

Food's senior moment: Retirement homes serving upscale meals

At many of South Florida's retirement communities, institutional food has given way to micro greens locally sourced produced and made-from-scratch entrees.

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The crystal chandeliers gleam, the women's jewels sparkle, and the red roses in the center of each white-linen-topped table give off a perfume not unlike what indulgence might smell like.

"Hello, darling," chef Christophe Pellier greets diners as he works the room in his chef's coat. "Hello... hello...hello."

Soup of the day is lobster bisque, the salad mixed greens with artichoke hearts, Kalamata olives and roasted red peppers. Entrees include osso buco, chicken Milanese and pan-seared scallops, with roasted rosemary potatoes and ratatouille.

"Wine?" black-clad servers ask as they navigate from group to group.

Welcome to dinner at The Palace at Coral Gables, a luxury retirement community whose administration believes that aging should never mean an end to enjoying the finer things in life — exceptional food among them.

"Residents come here expecting to have a unique dining experience," said Josh Cabrera, executive director of The Palace. "Food has always been a big part of socialization."

So much so, in fact, that about 65 percent of the community's 130 employees work in the food service department and many residents spend their afternoons at the daily happy hour, listening to live music before moving on to dinner in a room full of opulent touches.

"The residents are accustomed to a certain level of service and dining," added Pellier, who has worked at several five-star restaurants around the globe. "They're well-traveled, well-educated, and they certainly know what they like."



Chef Christophe Pellier checks to see how Warren and Florence Ironson are enjoying dinner at The Palace at Coral Gables, a luxury retirement community.

TRENDING UP

The Palace is not alone in its efforts to deliver upscale food that also meets the dietary restrictions of older adults. Around South Florida and the rest of the country, institutional food — mushy meatloaf and canned peas — is passe at senior communities. Micro greens, locally sourced produce and made-from-scratch entrees are hot, hot, hot. It's a trend that mirrors the general population's fascination with food. Regardless of age, eating has become as much a cultural experience as a source of nutrition.

"These are savvy people," said Stephanie Braudrick, a regional manager for A Place for Mom, a for-profit senior care referral service based in Seattle. "They want not only high-quality food but also high-quality service. They're used to the concierge touch."

Nancy Stein, who founded Seniority Matters, a Miami-based service that helps find caregiving solutions in the three-county area, agrees. Many of her clients — and their baby-boomer children — are interested in communities with an assortment of amenities.

"Food is a great hook," she added. "People want choices and quality."

What's more, dining options are of particular importance because "there's a social aspect to food. It's how people socialize and come together."

FLAVORFUL AND HEALTHY

Dozens of miles north of The Palace, executive chef Gonzalo Vazquez is busy in the kitchen of Vi at Aventura, another luxury community for older adults. He jokes that he works "for the healthcare service industry in a resort setting." The description is hardly an exaggeration.

Like his colleagues in other retirement centers, Vazquez develops recipes with a focus on "fresh and seasonal and locally produced."

But once these recipes are tested, they're submitted to a certified dietitian to ensure meals are meeting the dietary and medical restrictions of residents. This is perhaps the chefs' greatest challenge: delivering tasty, quality meals in a restrictive ingredient environment. This means low levels of sugar or

sugarless pastries and substituting herbs and spices for salt. Meat is always the soft cuts — New York steak, rib-eye, filet mignon.

“We focus a lot on the cooking process, too,” said Vazquez, who has worked as a corporate chef and at Le Cordon Bleu. “A lot of baking, roasting, grilling and broiling.”

A typical dinner — the most attended meal at Vi’s restaurant — always includes three types of entrees (meat, chicken and fish) along with a vegetarian substitute. His diners like such traditional dishes as chicken cacciatore, brisket with red wine sauce and eggplant parmigiana.

Dessert, however, remains the fan fave. And not just any dessert either, but pies, pies and more pies. Vazquez’s kitchen bakes 14 different kinds. He recently sent his pastry chef to a five-day training program in Chicago corporate headquarters to perfect his pie and cobbler skills. “He’s French-trained, so this was a surprise for him,” Vazquez said.

APPROVAL RATINGS

Marilyn Robinson, 85, moved from Fort Lauderdale to Vi six months ago. She admits that at the beginning her eating was out of control, “like when you’re on a cruise,” but now she has settled into her new environment and usually orders fish or chicken. Her favorite dish is Vazquez’s miso salmon salad. “You get quite a variety,” she says.

