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**FOODSERVICE FOCUS  
OPPORTUNITIES IN  
SENIOR COMMUNITIES,  
HOSPITALS,  
AND MEAL KITS**

## **RESTAURANT- TRANSFORMING TECH**

*Pictured (left to right) Luke Schlueter,  
Michael Farid, Kale Rogers, Sam Benson, Brady Knight,  
chef Daniel Boulud, Spyce*

**CHEESES FROM  
THE HEARTLAND**





# The New Taste of Senior Dining

Senior living and hospital foodservice operations are upping their game to appeal to more discerning older adults.

BY DENISE SHOUKAS

**M**ore so than any generation before them, aging Baby Boomers are causing a monumental shift in the way senior living professionals are thinking about dining services. Estimated to number 72 million in 2019, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, Baby Boomers possess the proclivity to elevate the business of aging to a new level.

When it comes to choosing a senior community, they expect more, especially when it comes to food. They want all-day dining, restaurant-style menus, retail cafes, local sourcing, fresh produce, fully stocked pantries with cereal and snacks, and chef-driven meals. Facilities that don't put food first stand to lose.

Sharon Olson, executive director of Culinary Visions, a Chicago-based foodservice research and forecasting firm, says, "Those who are evaluating senior living environments for themselves or a loved one are often interested in the nutritional content and quality of ingredients. Specialty foods for

foodservice that have unique nutritional characteristics and clean ingredient statements are likely to be well received." She also stresses that maintaining connection to friends and family is important. "Over 90 percent of those we surveyed said it was important that they had food that made them proud to invite their family and friends to dine with them."

"Food is a highly valued pastime for aging Baby Boomers," says Lori Bitter, founder of California-based consultancy group The Business of Aging, who consults, researches, and develops strategies for companies seeking to engage with mature consumers. And they have pur-



chasing power to back up those desires: 60 percent of Baby Boomers purchase specialty foods, according to the SFA's "State of the Specialty Food Industry 2018," with foodservice accounting for 21.6 percent of overall sales.

### Breaking the Mold

"The opportunity for specialty food producers in this market segment is wide open," says Todd Lindsay, director of business development for Glendale Senior Dining in New Hampshire, which partners with 30 facilities that range from independent living to critical care. A recent survey from Culinary Visions of 500 senior consumers older than 55, shows that seniors want food cooked to order, which is where foodservice-size specialty foods can make an operation run smoothly and guarantee consistent, delicious results. And while healthy eating is important to them, Bitter confirms, "they're not willing to trade off taste for it."

"There's no question that aging Baby Boomers have different expectations than generations out in front of them," says Lindsay. "They're educated, wealthy, and well-traveled. They want vegan, vegetarian, organic, sushi, and power bowls, branded items, and a community that offers retail operations. They want it all."

Bitter notices a notable shift in the new 50+ communities. "These country club amenity communities used to be surrounded by golf courses, but builders find people don't want that anymore. So, they asked, 'what else?'" In lieu of golf, Trilogy at The Vineyards in Brentwood, Calif., offers a demo kitchen, a restaurant, food delivery, and outdoor dining. "They even have Abbey's Gourmet Studio for special occasions from two to 40 people with culinary-centric experiences like cocktail parties or winemaker dinners," notes Bitter.

"It used to be that senior living would plan a calendar and you went if the event interested you. Now you provide a beautiful space and the residents determine what they want to do, like a weekly cooking club or wine club." For traditional senior living, Bitter sees the challenge as, "how do you offer choice?"

Lindsay finds that residents love seeing local products. Paula Lambert of The Mozzarella Company, maker of award-winning cheeses, says, "We sell to some of these types of facilities, which are becoming more prevalent in Dallas," and she's noticed that "some well-trained chefs are now working in them rather than restaurants because as the chefs and their families are aging, the chefs like more of the 9-to-5 lifestyle than the hectic late hours of restaurants."

In the same way they sourced ingredients for their restaurant work, they're sourcing high-quality food to meet the needs of aging Boomers. But shifting the industry is anything but straightforward. "What works in one place will not work in another," notes Lindsay. Glendale tailors its offerings to what the residents in each facility like. If residents want local, quality coffee, Lindsay searches far and

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wide for vendors of distinction. "Our approach is the opposite of the rest of the industry. They want to see how much they can get on one truck from one vendor. And that's convenient, but not what today's residents are looking for." For example, they have fresh fish delivered from Portsmouth to its other New Hampshire locations. "If you or I were sitting at a table in Laconia and wanted fresh diver scallops from Portsmouth, we could have that," he says.

