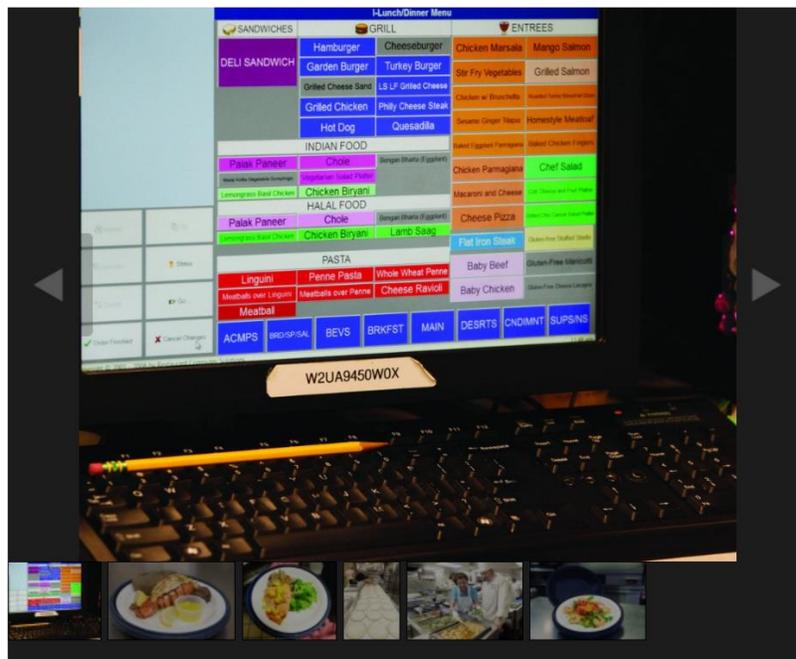


The New Culinary Frontier: Hospital Food



A patient's meal choices are displayed for nutritionists on a computer screen at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital. (Amanda Brown/For Inside Jersey)
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After a career in health care, retired pediatric nurse Anne Hulsizer thought she knew all about hospital food. For years, she had watched food trays go into patient rooms, and later saw those same trays come out -- often with much of the meal still on the plate.

"Basically, it was the vegetables that were left," Hulsizer says. "They were dead. Overcooked. Unappetizing. Part of the problem was that the trays had usually been left out on the carts for a long time until the (nursing) staff had time to deliver them."

A lot of us are on this journey to provide not only top-quality care, but also top-quality patient experience," Dawn Cascio, director of food services at The Valley Hospital

So when the 71-year-old Bloomingdale resident recently became a patient at [The Valley Hospital](#) in Ridgewood, she got a shock at mealtime.

"I had the surprise of my life when I got shrimp pilaf for dinner," Hulsizer says. "Who in heaven's name has ever heard of a hospital serving shrimp pilaf? The surprise was not just that it was delicious, but that it was even on the menu at all."

CULINARY CHOPS FOR HEALTH CARE

When John Graziano was a student at The Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y., he dreamed of doing many things as a chef. Working in a hospital was not one of them. "It never crossed my mind when I was in school," says Graziano, 44, who has been the executive chef/manager at The Valley Hospital in Ridgewood for the past five years. He'd previously spent 20 years working long hours, as well as many weekends and holidays, in catering, hotels, restaurants and on cruise ships. But with a wife and three children, a hospital position began to look more attractive. "Health care was very open to quality time with the family," he says. "At a hospital, it's more of a 40-hour week and a management job. Plus, I get full benefits, sick time and a 401(k). All of that is unheard of in the restaurant world."

Graziano is not alone in taking his culinary expertise into such a setting. As health care reform has taken hold, an increasing number of chefs with formal training have become an integral part of food services in hospitals determined to improve their patient satisfaction scores. For these chefs, compensation also is a consideration, with starting salaries said to range from \$70,000 to \$95,000 a year. Graziano says the range can be "gigantic," but notes that salaries are often tied to the volume of business. "In hospitals, you are dealing with a lot more money," he says. "So chances are that you can be paid better than in a restaurant that doesn't generate as much business." Even so, recruiting chefs -- especially recent graduates -- to work in health care can be difficult, says Brian Salter, senior corporate executive chef for Morrison Healthcare's East Coast properties. Salter, who is also a formally trained chef, recruits for hospitals up and down the East Coast.

"**People typically don't** go to culinary school to work in a hospital," he says. "But when you make the change to work inside a hospital, you know you have the ability to affect patients' lives with the food you prepare." At University Medical Center of Princeton at Plainsboro, executive chef Robert Jackson is in charge of patient meals, catering and the operation of the hospital cafeteria, which the center calls its restaurant. A chef for 27 years, Jackson has spent the past 10 years working in a health care setting. Jackson says he understands that people have high expectations

when they enter a hospital, and that those expectations extend to the food they eat and the service they receive. For that reason, he says, he sets the bar high for himself and for his staff. "I want this hospital to be like the Ritz-Carlton when it comes to food service," he says.

Hulsizer was also impressed to find her meal orders taken bedside by a dietary staff member, with a hand-held computer, who offered suggestions as if she were in a restaurant. And she loved that the person who delivered her tray removed the cover and asked if she wanted anything else.

"It wasn't just the food," she says. "The experience was the food service as well. It was great PR."

If Hulsizer was astonished, it is likely because it has been a while since she was in a hospital at mealtime. During the past decade, hospitals across the country have been working to provide their patients, staff and visitors with better tasting, healthier food and better customer service.

A growing number are replacing old-style kitchen production managers with trained chefs, who make low-fat meals from recipes that substitute herbs and spices for salt, and who develop menus that incorporate locally grown produce and antibiotic-free meats.

