example, lemon pepper often has a lot of salt.

Many believe that low fat and low salt equals low flavor, Lammel-Hamor says.

"The mind set is it's going to taste horrible, but it really doesn't need to be that way," she says. ■

"It's like taking them to an exclusive restaurant," he says adding that they also have their own wine label [10 Wishes Wine].

### Beyond the menu

Bill Boyd says it's about more than just the food — it's also about the attitude of the staff, which is attentive and caring and eager to please.

Residents look forward to seeing what Fegert and other staff members will come up with — from looking to see what is available as Chip's Choice every Thursday when he creates a recipe from a request, to anticipating what special items he will create for a holiday or special occasion. In January Fegert brought in a popcorn maker with different types of popcorn for National Popcorn Day.

"We try to make it fun," he says. "We try really to keep them young and it has been a blast."

Baldwin says residents have been

very supportive.

"Residents from day one have been so complimentary of the food," she says. "What Chip is offering stacks up to some of the food they've gotten around the world in their finest dining experiences."

### On the horizon

Baldwin says she expects they will continue to see more diversity in the food offered in senior living facilities even further down the road.

"The Baby Boomers are a well traveled generation," she says.

In addition they are more green conscious. Fegert is looking forward to warmer weather when he, with the help of staff members and residents, will have about 30 private garden plots where he can raise his own herbs and vegetables.

Fegert says the Baby Boomer generation will offer the industry even more opportunities to grow. ■