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## Making hospital cuisine green

*St. Luke's cafeteria debuts winter menu, every meal cooked from scratch*

Zac Stone and Dave Aspin only have a couple minutes left. Aspin quickly drizzles a zigzag of glaze over the maple/soy-marinated pork chops and carries the plate from the kitchen to the serving area where four other hot meals sit in a row, each prepared by two- and three-member teams.

Halibut topped with orange, pineapple and cilantro salsa. Pork loins rubbed with a brown sugar, garlic powder and coriander mixture. Breakfast burritos. Pecan-crusting tilapia. And each with a side dish, such as apple salad, braised mustard greens or lentil salad with sautéed onions and carrots, and apple cider.

Teams had an hour and a half to prepare their meals, starting from scratch and using fresh ingredients like garlic cloves and fresh basil. No powder seasonings in shakers.

The frantic-paced kitchen scene resembles that of a cooking reality show or a bustling high-end restaurant, but is neither. The 14-person cafeteria staff at St. Luke's Wood River Medical Center is practicing preparation of the hospital's first "Green Cuisine" winter menu in a timed effort, a day before the menu's debut on Sunday, Nov. 8.

The hospital revolutionized its cafeteria earlier this year, switching from pre-prepared meals to cooking from scratch using fresh fruits, vegetables and meat from locally raised livestock. The hospital dubbed it "Green Cuisine," and launched its first menu in May.

Offerings changed on Nov. 8 because each seasonal menu focuses on local foods produced during that time of year. Sherrie Pond, St. Luke's nutritional services manager, said winter means a lot of locally grown grains, but obviously some things must come from out of state, like fruits and some fish. She said when the hospital looks for foods, it sets its sights in expanding radii, first searching within 150 miles, then Idaho and lastly the Northwest.

Pond, who oversees kitchen and cafeteria operations, said some items like avocado are not locally available at any time of year. Changing to healthier foods was only the first challenge for St. Luke's. Much more was needed to make Green Cuisine permanent, including facility changes, keeping costs reasonable and teaching the cooks how to do more than merely cook.

Zac Stone, 15, has been working in the St. Luke's cafeteria for more than a year and said he used to just take frozen meals out of a freezer and heat them in an oven.

There's no more of that. With Green Cuisine, cooks have had to learn something they didn't need before—chef skills. Those include knife handling, searing, and reading recipes, making them more like chefs and less like short-order cooks.

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The hospital didn't do this on its own but hired consulting company Sustainable Food Systems for guidance. John Turenne, president and founder, said the company has led about 25 hospitals and schools through the voluntary change of offering healthier meals.

To note the change, one merely needs to walk to the back of St. Luke's kitchen where two walk-in freezers and two walk-in refrigerators formerly lined the walls. Since the hospital doesn't use frozen meals anymore, it switched one of the freezers to a fridge for storing dairy products like milk delivered from Cloverleaf Creamery in Buhl and cheese from Ballard Family Dairy and Cheese in Gooding.

Even with a trio of walk-in refrigerators, Pond said finding room for fresh produce in the two others can be a challenge. Shelves are stacked full with weekly shipments of squash, potatoes, green onions, rainbow carrots, peaches, pears, spinach and much more.

And the storage room has no more canned vegetables or soups. Even the usually dried ingredients like ginger, basil and cilantro are fresh.

### *Veering from the norm*

Hospitals have a reputation for providing unhealthy food, and up to a year ago, St. Luke's Wood River was no different, according to St. Luke's clinical dietitian Becky McCarver.

She said the kitchen previously received 98 percent of its food from one national vendor and used a lot of processed food, and many employees refused to eat at the cafeteria. And the kitchen had just been granted approval for a second fryer.

"That was a step in the wrong direction," she said.

McCarver said the kitchen used to offer chicken fried steak. She said a person once made the comment, "I can have my heart attack here, and everything will be all right."

McCarver said the hospital realized that its cafeteria's food was part of the problem and decided to stray from the hospital norm.

"What could be more closely related to health than what we eat?" McCarver asked.

In fall 2008, the hospital discovered Sustainable Food Systems and contracted the three-year-old company to usher in the switch. Turenne visited in December to assess the existing program and recommended changes.

Turenne said he was in the hospital's position not long ago when he worked as executive chef for Yale University, serving about 12,000 meals every day, and the emphasis was on getting as much food out as "cheaply" as possible.

"I was part of the machine, part of the problem," he said.

Turenne said that in the past 25 years that he's worked in the food service industry, decisions have been made for the sake of money, not health.

"The food service industry created a monster in places where we need the best food—hospitals and schools," he said. "To me, it's mind boggling."

Turenne said Yale decided to offer healthier food in one of its 12 dining halls—where 1,100 meals are served a day—and delegated the task to him.

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"When we became successful ... all the other dining halls started asking, 'What about us?'" Turenne said. "We eventually started to train the others to do the same."

Turenne later left Yale and started his own company to spread the food service renaissance to other institutions.

### *Costs don't have to increase*

Turenne said hospitals and schools are "beginning to wake up slowly but surely," but the perception that fresh, healthier food costs more often keeps institutions from committing to change, as does Turenne's suggestion to get rid of popular treats like soda and bacon.

"They say, 'But bacon and soda are our highest revenue makers,'" Turenne said. "But what's the cost? God knows, places like hospitals and schools have tremendous impacts on health."

St. Luke's Wood River employee Jo Dee Alverson has been a liaison between the hospital administration and Green Cuisine's lead team. She said the administration was, at first, worried about money, thinking costs would increase.

Pond said that hasn't been the case. She said operating and food costs haven't increased despite more work required per meal and ordering from local vendors like Carey-based Lava Lake Lamb, Big Wood Bread Co. in Ketchum, and Idaho Trout Co.

She said that's possible because the cafeteria has sacrificed its number of food options for better quality. Instead of offering two menus for its 180 meals purchased a day, as it had previously done, St. Luke's now only offers one lunch menu daily. There are two menus but not at the same time. They alternate on a weekly basis.

Pond said buying in bulk has also kept food costs low, as has buying as many things unprocessed as possible. For example, St. Luke's has switched coffee suppliers and now gets whole beans from Hailey Coffee Co. instead of ground beans from Seattle's Best.

And St. Luke's has completely cut out unhealthy things like trans fat, MSG and some artificial sweeteners. But soda is still available. Pond said St. Luke's is about to offer a healthier soda alternative called Izze, a sparkling juice, and will see if people take to it.

But, Turenne said, people's health isn't the only issue at hand. The environment's health is also a concern, the biggest aspect of that being how far food must travel. By getting supplies from inside the valley, carbon emissions are decreased. "It's about understanding the stories behind the food," Turenne said.

Tonia Bruess, St. Luke's marketing and public relations coordinator, said the ultimate hope is that Green Cuisine will spark something larger for its patients, physicians and anyone stopping in for a meal. Maybe, they'll decide they like mustard greens, lentils or halibut.

"Who knows what people eat at home after coming here," Bruess said, "but maybe that'll change."

And maybe others beside patients and hospital staff will stop in for a meal. Turenne said a bicyclist riding by a few days ago wandered in. "He said, 'I can't believe this is hospital food—it tastes like a restaurant,'" Turenne said.