

Major Renovation Transforms Albright Dining Hall

The newly renovated Campus Center Dining Hall at Albright College in Reading, Pa., addressed many challenges posed to the school's nearly 50-year-old dining hall. With this redesigned facility, foodservice options, delivery and overall atmosphere have all been successfully upgraded.

"It is a renovation, basically a gut and rebuild," said William Wood, vice president for Administrative and Financial Services with the college. "It was built in 1966 and some of the equipment was still from then. We have had expansions, but never really a major renovation. We used a consultant who, when he first saw the dining hall, was reminded of an army mess hall. It was the old classic, take your tray and walk through the line and the serving ladies will dish it out for you. Besides replacing old equipment, we wanted a more contemporary college dining facility."

The decision for the renovation was made when Aramark became the campus foodservice provider in July 2011. "We entered into the relationship with Aramark, because we had been self-op previously, and that was one of the things that we decided together, that the dining hall needed help," he



said. "The planning for the renovation started in around November of that year."

The pre-renovated dining hall was not something the school was very proud of. "When the admissions group would do tours on campus, prior to renovations, the dining hall was very much an eyesore," said Kristina Coble, general manager of Dining Services with Aramark. "They did a little bit of a drive-by because it was so dated. It wasn't meeting what student expectations were. I think this was an overall goal for the college to really improve the overall operations and our ability to serve great food."

Student surveys were done even before Aramark was brought on board. "From the beginning, when Albright was exploring outsourcing, there were a lot of surveys and focus



groups with the students," she said. "Obviously, there were a lot of emotions tied into that, but I think that the feedback the college got during that time about the current food services was passed on to us. We knew what the challenge would be, and what the students were looking for."

The surveys revealed that one of the main priorities was the dining area. "We had 70 eight-tops, and they all had vinyl table cloths on them," said Coble. "That was primarily because the space was cross-utilized for banquets for annual events. They were really trapped into inefficient seating, a poor atmosphere, and it wasn't really a place for them to want to socialize with their friends."

Only having tables for eight also made it difficult for those eating alone. "That was also a problem, because there are always going to be loners," said Wood. "When you had nothing but eight-tops, it made it a little uncomfortable. In the redesign, there are larger tables, but there are also some booths and high-tops, so one or two diners can feel comfortable eating. It is a friendlier atmosphere, more inclusive."

The seating area also features other elements enjoyed by the students. "I think we met the needs of every group and demographic on campus," said Coble. "We have a private dining room that our sororities will have parties or meetings in. There is seating along the windows with power for electronic devices. We have a new sound system and projectors. We are able to show movies and things like that."

Although the seating area was important, the emphasis was on the food. "What we really worked hard on, and the emphasis of the budget we had, was to have a state-of-the-art kitchen that would last another 40 years, really bring the food closer to the students, and make it as fresh as it could be," she said. "Ninety percent of all the preparations are out front and 10 percent in the back, for a little bit of catering and some other types of food handling."

"One of the things that we emphasized is the kitchen — it is,



after all, all about the food,"

said Wood. "The architect allowed us to put a lot of the dollars into the kitchen. She was able to take the remaining dollars and very efficiently and effectively make the aesthetics

something that is attractive and compelling, but allowed us to really put in a kitchen that can do a good job on the food side. The previous issue was all back of the house, very archaic. They had steam tables that they were dishing out. That is all gone and went to the food station approach with flipping the burgers where they can see them."

The main feature of the server is the cooking suite. "We took that inspiration from the University of Rochester, where they have a cooking suite that also opens up into the kitchen," said Coble. "Our suite features our rotisserie station and our Chef's Table. But you can glance all the way back to the kitchen to see the walk-ins and freezer and the whole operation."

The station expands from the back of the house out. "We feature a lot of the comfort foods, the more traditional-type items," she said. "That station shares the Mongolian Grill with the chef's table."

The rotisserie was brought in to have another sensory item. "We added it for the visual, but also to relieve some of the pressure on the convection ovens in the back," said Coble. "I also have a long-term vision of employees picking up a rotisserie chicken dinner on certain nights of the week."

Many international cuisines are featured at the Chef's Table. "Yesterday we had shrimp Pad Thai," she said. "We do a lot of Indian and other international foods. People have warmed up to those dishes. There are a percentage of students who come from those cultural backgrounds, and I think that they participate more in the dining program, because they can see things they are familiar with."

Another station, The Grill, has the



ability for charbroiled and flat top items. "There is a double fryer, refrigeration, freezer and pull-out drawers," said Coble. "All of our stations were built so that they could become anything. The area that says 'The Grill,' could be changed at night to feature some of our comfort foods from rotisserie. They are very versatile."

