

SENIORS HOUSING BUSINESS®

The Magazine for Seniors Housing Real Estate and Operations

February-March 2025

Putting the Active in Active Adult 20



What's on my Mind

Why Excellent Dining Is Imperative

Not simply an amenity, food-and-beverage options are integral to senior living communities and should be treated as such.

By Joe Cuticelli

The senior living industry is at a pivotal moment, with resident expectations evolving and market growth accelerating. As community developers and operators create blueprints for the future, they face the reality that dining has emerged as a critical factor as residents select — and choose to remain in — a senior living community.

Dining must therefore be treated as a strategic imperative, rather than just an amenity. Investment in food-and-beverage innovation should be on par with that of physical space design.

A recently released report from the American Seniors Housing Association (ASHA) surveyed households age 75 and older about the most important attributes for active adult, independent living, assisted living and memory care communities.

Of the options, respondents selected price and affordability and good food across all property types. Items like activities, residence size and style and exercise facilities were significantly less important to those surveyed. Prioritizing a new approach to dining experiences is the silver bullet that will propel successful communities into the next generation.

Data: The New 'It' Ingredient

While many industries have leveraged data to drive efficiency and personalization, senior living dining has been slow to adapt. Operators today have an opportunity to use real-time data to inform menu planning, reduce waste, track resident sentiment and optimize staffing.

Electronic medical records (EMRs) integrated with AI can personalize menus in ways never before possible based on each resident's medical needs, dietary restrictions and personal preferences. This results in both improved resident satisfaction and health outcomes.

Data on resident feedback is also critical. It is fundamental to build technology solutions that capture and measure resident feedback in minutes — not weeks, months or quarters.

Today there are AI-powered sentiment analysis tools that provide real-time insights by analyzing comments, ratings and team member inputs to identify opportunities for improvement and respond to trends in real time. These data-informed operating systems foster a dynamic connection with residents and create elevated experiences that the residents of tomorrow expect.

Food As Medicine

The connection between diet and longevity has never been clearer. Studies show that dietary improvements can add up to 10 years to life expectancy, while poor nutrition is linked to a 30 percent increase in the risk of chronic disease.

Today's aging population is actively seeking ways to extend not only their lifespan but also their healthspan — the number of years they remain healthy and independent.

Food is a powerful tool in this equation. Senior living leaders must think beyond traditional meal service and embrace a philosophy that prioritizes nutrient-dense foods, holistic wellness and longevity-focused dining. Nutritionally optimized menus, anti-inflammatory ingredients and specialized diets tailored to cognitive and physical health can be gamechangers.

Transparency As a Standard

We live in a world where we can monitor our steps, children, and



Joe Cuticelli
Restaura
Hospitality
Group

sleep patterns with the push of a button. Families and residents are likewise demanding more visibility around what they or their loved ones are (or aren't) eating, including nutritional values and meal reviews.

The ability to see what's on the menu, including personalized selections based on each resident's specific likes and dietary needs, is incredibly beneficial for retention. Providing information like special culinary events and notes from staff can transform the resident experience, mirroring exceptional (and highly effective) service standards.

In a similar vein, there is a growing movement in senior living circles to create dining standards of excellence. The intent is to create a system that benchmarks culinary performance with specific assessments. A standardized approach to reporting can drive higher trust and accountability across the industry.

Home Life Replicated in Senior Living

Today, a senior living facility's biggest competition is not necessarily the continuing care retirement community on the other side of town, but more likely the desire to age in place. When seniors transition out of the home, meals become a highlight rather than a routine part of the day.

Dining standards shape a resident's satisfaction and quality of life and can tip the scales when seniors are choosing where they want to live.

Additionally, today's seniors expect choices that mirror the freedom they had at home. A one-size-fits-all approach to dining is no longer viable. According to Restaura's Great Expectations research, 72 percent of residents cite dining flexibility as a key factor in choosing a senior living community.

This means going beyond themed meals and pop-ups by offering grocery options, meal kits, takeout, delivery and multiple dining venues within communities.

Forward-thinking communities might provide a farmer's market-style shopping experience, partner with local restaurants for curated takeout options, and offer flexible meal plans that allow residents to cook when they choose. This variety is not just a luxury, but a necessity, and can help senior living communities better compete with the lure of aging in place.

Important Questions to Ask Yourself

Are you ready for the future of senior living dining? Here are a few questions to assess whether your strategic plan truly reflects the growing importance of dining in resident satisfaction and retention.

- Are you making data-driven decisions that enhance dining experiences and reduce inefficiencies or are still relying on outdated assumptions?

- Do your menus reflect cutting-edge research on nutrition and longevity, or are you simply serving what's easiest and most cost-effective?

- Are you truly transparent about meal quality and nutrition, giving residents and families the insights they need to make informed choices?

- Have you reimagined dining to match the variety and autonomy residents enjoyed at home, or are you offering the same rigid meal plans of the past?

Dining should be a highlight of the senior living experience — one that enhances health, fosters connection and provides the choices today's seniors expect.

As the industry moves forward, communities that innovate in dining will set the standard for the next generation of senior living. The question is, will you be among them?

Joe Cuticelli is co-founder and chief executive officer of Restaura Hospitality Group. Restaura provides food services to senior living and active adult communities.