

Southlake challenges ideas of hospital food with complete culinary transformation



The mere mention of "hospital food" can conjure up, for some, images of a mushy, beige blandness – but that idea has been thoroughly challenged by Southlake Health in a complete transformation of their culinary experience for patients, their families, and staff alike.

Gone are the days of pre-made, warmed-up fare. In are scratch-made recipes designed to meet the individual nutritional and cultural needs of those they serve.

New mealtime experiences were celebrated at the Newmarket-based hospital last week, the culmination of a project that began in 2023, guided by both patient needs and survey feedback.

The first step was the opening of Southlake's Carvery & Bakery, which features fresh-roasted carved meats prepared on site, fresh salads, soups and sandwiches and more. The next step was the re-opening of the fully-renovated on-site Subway location, followed by the launch of online ordering, a refreshed patio, full-service Starbucks and Tim Hortons locations, and, in December of last year, the opening of Aquene Café, the hospital's main cafeteria.

The newly-expanded cafeteria now includes the Chef's Table, offering a scratch-made rotating menu, a market with grab-and-go fare, Roots & Seeds, which serves up customizable bowls and wraps, pizzeria San Marzano, and Grill & Go, described as "a contemporary dining experience."

Helping Southlake Health realize their gourmet goals was food service company Compass Group Canada.

Having multiple options on-site allows the hospital to meet the needs of everyone they serve, and it also gives them additional flexibility to meet individual nutritional needs – an essential component of recovery.

"With patients, as part of that healing journey, that recovery piece, overall meal consumption is very important, right?" says Brielle Perl, Dietician and Director of Marketing, Nutrition and Support, with Compass. "It's the fuel to our body to help our patients heal. For all of our main entrees, we had a protein goal, working with our culinary team to ensure we had over 20 grams of protein in each of our entrees, including breakfast. Certainly for lunch and dinner, those are easier targets to meet, but at breakfast time, we wanted to offer a hearty meal as well as ensure we had the appropriate amount of calories on our menus as well. It was a collaborative approach with the clinical dieticians at the hospital, as well as our culinary team with Compass, to really ensure that we're providing nutrient-adequate meals to our patients to get them back on their feet and back to their everyday lives outside our hospital walls.

“When we collaborated with Southlake, we really looked at the community, talked about the nutritional background of the menu, but we also looked at the diversity of the culture within the community. That allowed us the flexibility to really create a menu that was specific to Southlake. Looking at the diversity [we asked], ‘What do they want to eat?’ If we put something in front of them, it could have 100 grams of protein, but if they don’t consume it, they don’t really get the protein and they don’t get the benefit for that healing process.”

Through this feedback, such dishes as the Asian-inspired chicken congee and a Persian-influenced koobideh, a type of lamb kebab, have found their place on the menu among North American favourites.

Feedback from patients, families and staff alike, adds Johnny Grajcar, Southlake’s Director of Support Services, helped them reimagine their menu from all points of view.

“One [piece of feedback] that comes to mind was anecdotal feedback around when you’re in the hospital and you’re taking medication, your tastebuds aren’t exactly the same,” he says. “Understanding that what you like traditionally might change and evolve. I think that our flexibility and our work with our dieticians allowed for more of that specified opportunity.”

“A survey was put out and we had 2,000 respondents. Top of the list was we needed to have a Starbucks, so we needed to figure out how we could fit that into our new system. Then it was more updated menu offerings in our other locations other than our franchise table. The retail side started earlier than the patient side? the patient side started in December of last year.”

After the patient side began to roll out, Grajcar says one particular piece of feedback underscored that they were on the right track.

“We actually had a former chef be one of our patients and talking about working in an industry and understanding how challenging it can be. They were very much surprised. It was along the lines of ‘forget hospital food, this was fantastic for any type of food.’”

Adds Perl: “Being a chef, we’re very difficult, so the fact that somebody was in the hospital and in that moment wanted to make sure we got that feedback, we hang it on the wall with pride. Our goal really was taking that negative stigma away from hospital food. People always think [hospital food] is bland and ‘I’m eating for the sake of eating,’ where we really took the approach of that restaurant-style quality and bringing it to our patients.”

“The fact that we had somebody that had been in the industry? say how much they enjoyed it, that the quality stood out to them, really made a difference to ourselves.”

From the retail perspective, Jennie Baker, Compass’ Regional Director of Retail Operations, said it was all about “creating an oasis.”

“We’ve really focused on enhancing the space as well to create that atmosphere where the teams, whether it’s a staff member or a family member can come kind of rest, refuel and recharge and then go back out, whether they’re caring for a loved one or going back to their shift,” says Baker. “We take the model where every bite brings you home. It gives you that comfort level of food, but then also offering that elevated dining experience with culinary chef inspired menus and operations.”

By Brock Weir
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