
THE TOTAL PATIENT



Delicious hospital food? Yes! Cancer center kitchens focus on stimulating the appetite

Bette Weinstein Kaplan

Times have changed for hospital food, and grateful patients could not be happier. As medications and other treatments for cancer patients have evolved, so have their meals. Hospitals have begun to stress the quality and variety of foods they offer, as increasing emphasis is placed on the role of taste appeal and good nutrition in fighting cancer.

ROOM SERVICE

Examples of how things have changed for the better are the room service programs, such as the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center's "Room Service at M.D. Anderson."^{1,2} This is an extensive menu from which patients and their guests can order snacks and meals any time between 6:30 AM and 9:30 PM by dialing the catchy in-hospital number, 2-DINE. In addition to restaurant fare chosen by the chefs, patients can build their own breakfast sandwiches, create their own omelets, build their own salads, sandwiches or pasta bowls ... and top everything off with their choice of desserts. When possible, foods on the menu, such as yogurts, ice cream, and sorbets, are offered in different brands as well as flavors. The menu looks like it belongs in a high-end diner, except for the multiple variations available for so many of the foods. The Houston hospital's Room Service staff says that once

an order has been placed, the patient or guest can expect to receive their freshly prepared food in 45 minutes.

TEMPTING THE APPETITE

The goals of these programs are to tempt patients' appetites, meet their nutritional needs, and provide enjoyable dining experiences with a large selection of appealing and healthful food choices. Although the M.D. Anderson service is for cancer inpatients and others with special dietary needs, caregivers, family members, and friends of inpatients may also order from room service. The

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clinical nutrition personnel work with each patient's health care team to provide nutritional evaluation, education, and counseling, as well as to identify opportunities for intervention or support.

Cincinnati Children's Hospital also has a room service program, which is available from 6:30 AM to 10:00 PM. The nutrition staff says their food delivery program is formulated to increase patients' dietary intakes and enhance

their satisfaction levels. The menu is designed to provide healthful food choices and child-friendly food items. In addition, members of the clinical staff from the Cincinnati Children's Division of Nutrition Therapy assist patients who are on specialized diets.

Patients receive the Room Service menu when they are admitted. One of the goals of the program is to educate patients and their families about proper nutrition and eating habits, and information for accessing the USDA's My Pyramid/My Plate on the Internet is provided on the back of the menu.³ When a patient submits a food request, Room Service nutrition care assistants promote balanced meal selections.

AWARD-WINNING EXECUTIVE CHEF

Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center's executive chef, Pnina Peled, has won multiple awards. She is renowned for the exceptional consideration she gives all the hospital's patients and for the creative meals that result. She is also a very busy executive chef. Her responsibilities include food services for more than 350 inpatients and the employee and guest cafeterias, as well as the operating room lounge. In addition, she oversees special functions and the hospital's retail operations: food sold in the gift shop, the Cyber Café, Starbucks, and the Student Faculty Club.

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REPLICATING FAVORITE FOODS

Although Memorial Sloan-Kettering patients can choose from 75 multiethnic and diet-specific menu variations, Chef Peled alters recipes in order to appeal to her patients and still meet their dietary restrictions. This is especially challenging when it comes to the children. She says, “I have to keep in mind that they are immune-compromised and in many cases they are restricted from any raw foods, including fruits and vegetables. I have to be creative when a child on a low-fat, low-sugar diet wants pasta carbonara.”⁴ Many patients have had bone-marrow transplants or are on steroids and must be on low microbial diets; others have difficulty eating due to complications of chemotherapy. The chef and her three sous chefs are happy to customize a recipe in order to safely replicate a favorite food from a fast-food restaurant or Grandma’s cooking.

The goal is always the same: to stimulate the patient’s appetite and to limit or avoid parenteral or enteral nutrition. Peled types up personalized menus, complete with graphics, when

necessary. If a patient comes to the hospital from another country and cannot speak English, the chef has the menu translated into the patient’s language with each item numbered. The staff has a coordinating menu in English, with the items numbered in the same order. The patient simply has to ask for the number of the menu item in order to get the desired food.

Chef Peled provides advice to caregivers on how to make fresh fruits and vegetables safe for people who are on antimicrobial diets and cannot have fresh fruits and vegetables. She advises them to use a thermometer so they can blanch the foods for 1 minute in water of 180°, then plunge the food in ice water to stop the cooking. The result will be slightly softer than when totally raw, but the fruit or vegetable will still be appealingly whole.

The mother of a young daughter, Chef Peled is especially affected by the pediatric patients and has devised ways to make their food appealing and fun.^{5,6} She caters to patients whose sense of taste has changed due to chemotherapy and who

can only taste something if it is bitter, salty, or lemony. She says, “I’ll concentrate on what they *can* taste rather than what they can’t, and make it taste like that. Kids love salt and vinegar flavored potato chips, so I know that’s what they can taste. I’ll use vinegar for marinating and also use vinegar reductions for

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saucers.” She created a lemon pizza for patients who can only taste lemon, and she uses turkey and a little liquid smoke flavor to replicate bacon.

SMALLER IS BETTER

Chef Peled also likes to miniaturize items that are usually unappetizing when served full size to a sick child, so a plate might consist of mini-kebabs and small potatoes stuffed with broccoli and sour cream. Children in the hospital might have a dinner of a few small foods on one plate, accompanied by a shot glass of gazpacho crammed with pureed vegetables. Pureed vegetables are also hidden in Chef Peled’s pasta sauce, which she uses for everything from pizza to miniature calzones stuffed with all sorts of good nutritional fillings.

Although Memorial Sloan-Kettering has an extraordinary kitchen and a large staff, Chef Peled often uses her mobile kitchen to cook or bake with the patients in order to stimulate their interest in food. She gives cooking lessons of her tips and techniques to caregivers. A wall in her office is plastered with handmade thank-you cards from her young patients and notes from their grateful parents. And, she is a proponent of the take-out

A sample of Pnina Peled’s recipes

Chef Peled’s recipes featured on the “Rachael Ray Show,” aired on April 21, 2011.

- **Antipasti skewers**
www.rachaelrayshow.com/food/recipes/antipasti-skewers/
- **Chicken kebabs**
www.rachaelrayshow.com/food/recipes/chicken-kebabs/
- **Basic pizza dough**
www.rachaelrayshow.com/food/recipes/basic-pizza-dough/
- **Mini calzones**
www.rachaelrayshow.com/food/recipes/mini-calzones/
- **Mini quesadillas**
www.rachaelrayshow.com/food/recipes/mini-quesadillas/
- **Mini stuffed baked potatoes**
www.rachaelrayshow.com/food/recipes/mini-stuffed-baked-potatoes/
- **Tahini sauce**
www.rachaelrayshow.com/food/recipes/tahini-sauce/

and unusual container philosophy: she uses her stash to serve patients their special-request foods in pizza boxes, fast food and Chinese food take-out containers, milkshake cups, or other unique receptacles. The results are familiar, fun and appealing—and are eaten!

This chef has a wonderful philosophy about making hospital food delicious: “If any place needs nutritious food that people enjoy eating, it’s a hospital. If I know I can make that happen, why would I say no?” ■

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