

The Commons

at Kennesaw State University –

Freshman Year: Tapas are hot
Sophomore Year: Pasta reigns supreme
Junior Year: Sushi rules
Senior Year: Everyone wants comfort food
(after all, it has been a long four years)



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A Different Kind of Dining

When Auxiliary Services and Programs at Kennesaw State University (KSU) in Georgia decided to change from an entirely retail operation to all-you-can-eat dining, they built a facility and program that was different from what other campuses do.

They decided to make the switch because of the evolving nature of their campus. “We also have been moving from a total commuter campus to a residential campus,” said Faye Silverman, executive director of Auxiliary Services and Programs. “We now have 3,044 beds on campus. The first housing opened on campus in the fall of ’02. That was 750 beds approximately; it continued to grow and we continued to have waiting lists.”

Another reason for the change was to offer better value to the students. “We couldn’t provide the value for the food dollar to our students in a retail environment the way you can when you have to an all-you-care-to-eat dining hall, and you can do your production differently,” she said. “That is just changing the profile of our campus as well. We have been working very hard on campus to make it financially make sense with retail operations — with the dining hall, we can operate seven days a week.”

The first difference from other campuses is how they partner with Sodexo, the campus foodservice provider for nearly 20 years. “Our relationship with Sodexo is different than the other 900 or so accounts that Sodexo has in college food service,” said Gary Coltek, director of culinary services and campus chef du cuisine. “A lot of our team has a culinary and five-star background from hotels and fine dining restaurants, with front-of-the-house and back-of-the-house experience. We manage Sodexo a lot differently than most of their accounts do.”

The school did extensive research on what it wanted in the facility. “We worked on it for over four-and-a-half years — visiting sites, going to other campuses, going to all kinds of operators, self-ops, contract managed,” she said. “We were just trying to see what we wanted.”

The biggest factor in the decision-making process was a student survey conducted in the fall of 2006. “We learned



four things from them: They wanted the food to be fresh,” said Silverman. “They wanted the food to be made in front of them. They wanted it to be authentic with good variety and they wanted it in a warm and welcoming environment. Those were the touchpoints that we needed to make sure we met.”

Those factors were used in the design of the facility. “We didn’t want to feel institutional in any way,” she said. “It doesn’t have to cost money to use sheet rock and paint. You can add touches to make it feel different. This was a 50,000-square-foot free-standing facility. We didn’t want it to look like a mad cafeteria. We used different types of seating. We broke up the seating. We didn’t just put the food venues around the perimeter in a court backing up the kitchen. The 10 venues are out and about

throughout it so it creates a flow within the whole thing.”

That flow also follows through the food offerings. “There are certain things we do in the entire building,” said Coltek. “There is no MSG used in the building and soups are made from stock, not from bases or those kind of things. We brine our corned beef. We brine our own pickles in the building. All of the pasta is made fresh. We do 40 pounds of fresh pasta an hour. Authenticity is what the students wanted.”

He continued, “The whole building was designed around batch cooking. Unlike other universities, where you might see a hot box filled with broccoli for the day, here a line server will yell back ‘broccoli’ and they will actually sauté it to order for that line. Nothing is pre-cooked. We don’t use frozen vegetables or canned vegetables.”

The Venues

One of the most popular of The Commons’ 10 venues is **Apron Strings**, which offers traditional comfort foods. It features items such as eggs, hash browns and biscuits for breakfast and roasted or fried chicken, fresh fish, meatloaf, mac ’n cheese, greens and an assortment of casseroles for lunch and dinner.

“We do something here called

Fried Chicken Thursday which has become very popular,” said Coltek. “Since we are open to the public, we get a lot of public business. We are using organic Spring Mountain Chicken from Georgia. It is hand cut and hand breaded. For lunch on Thursday, we will average about 5,400.”

Globe Trotters features international cuisines, with many recipes submitted by the student population, representing more than 150 countries. “Before we even built the building, when we had the forums, we had a student from West Africa ask me if I made fofou,” he said. “I said we didn’t, but I told her if she got me a recipe I would and she did. The students can now go on to our website and submit them.”

The Campus Green, a salad bar, is one of The Commons’ busiest stations. It offers fresh fruits, vegetables and salad options. “We get a lot of our local farmers to plant for us,” said Coltek. “We use as much local and some organic as possible.

Made-to-order hot and cold sandwiches, as well as seasonal soups, chilies and chowders are served at **Dan’s Deli**,



THE COMMONS STUDENT CULINARY CENTER At A Glance

- Architect:** Lyman Davidson Dooley, Inc., Marietta, Ga.
- Concept Architect:** Flynn Finderup Architects, Marietta, Ga.
- Furniture Consultant:** ... Creative Office Design
- Cost to Build:** \$22 million
- Stations:** 10
- Square Footage:** 52,000 square feet
- Number of Seats:** Approximately 1,300
- Meals Served per Day:** ... 3,440



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named for KSU's current president, Dr. Daniel S. Papp.

"We make some good corned beef," he said. "We can smoke our own meat and fish — cold smoke or hot smoke. We do our own brining. We make our own sauerkraut. We switch things around quite a bit based on what students want. We have 40-quart stone pickle crocks from Germany. We keep a cycle of pickles going constantly. We roast our own roast beef. We cook our own turkey. We just don't buy finished product like that."

Piatti offers favorite Italian dishes. "We make between 350-500 hand-thrown pizzas a day," said Coltek. "Two deck stone ovens operate constantly; we can put 15 pies in at a time in each oven.



It runs non-stop all day long from 10:30 in the morning. We keep it fresh. We also have our own pasta.