In the middle of the station is a cold well for all of the vegetable toppings. "We keep it healthy, so diners can get some side salads, some more veggies in with those items," she said. "That seems to be working well."

The Bakery, one of Coble's favorites, is a new addition from the previous dining halls, "One of the things I really like

is our bakery station, because we never really had a bakery station," she said. "We'd put out cookies or brownies, or jars of different things at stations, but we now have a full-time baker at lunch and dinner who prepares things at the station."

The variety of dessert items has quadrupled compared to the old facility. "Now, we have crepes on Fridays, which we had started the year prior," said Coble. "We have a weekly showcase on Wednesdays. The dessert station is a stress reliever. Students treat themselves because they work so hard in class. That is one of the focal points as well. You can see all of the baked goods coming out of the oven. It is really nice."

The Bakery features a double convection oven, mixers and

refrigeration. "Then we have a case that is very much like a retail case," she said. "The front is open for them to grab parfaits and then the top has a showcase on there for cookies and things."

One of the most popular stations is The Deli. "Students can customize their order from A-Z," said Coble. "We have two panini grills there. Most of our students love wraps and they love to have them grilled."

Another reason for its popularity is the self-service option. "We don't have schedules at Albright where the classes sporadically get out," she said. "They all get out at the exact same time. On those days, we have had to add a self-serve deli bar or a salad bar, just to get the demand for sandwiches there for the students so they can back to class, and in and out. Sometimes, our deli has anywhere from three to four people working in it, just to get them in and out for speed of service."

For students with various allergies and intolerances, there is 'Sensitivities.' "That is where we offer our gluten-free foods and a lot of different products that help folks with food intolerances," said Coble. "At that station, we are able to take an item off the menu, and localize the recipe to prepare it gluten-free for anyone with celiac disease. That is nice, because if their friends have tacos, they can have tacos, too."

The centerpiece of the servery is the Wood Stone oven. "It is like the little fireplace," she said. "In the winter, everyone wants to sit around closer to it and the visual is awesome. Right now, we do a lot more of the pizzas during the day, and we do a lot more pasta at night. We are changing that up, too. There are certain nights of the week that we do pizza now. We are trying to make it as unpredictable as possible to appease everyone. Variety is one of the things that we battle with."

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The Wood Stone oven is something that Coble insisted on. "I really felt that the brick oven was key to make sure the students were very satisfied. From an operational perspective, it really helps us balance out the cost of the added variety. Particularly in our salad bar and other areas, but we have added so many more items, luckily, they are directed toward pizza, which one of our least expensive items."

The Island is a large salad and nature bar. "We call it the Produce Market," said Coble. "On the corner of that is Farm-2Fork, where we feature our vegetarian items, as well as soup. The island is another focal point when you first walk in."

A major part of the stations is the prepared-to-order nature of the food. "They get to pick their ingredients and assemble them and be a part of the process," she said. "One of the big things is just the sensory aspect of watching people prepare the food for you. They really enjoy being a part of that. During peak periods, if there is a little bit of a line, at least they have entertainment to watch and be a part of it."

The students have noticed the difference — perhaps more than there actually is. "One of the funny things I noticed when we first opened the new facility was that the students would come up to Kristine and say, 'Why does the food taste better?'" said Wood.

"We giggled over that, but it is just bringing the food closer," said Coble. "If a rush of students gets out of class, the cook can see the front door and quickly draw up a



batch of fries and it is fresh. We don't have hot boxes. We have maybe five little Alto-Shaams just to hold a batch of mashed potatoes, but we really do just cook to order. That takes a lot of balance, too, and a lot of management."

When working on equipment planning with Colburn and Guyette, foodservice designers and consultants, they wanted to make sure that labor was a major consideration. "One of the things we had to balance out was how to save on labor and add it to benefit the students," she said. "We added ice machines that feed through the ceiling to our beverage station. That eliminated one position so that we could afford to have a baker. There is a lot of efficiency, even in our dish room because we have an accumulator and it just makes it much more streamlined. We were able to spend our money wisely in other areas to benefit the students."

Something that Coble is very proud of is the fact that the entire renovation was completed in only two and a half months. "We moved out on graduation morning and demolition started as soon as we got out the backdoor. It was an amazing process."

During the down time, they still had to feed summer campers. "We worked with Mobile Kitchens out of Alabama," she said. "That was interesting because midway through designing the facility, we were still trying to identify how we were going to feed the kids in the camp — in a tent? Luckily, the college had just acquired a large warehouse facility down the street. We got the mobile kitchen, and we worked with the health department on how to set up our operations, and what that facility offered. It worked really well."

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