

# College and University Chefs Pave the Future

Student demands dictate the direction of the foodservice industry going forward // By Jody Shee



To see the future of ingredients, food concepts and operational solutions, go to a university food hall. Different from what most career-established individuals remember, today's college and university dining halls offer chef-driven student-critiqued fare on a city scale, every single meal.

Based on what students demand and receive regularly at school, they will be disappointed with eateries that don't offer highly authentic dishes, adherence to allergy and dietary protocol (think halal), total customization of dishes, plant-based options aplenty, great desserts and, of course, sustainable food and operations.

## Assess and address

If pandemic shutdowns did anything positive, they gave college and university chefs a chance to stand back, evaluate and pivot. Michigan State University added phone app mobile ordering capabilities and expanded the amount and variety of both hot and cold grab-and-go items in its retail outlets, says **Chef Kurt Kwiatkowski, M.S., CEC, CCA, AAC**, senior executive chef of culinary services.

With operations back in full swing, the university navigates the volume for popular chicken tenders, for example, by pre-cooking the chicken via sous vide.



Spread from left: Michigan State University's Pangea platform features Pan-Asian dishes made to order with the choice of rice or noodles and a variety of house-made sauces (credit: Michigan State University); Chef Kurt Kwiatkowski, M.S., CEC, CCA, AAC, senior executive chef culinary services at Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan; Pasta al forno with pork sugo (credit: Michigan State University)

Per order, it takes no more than two minutes to take the chicken from the bag into the seasoning and gluten-free panko mix before frying the chicken just long enough to warm it up, Chef Kwiatkowski says.

MSU, which handles 40,000 to 50,000 meals per day, serves food from 11 units across the campus, which is broken down into neighborhoods. Each neighborhood facility operates with its own brigade system. A few decades ago, university dining strictly focused on the bottom line and serving people. "The mind for innovation wasn't at the forefront," Chef Kwiatkowski says. These days, the staff learns how to break down whole-muscle meat and sides of fish, "plus, any whole chicken on campus is halal."

Chef Kwiatkowski focuses on staying up to date with trends and dealing with sourcing challenges, partly from the standpoint of securing authentic ingredients in foodservice quantities. For a unit to offer Korean ribs, for example, it

must source several tubs of gochujang, he says. Add to that general supply shortages that all of foodservice is facing, and the problem is amplified in large-volume universities. Currently, the ebb and flow of chicken parts makes adjusting the menu on the fly a daily exercise.

It's also an exercise to assure that students' biggest food values are adequately addressed. That means food that is globally authentic, sustainable and customizable, Chef Kwiatkowski says. Among MSU's new or popular venues are international street food — serving the authentic dishes found in a region's natural environment — and noodle bowls in which students can choose their desired protein and vegetables and select noodles or rice with sauce or broth. A popular chicken concept serves halal chicken or another protein along with a scoop of hummus and pita for an entrée served in a wrap, sandwich, on a bed of grains or as a salad with chopped lettuce.



Johnny Curet, CEC, AAC, director of campus dining with Rice University, Houston

## Menu smarts

Given supply fluctuations, universities that operate on a cycle menu face challenges that Rice University in Houston, more easily navigates. The 4,200-student campus operates with five kitchens, each with its own executive chef who writes the kitchen's menu weekly, submitting it to **Chef Johnny Curet, CEC, AAC**, director of campus dining. He looks over menus to assure, among other things, that they don't get too redundant, that all allergens are documented and that there is a solid plan for plant-based center-of-the plate dishes, he says. With a short planning window, the chefs are able to flex and pivot quickly based on supply.

Student desire for customization also makes menu planning a little easier. Rather than pre-crafted sandwiches and composed salads, students prefer

to select from ingredients to make their own version, Chef Curet says.

With the rise of the food channel and food videos, today's students are more food educated than those of yesteryear. "You have to be on your toes," he says. "For us, the biggest thing, and growing stronger, is the desire for plant-based cuisine." Rice University treats plant-based as a cuisine type the same way someone would French or Italian. "It's not just an offering, but it's incorporated in daily production."

The university is building a new student center, and Chef Curet wants to include a station dedicated to 100% plant-based items. "That's based on feedback we've gotten," he says. "If you're not working toward building a solid plant-based program, you're behind."

In the past five years, Chef Curet says, authentic international cuisine has risen more to the forefront. More than

90 nations are represented in Houston, so global cuisine know-how is among the top things he looks for in new chef hires. Applicants with foodservice experience working for airlines with international flights rise to the top for their experience with global cuisines.

Yet with all that's new, "students will never stop loving desserts. We do some quality desserts," he says. The units make cookies for lunch, while the pastry chef decides the dinner dessert.

## Expectations dictate menu

In his 21 years with Grinnell College, a liberal arts college in Grinnell, Iowa, **Chef Scott Turley, CEC, AAC**, executive chef and chief culinary officer, has led a large transition from traditional college food to what students expect now. Top of the list is food that is highly authentic and non-processed. "We have over 7,500 ingredients in house at any time," he says, noting that up to 99% of food items are scratch-made, including curries.

Not only does Chef Turley talk to international students about the dishes and ingredients of their cultures, but he and the staff also attend the school's annual international food bazaar, which offers student-prepared samplings of their popular native dishes. When he sees potential for the school menu, Chef Turley calls the student in for further discussion. "Once on paper, we look at the nutritionals and yields to quantify it so we can scale it up," he says. He does that because, "if you're not true to the food and culture, the students will call you out on it."

The sustainability focus at Grinnell College expands beyond purchasing local to using the entire animal and purchasing eggs and chickens from the same company to utilize the entire lifecycle of the animal.



Chef Scott Turley, CEC, AAC, executive chef and chief culinary officer at Grinnell College in Grinnell, Iowa (below), offers fried chicken steamed buns on his globally-inspired menu (above).

Chef Turley can't think of another venue that allows chefs to be exposed to so many cooking styles and cuisines. "In a restaurant, the menu might not change every day. Our style might change between meals. For someone really interested in culinary, where else could you get this variety and develop this skill set?"