Hospitals have also been revamping their kitchens, so that patients can order meals like room service -- any time of the day or night. Many have transformed their cafeterias into bistro-style operations for employees, too.

New Jersey hospitals are no exception. Last June, state medical centers proved to be in the forefront of providing good-tasting, nutritious meals.

That's when chefs from The Valley Hospital and [Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital](#), in New Brunswick, placed first and second, respectively, in a national culinary competition sponsored by the [Association for Healthcare Foodservice](#) (AHF), an industry trade association, at its annual conference in Dallas. A third New Jersey hospital, [Overlook Medical Center](#) in Summit, was among the five hospitals in the final competition.

Both Valley and Robert Wood Johnson now serve the award-winning recipes in their cafeterias.

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The trend toward better tasting and more nutritious hospital food is being driven by health care reform and the desire for greater patient satisfaction, which helps determine reimbursement rates.

Hospitals also believe that patients, employees and visitors increasingly appreciate the effort.

"The hospital industry is becoming so competitive, and everyone is trying to provide the best service in every area," says Dawn Cascio, director of food services at The Valley Hospital. The facility also is committed to sustainability and keeps as many as 60,000 to 80,000 honeybees in eight rooftop hives. The harvested honey is used in recipes, while wax from the hives is made into products, such as lip balm, provided to patients.

"A lot of us are on this journey to provide not only top-quality care, but also top-quality patient experience," she says. "It's an ongoing process, but good food, and food service, is definitely part of that."

To be sure, hospital food service operations don't all look alike.

Healthy food choices can mean different things to different hospitals, says Peggy O'Neill, vice president of nutrition and wellness at Atlanta-based Morrison Healthcare, a national food and nutrition services company that supplies products to a number of New Jersey hospitals.

"Some hospitals will go to extremes and want to remove all sugary beverages from the cafeteria," she says. "We have other accounts where they feel they've provided healthier snacks if you don't see candy bars at the cash registers. It varies, but the important thing is that everyone is paying more attention to healthy food choices."

[Morristown Medical Center](#) in Morristown continues to deliver patient meals on a set schedule, over three shifts a day, as it studies how best to implement room service for patients in the 703-bed hospital.

But Morristown has made numerous other changes. Its 11 chefs and cooks represent 10 nations, and their knowledge of international cuisine has been incorporated into the food that is served. Dishes are baked rather than fried and much less salt is used; healthier snacks have replaced chocolate bars in the vending machines; and the employee cafeteria includes a "Healthy Corner," at which employees can order food that is prepared while they wait.

"It's all about the healing environment," says Deborah Visconi, director of food operations at Morristown, which serves an ethnically diverse community. "Cultural food and nutrition are an important part of how patients heal. It's more than whether a patient is able to order a hamburger or Cheerios for breakfast, but about respecting individual choices, desires and cultural differences to help in the healing process."

Hospitals have found that while the initial effort involved in retooling a kitchen or ramping up a cafeteria operation can be significant, so can the rewards.

At Valley, executive chef John Graziano, whose Tex-Mex chicken and waffles entry won top honors at the AHF competition, says the food service operation has become more efficient.

"Because we make everything from scratch, we utilize 100 percent of what we bring in," he says. The hospital orders locally, with more frequent deliveries, Graziano says, so "we've eliminated the processing cost. I also have a much better idea of how much food I will use when I order." Hospitals also have found that their cafeterias can be more profitable.

At RWJUH -- a busy, 610-bed, teaching hospital that serves about 5,000 meals a day -- food and nutrition director Tony Almeida says 70 percent of his job involves serving employees and visitors in the cafeteria, an activity that generated about \$5.4 million in sales in 2015.

At midday recently, both the kitchen and cafeteria at RWJUH were bustling. In the kitchen, workers were making sure individually prepared meals were ready to be delivered to patients within 45 minutes of being ordered. In the cafeteria just off the hospital lobby, hundreds of people were purchasing food that had either been prepared earlier in the kitchen or was being cooked to order at special stations.

One of the stations, which until recently only prepared pizza, now offers five options -- Greek, Mexican, dim sum, salads and pizza (flat, thin or traditional) -- on a rotating basis.

Almeida says that after diversifying the menu at this station, sales and volume increased 300 percent. "Outside our doors, within a 5-minute walk, are about 40 restaurants," he says. "The competition keeps us on our toes. What we want to do is keep our employees here, keep them well-fed and keep our prices reasonable."

"We also have ... literally hundreds of people come in to visit patients, or for things like same-day testing," he says. "We run a busy operation and we've been really successful. In general, our sales have been going up 5 percent to 10 percent a year."

As demand evolves, hospital food service operations will continue to adapt.

At [University Medical Center of Princeton at Plainsboro](#), patients soon will be able to order food from a menu while they wait to be seen.

"We plan to do this because we believe many people coming in are headed for a hospital bed," says Lesha Colin, director of food service. "It's a very busy area."

And at [Virtua](#) in Marlton, cafeteria hours and kiosk services will be expanding in all three of the system's hospitals -- plus, it may soon be possible for patients and staff to order meals through an app on their smartphones.

"The thing to realize is that food is looked upon like all business decisions," says Stephen Boyle, assistant vice president of hospitality services for Virtua. "You look at the data, you analyze it and you recognize the impact a decision can have on the patient and guests' experiences."

After 30 years in hospital food service, Morristown's Visconi says she looks forward to the continuing evolution of the work she does.

"Food service is the hidden gem in the hospital," she says. "It's an exciting time to be involved in it."