"When we buy perishable, we try to keep it from a 100-mile radius. Because of seasonality, that makes it hard, but we're not going to buy apples from Washington state because we have delicious apples grown in New England," he adds. Lindsay is on mark, as a recent Culinary Visions survey showed that 72 percent of seniors would like their senior living communities to incorporate local produce in their dining menus.

"You want a program where you can attract Baby Boomers to these communities and satisfy those that have been there for 25 years already. We get to push the envelope," Lindsay observes. Glendale is opening its first all-day dining facility in the first quarter of this year. "It will be open from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Residents can go in anytime and have anything they want," he says. Retail operations satisfy many needs. "We're keeping up with the same level of retailer you'll find on the street, so residents won't feel the difference from walking into a Starbucks," he adds, noting this is particularly accomplished by stocking the same quality and variety of branded items.

### Trained Chefs Up the Ante

Having a chef on-premise—who is visible and accessible—can be another important aspect of senior community life because chefs are trusted. "A chef who works in an office preparing menus is far less likely to have an impact than one who is visible to residents in the dining room and able to talk knowledgeably about the ingredients and the sourcing of particular foods," Olson asserts.

The Senior Food and Lifestyles Study, which is Culinary Visions' latest study, found that "new" seniors—those who are not



## TECHNOLOGY & THE BOOMER

Thirty percent of U.S. adults over 65 own a smartphone, while nearly one-third own a tablet and more than half own a desktop or laptop computer, according to a 2015 study by Pew Research Center. Foodservice teams have an excellent tool with which to communicate with senior residents, whether with online menus, portals to learn about producers and farmers, or nutritional information. "Seniors are likely to be very interested in the story behind the food," says Sharon Olson, executive director of Culinary Visions, a Chicago-based foodservice research and forecasting firm. "The story behind the ingredients often validates the quality and craftsmanship of the product and validates minimal processing."—D.S.



yet living in senior communities—care deeply about the quality and social nature of their dining options. Olson notes, "They shy away from anything that seems institutional and want minimally processed fresh food."

Hospitals are onboard as well, now operating more like restaurant lines, accommodating made-to-order meals for each room and rotating menus in the cafeterias. "When I started in hospital foodservice, we were asking patients to decide today what they wanted to eat tomorrow," says Liz Hollowell, UCHHealth's director of hospitality in northern Colorado, which serves an average of 450 patient meals a day and another 3,500 to 4,000 meals in the cafeteria. "We now offer room service in which patients can order what they want (within the guidelines of the diet their physician has ordered), and when they want to eat it." Everything is made fresh to order. "We have a very savvy Boomer population that wants those extra added-value services," Hollowell says. "Many of the Boomer patients have cooked over the years and want their food to be fresh, healthier, and yet comfort them."

The biggest challenge she sees is meeting the needs of patients with food allergies and providing tasty gluten-free selections, a segment that specialty foodservice manufacturers are poised to fill, with products ranging from gluten-free pancake mixes to alternative dairy products.

As in the senior community arena, Hollowell sees a different caliber of chef applying. "I just hired an executive chef whose whole career has been in restaurants. Chefs understand we are doing exciting things in hospital foodservice, and they're finding their schedule is more conducive to a family life, and healthcare offers benefits."

## Pleasing the Aging Palate

The aging palate is an important element for chefs and producers to understand. "So many things happen with the aging palate," notes Bitter, "like more or less sensitivity to salt, often driven by medications. Many also need to control fat intake." Olson adds, "Chewy and crunchy snacks might be great for younger Boomers, but these can pose a problem for older adults." But creative chefs and producers can offer solutions, whether it be a way to create creamy sauces with potatoes and vegetables, to offering meal replacement drinks that taste good, or a new image for an old favorite, like prune juice.

"The one thing to remember with Boomers is that they won't react well to being treated their age. It's essential to call out a product's characteristics in a positive way that would appeal to any generation," comments Olson. Packaging matters too: With 83 percent of seniors yet to join a senior living community saying access to snacks is important, according to Culinary Visions, supplying delicious, easy-to-open, nutritious snacks is key. "Frustration with packaging is real and often happens sooner than we think," Bitter notes, "so a design must work for everyone," she says. "Single-serve items also are ideal as appetites are smaller as you age, and because older Boomers don't want to waste anything."

Olson advises, "Easy-open packages that don't look like they were designed for seniors would definitely be a plus. But it's important not to cross the line of making a product look institutional by making the lettering on the package look too generic or utilitarian."

"These new residents are the future," says Lindsay. "The twist is to keep everyone happy, whether they're 63 or 103."

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*Denise Shoukas is a contributing editor to Specialty Food Magazine.*