

The dining habits of seniors

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In other consumer trends, Baby Boomers are reshaping conventional thinking about senior dining according to Culinary Visions® Senior Dining and Lifestyle studies. This generation is driving the pressure for higher senior living standards, particularly when it comes to food. They crave independence, culinary adventure and cultural enrichment and have no intention of compromising their lifestyles as they age.

“Senior community developers should take note of the expectations of today’s adventurous, food savvy seniors,” says Sharon Olson, executive director of Culinary Visions. “This generation of out-of-the-box thinkers is enjoying every opportunity to break the rules for senior living.”

The following insights are compiled from several Culinary Visions® studies focused on consumers 55 years and older. The specific studies referenced are: Senior Food and Lifestyles, Modern Hospitality, Catering for Food Centric Lifestyles, New World Dining, and Trend Forecasts.

Here are 5 key insights on modern seniors that will be important to senior community developers:

Elevated Interest in Entertaining

After retirement, there is more time to enjoy life which often includes entertaining. Ambiance is an essential part of the dining experience for today's new seniors who defined the restaurant industry in its growth years. In fact, 87% of those who participated in this study said quality of food and quality of atmosphere are important to them.

Senior communities that offer private dining rooms attract residents interested in continuing their active social life with ease. The vast majority (92%) said it was important to have food that they are proud to share. A private dining room where they could entertain family and friends was important to 75% of seniors surveyed.

Chefs and Dietitians Balance Health and Indulgence

The majority (63%) of the 55+ consumers surveyed consider themselves to be adventurous eaters. This generation is accustomed to restaurant dining with 62% reporting that they usually like to try new dishes and flavors when they dine out. Of those who had explored the idea of a senior community, 83% said it was important to have a chef on staff.

Yet, balancing health and indulgence is a top concern, and 77% of those considering a senior community also said it was important to have a registered dietitian on staff. Accustomed to having customization, 79% said it was important to have menus for special diets.

Focus on Fresh

The seniors surveyed are very much in agreement with consumers across other demographics when it comes to fresh food, clean labels and less additives. 87% of seniors said that eating real food with no artificial ingredients was important to them. Furthermore, 65% of senior residents interviewed agreed that these types of foods are currently available in their residence's dining menus.

Senior communities are already responding to a wide range of desires from their residents. Of the senior residents surveyed, 75% reported local produce was offered; 69% agreed that less processed foods were available; 73% reported the availability of whole grains and 67% reported that foods with healthier fats were on current menus.

Boomers Are Back on Campus

Baby Boomers are attracted to the vibrant food culture and lifestyle of college and university campuses. A comment from one of the study participants who chose a senior community on campus said, "When I retired I wanted to go back to college, learn languages, study humanities, take swimming lessons."

The vibrant food scene is particularly appealing with 85% of seniors saying they want to live in a place that has a variety of dining options like a common dining hall, restaurant and café. Convenience is also important to this new generation of seniors, with 95% saying it would be important to have a convenience retail market in the community they choose.

Going Beyond Room and Board

Senior community developers can also take some cues from innovative hotel and lodging venues to entice this new generation of seniors. When consumers over 55 years old were asked about some of their hotel preferences, 70% said they enjoyed a vibrant lobby where they could have a drink or snack.

Although the occasional convenience of room service is enjoyable, only 27% of seniors said they preferred dining in their room. The indulgence of a lavish breakfast buffet appealed to 87% of those surveyed.

Activities are a big part of life in senior communities, but cookie cutter activities are not enough. This is a generation that remembers the pleasure of a concierge and 84% of seniors surveyed said they appreciated a concierge who could make customized recommendations for them.

It's often said that Baby Boomers will die before they admit to being old. Senior community developers will be wise to keep this in mind as they feed the youthful exuberance of these new seniors.