One of her table companions, Joyce Kraner, 85 and a 12-year resident, added: “If you don’t find something you like here, then you have a problem.”

In the southern end of the county, chef Roberto de las Salas, who has been at East Ridge Retirement Village at Cutler Bay for a year, discovered that ice cream was the most ordered dessert on a menu that included five different end-of-meal sweets. He goes through at least 60 gallons a week.

“They like chicken fraicaise and sole almondine,” he said, “food that is simple, familiar and well-executed, but they love, love their ice cream.”

Unlike most other retirement communities, which offer different menus on a rotating cycle, de las Salas sticks to a regular restaurant-style menu for his usual 120 to 140 daily diners. The choices are varied, from baked chicken to lamb shank, with a salad bar and a fruit bar.

The administration brought him in, he said, to liven up the offerings. “They used to buy a lot of frozen vegetables, but we’re going more organic, more local,” he said, citing one of the changes he has made.

HAPPENING EVERYWHERE

Changes in food-prep are happening in the kitchens of more modest retirement communities, too. At The Floridean Nursing & Rehabilitation Center, which has been in operation for 70 years in Little Havana, changing demographics have translated into more typical Latin fare, but with a twist. Chef



OSSO BUCO

1 sprig fresh rosemary

1 sprig fresh thyme

1 bay leaf

2 cloves

3 whole veal shanks (about 1 pound per shank), trimmed

Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

All purpose flour, for dredging

1/2 cup vegetable oil

1 small onion, diced

1 small carrot, diced

1 stalk celery, diced

1 tablespoon tomato paste

1 cup red wine

3 cups chicken stock

3 tablespoons fresh flat-leaf Italian parsley, chopped

1 tablespoon lemon zest

Carlos Otiniano likes to introduce residents to Italian, Greek and other international dishes.

For example, lunch one day included chicken with peach sauce (flavored with thyme and white wine), a broiled tomato (sprinkled with extra virgin oil, oregano, garlic and topped with mozzarella and parsley) and couscous. Otiniano acknowledges that

planning and preparing meals for people in their 80s was “a learning process” after running restaurants, including a family-owned four-star in San Juan, where heavy sauces were the norm.

“I’ve learned that you don’t have to sacrifice the palate for it to be healthy,” he added.

Back at The Palace, chef Pellier is watching over the kitchen staff as they slice and serve tiramisu. In the dining room, Bernice Dubrow is enjoying her pan-seared scallops with three friends. She moved here from Venice at her daughter’s urging, and her initial reluctance has given way to unabashed enthusiasm.

“It’s like going to a fine-dining restaurant every night,” she said. “The servers know your name and know what you like.”

Pellier said that feeling of welcome is part of the experience.

“As a chef you want the food to be great of course,” he said. “But I want more. I want them to enjoy the ambiance, the people, the place. I want them to leave, saying, ‘Boy, that was a great night!’”

Ossobuco Recipe Instructions: Place the rosemary, thyme, bay leaf and cloves into cheesecloth and tie with twine to create a bouquet garni. For the veal shanks, pat dry with paper towels to remove any excess moisture. Veal shanks will brown better when they are dry. Secure the meat to the bone with twine. Season each shank with salt and freshly ground pepper. Dredge the shanks in flour, shaking off excess.

In a large Dutch oven, heat vegetable oil until smoking. Add tied veal shanks to the hot pan and brown all sides, about 3 minutes per side. Remove browned shanks and reserve.

In the same pot, add the onion, carrot and celery. Season with salt at this point to help draw out the moisture from the vegetables. Sauté until soft and translucent, about 8 minutes. Add the tomato paste and mix well. Return browned shanks to the pan and add the red wine and reduce liquid by half, about 5 minutes. Add the bouquet garni and 2 cups of the chicken stock and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to low, cover pan and simmer for about 1 1/2 hours or until the meat is falling off the bone. Check every 15 minutes, turning shanks and adding more chicken stock as necessary. The level of cooking liquid should always be about 3/4 the way up the shank.

Carefully remove the cooked shanks from the pot and place on decorative serving platter. Cut off the kitchen twine and discard. Remove and discard bouquet garni from the pot. Pour all the juices and sauce from the pot over the shanks. Garnish with chopped parsley and lemon zest. Serves 4-6. **Source:** Chef Christophe Pellier of The Palace at Coral Gables.