Wok Your Way offers a variety of dishes prepared in diverse Asian styles, changed up daily, featuring such proteins as beef, pork, chicken, fish and tofu, with vegetables and sauces to pair with noodles and rice. On occasion, sushi is also featured.

"I think the equipment in Wok Your Way is the most interesting piece," he said. "It is a one-of-a-kind piece that we had Imperial Ovens make for us out in California. It is a 10-wok, 10-burner, two-million-BTU wok with a recovery time after washing the pan of about three seconds. It has turbo-charged burners."

To accommodate students with allergy and dietary concerns, all woks are color-coded. "We really wanted to be able to ensure that if somebody doesn't

eat shellfish, whether from allergies or religious reasons, that wok didn't have shellfish in it," said Silverman.

Hwy. 41 Grille is a 1950s-style diner that features All-American favorites such as burgers, fries, onion rings, Philly cheese steaks and hot dogs. "We also have a different handspun milkshake every day," said Coltek. "We go through 35 gallons of ice cream just at that station, just making milkshakes."

The Grind Coffee Co. coffee bar features almost any style of coffee and tea drink. "We use a proprietary mix of coffee beans," he said. "We started out with all intentions to roast our own coffee, but with the volume we are doing, it is

and "heat and eat" items. "There is a separate entrance in the front of the dining hall," said Coltek. "Basically, what we told students from the beginning is we heard from them that they don't have enough time. We are a working culture here. A lot of them have multiple part-time jobs or full-time jobs. We heard that between class and work, they just didn't have time to come in and have a full meal."

He continued, "We put together this take-out menu where they can just come in and use a meal swipe to put together a meal. We do have some convenience options. We have a variety of salads and



sandwiches that are pre-made and ready to go with different drinks and options like that. We also have a smaller salad bar in that location so they can put together either an entrée salad or a side salad as part of their meals. We also feature two different types of pizzas. The same entrée that is featured at Apron Strings is featured in takeout for lunch and dinner every day. Students can come there and get the same food, in a more convenient

takeaway format."

really impossible. It is Fair Trade, organic and we have a couple of different custom blends other than our regular espresso, decaf and regular."

The Stone Mill Bakery is a full bakery that offers artisanal breads, premium pastries, pies, cakes and cookies from scratch.

For students who do not have the time to enjoy a meal at The Commons, **On the Fly** offers to-go-friendly sandwiches, salads and desserts, along with an assortment of prepared hot entrées

Special Dietary Needs

In addition to having color-coded woks at Wok This Way, The Commons offers other ways to accommodate students with special dietary needs.

"We make sure if they have a concern, whether it is religious dietary needs or allergy needs, or just food preferences, they can come in and one of the chefs will walk around with them, or the nutritionist on campus will meet with them,"

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said Silverman. “They will spend 30-40 minutes going from station to station and talk about their options and talk about what they can eat safe and healthy. That has worked very well and a number of parents are very pleased that it does.”

They make sure that there are plenty of options for these students. “With each of these stations, you also have the option of having vegan or vegetarian dishes, and there are also gluten-free options,” said Coltek. “You can get a gluten-free pizza, you can get a gluten-free pasta, you can get a gluten-free hamburger bun.”

Sustainability

Being green is also very much a part of The Commons.

“Students are certainly very conscious of being green and that was one of our goals from the beginning,” said Silverman. “That has been an initiative in the State of Georgia.”

They have applied for LEED certification for The Commons and hope to achieve gold certification. “We used as many sustainable, earth-friendly products

as we could,” she said. “Gary made sure we used the most possible energy-efficient equipment that we could put in place.”

Energy efficiency is important throughout the facility. “Each one of our stations inside of the main dining area is controlled separately from the back,” said Coltek. “We can go through every station that is not being utilized, say for breakfast hours. We can actually turn the electricity off for the wok, so we are not burning energy. We have lights on automatic photo sensors. When we get enough light, lights shut off on the appropriate side of the building.”

All items for takeout are compostable and the facility includes a pulper.

Meal Plan

The new facility also meant that the school had to come up with a new meal plan system, making them mandatory for all students. “We really went from zero meal plans in August of ’08 to more than 14,000 last August,” said Silverman. “It was an entire cultural shift for the campus. We did mandatory meal plans



because as a state institution, state funds cannot be used to build auxiliary facilities. You have to go out and get a 30-year bond and the bond underwriters have to have a guaranteed revenue stream to feel comfortable rating those bonds.”

She continued, “We did not put the burden on residential students. We wanted it spread. We had mandatory meal plans for all full-time undergraduate students. For sophomores, juniors and seniors, their mandatory meal plan meant that they had to have 16 meals in a 16-week semester. The goal was to spread out and get everyone involved.”

When students first heard about the mandatory meal plan, they were not very pleased, but that changed after they got to experience the facility. “They were pleased by both the facility and the food and they frankly were apologizing and telling us that 16 was not enough,” said Silverman. “We heard a great deal of that. I had one senior tell me he got very upset last year and he no longer considered it mandatory, he considered it a necessity.”

The facility also features biometrics to scan students’ hands to allow for entry into the facility and the use of their meal plan. “Biometrics is meant to make sure that the correct student is using their unlimited plan,” said Rob Nolen, manager of Culinary Services. “At the lunch crunch time, there are too many to check every face to an ID. We’d like to get to the point where really all they have is their hand and know their ID number.”

Silverman is very pleased with the results of their years of planning. “We didn’t set out to distinguish ourselves just to distinguish ourselves. We wanted to bring state-of-the-art facilities and first-class, healthy, great options for good value to our community.” —OCH

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