

Dished: The Mather Brings High-End Dining to Senior Living

By Elizabeth Ecker

What do you get when you mix two parts Culinary Institute of America-trained personnel, one part locally-sourced ingredients, five parts dining room variety and one part designated, in-house pastry chef?

The Mather, that's what.

Founded in 1941 and recently renovated to update its CCRC campus, Mather LifeWays does not take its dining program lightly. With one main kitchen and several satellites to serve residents across the continuum of care, The Mather has developed an offering of restaurant options to its residents that competes directly with the foodie-approved restaurants its Evanston, Illinois surroundings boasts.

That means two different sorbet options daily, custom desserts, house-made stocks and reductions and a fleet of foodies running the show.

From the \$10,000 gelato machine to the time its kitchen served an entire wedding for the family member of one of its residents, The Mather shared with SHN its concept, goals and food favorites when it comes to dining.



When he's not crafting The Mather's next menu plan, he can be found frequenting Chicago's foodie destinations as well as its tried-and-true Italian offerings such as Old Town's Topo Gigio.



An ancho chili reduction accompanies tilapia with cornmeal crust (pictured above) and Ingegno's "crazy fruit" salsa.

Front of the House.

Mather residents elect a meal plan or pay-as-you-go options from fine dining to a la carte cafe including "swipes" for family and friends.

Behind the operations stands David Kane, a Culinary Institute of America-trained food guru himself, who brings experience in senior living but also a strong knowledge of dining standards and trends. Case in point: the Mather's kitchen, recently inspected by the state board of health, received a score so high that inspectors returned the following day with their colleagues to make an example of it.

It also meant hiring for the kitchen staff was not going to be standard procedure. Rather than examining resumes or even simply observing and tasting cooking demonstrations by the applicants, the Mather's team held a Top Chef-style event that challenged each chef to prepare his or her best from a given basket of 20 items.

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“Anything you would think of and/or dream of in terms of the traditional nursing home setting, we will not do it,” says Chef Joel Ingegno. “Our clientele demands it. They are well educated, well traveled and opinionated when it comes to dining.”

The Mather kitchen serves up about 300 meals daily for residents and their guests. The biggest challenge, Ingegno says: A captive audience. But that means menu items that rotate daily.

“We come from a la carte restaurants,” he says of the kitchen staff, 20 strong at any given time. “The objective always has been and always will be to treat these as restaurants, not as dining rooms.”

On the line.

The menus here are globally inspired with some of their ingredients sourced by a three-acre plot of land in upper Wisconsin that is farmed especially for The Mather’s menu (think: micro-greens, herbs, heirlooms and whatever’s most readily in season).

All preparations from stock to sorbet are done from scratch.

Master of Cuisine.

From Disney to senior living, Ingegno is no stranger to preparing food for different audiences.



A recent take on the Italian staple Caprese salad (pictured above) featured the creamy, buttery mozzarella cousin burrata with micro arugula and a crunchy, salty version of what we know to be basil—just not usually seen in this form.



Mushrooms from far and wide including morels and blue foot chanterelles adorn this porcini-stuffed ravioli (above).

A Certified Executive Chef and Master Certified Foodservice Executive, Ingegno is CIA-trained with experience in every aspect of food service, from positions as food and beverage director to work with Chicago restaurant network mainstay Lettuce Entertain You.

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While the menu often plays to the preferences of the Mather’s clientele including items such as lamb chops and dark meat poultry, Ingegno says he is challenged, and delighted, to

have a whole host of regulars to whom he caters on a daily basis.

On behalf of Mather LifeWays, he has scouted a plot of land in upper Wisconsin where he can grow specific items not otherwise readily available.

Not only does the menu work to incorporate ingredients that are fresh, innovative and/or popular, but Ingegno plays to textures and flavors in his preparations, too.

And he likes to keep things interesting. “I have 20 staff and I like to keep them entertained. We want to make it exciting for the residents, and also for the staff,” he says.