



Why You Need to Shrink Your Menu

By Susan Saldibar

Is your dining menu turning into a book of mediocre dishes?

I spoke recently with David Koelling, President of [Strategic Dining Services](#) and RonnDa Peters, VP of Marketing and Sales. (Strategic Dining Services is a partner of Senior Housing Forum.) We talked about how senior living community dining menus have become bloated, all in the name of “variety”.

“When the head of dining services gets requests for ‘more variety’ from residents, the tendency is to simply add dishes,” David says. “So, your ‘always available’ menu items keep growing and growing. It may seem like a quick and easy fix, but it’s not.” Not by a long shot. In fact, those huge, diverse menus come at a high cost to the community, David tells me. Here are a few reasons why:

- Quality suffers as more food must be ordered within fixed budgets.
- Execution suffers as food service workers stretch their time to prepare more dishes.
- Waste increases in the form of more unsalvageable left overs.

And, David tells me, most residents get bored with the new dish and want yet another one added!

The answer to requests for more variety? Shrink your menu!

It's a tricky problem, as nobody likes to deny a resident a new menu item. But it's the solution that got my attention. David and RonnDa have found that by actually cutting down the number of "always available" menu items the dining team is able to concentrate on perfecting and enhancing the taste and presentation of their dishes. In other words, less is more.

As for providing more variety, it's simple, David tells me. You rotate out a dish each week and introduce a new one. But first, you have to get your menu down to a manageable size. "If, for example, you currently have 10 items on your 'always available' menu, make it a goal to remove 5 of them within 30 days," David suggests. "Focus on which items take the most time to put together in the kitchen. Then query your residents. Chances are the most time-consuming dishes are not the most popular," he adds. The result of all this is a better overall dining experience in the form of:

- Better quality. Less volume (diversity) allows for fresher, higher quality food.
- More engaged team. Having more time to concentrate on new innovative dishes, brings out more creative thinking from the staff.
- A creatively challenged and motivated chef. Chefs who are asked to prepare the same dishes, day in and day out, will quickly become bored and move on.

"A true culinarian wants to create and keep things fresh," RonnDa says. "This gives the staff a chance to try some new things," she adds. And she urges communities to challenge their chefs to come up with new ideas. David agrees. "Get people excited when their special dish gets on the menu," he says. "Maybe someone has a special recipe from their mom or sister. Try it out! With a smaller menu, you have more room to experiment."

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This almost sounds like the way the chic boutique restaurants operate; fewer menu items but each one a star in its own right. It certainly is a departure from the way assisted living dining has operated in the past. And that's a good thing.

"If you want to stay competitive you need a vibrant menu," David says. "Of course you'll have people wanting their own personal favorites back on the menu. But instead of simply adding them back, try saying, 'I know we're not serving your favorite this week. But you'll love your delicious Caesar salad, hand tossed right at your table!' I know I would!"



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