

PENN STATE TO OPEN NEW POLLOCK

With a need for more housing on the University Park campus of Penn State University, a decision was made to convert Simmons Dining Hall to living space. To continue to meet the dining needs of students who used Simmons and those in the new housing, when they arrive on campus for the fall semester they will find a newly renovated Pollock Dining Commons.

"The old Pollock dining hall had the physical size to handle 1,200 more students, but the servery and setup and style of service would not have accommodated additional students," said Lisa Wandel, director of residential dining. "It was a great time with Simmons closing for us to renovate Pollock, build it in a new style of service, where they could accommodate more students, quicker service, more points of service, trendier, things that they wanted to see versus what was okay back in 1991 or 92, when it was last renovated."

Wandel and her staff conducted extensive research on the latest trends in dining, as well as what her students wanted in their dining hall.

"Two years ago, we did a research trip," she said. "We traveled out to see BYU, UCLA, Virginia Tech, Vanderbilt, UMass and William and Mary. We wanted to see what the trends were out there. It had been a while since Penn State had renovated. We had read about these schools in *On-Campus Hospitality* and other trade journals, as well as information from NACUFS and decided those were the schools we wanted to visit."

They spent a few days at each school and observed the day-to-day operations. "We asked things like what was working?

What was not? What would you

do different? What you would recommend?," she said. Our folks were talking to the cooks, the chefs and the food production people because those are the people who will tell you what works and what doesn't."

In addition to campus visits, a peer review group was brought in to evaluate the Penn State operations and speak with students. The peer review team consisted of Chair Julaine Kiehn, RD, director of Campus Dining Services, University of Missouri-Columbia; Jim Korner, director of Administrative and Financial Services, University Outreach, Penn State (formerly director, Seattle Pacific University); Ken Toong, executive director of Auxiliary Enterprises, University of Massachusetts; and Dean Wright, director of Dining Services, Brigham Young University.

"They spent about three days with us touring our residential facilities and gave us a wonderful report summary on the things they thought were our strengths and things they suggested we needed to do to bring it to the next level," said Wandel.

The school covered the group's travel and expenses. "They were willing to help us out as colleagues," she said.

Focus Groups

Dining Services conducted a large number of focus groups to decide what should be part of the new Pollock.



BACK to SCHOOL

One of the challenges faced was that both Simmons and the old Pollock had different clientele with different tastes. “Simmons handled students who were looking for healthy menus,” Wandel said. “Pollock was serving more athletes who have high-caloric needs. There are two different styles of student taste that we are trying to blend together. It was very important for us to meet with all of these students.”

The staff met with groups of students from sororities to athletics to student employees of Pollock to student employees of Simmons to customers of Pollock and Simmons to the student leaders to the Honors College. “We were asking all kinds of questions: What did you like about Simmons?” said Wandel. “What would you like to see us keep? What are the things that you like at Pollock?”

One thing that a number of students said was that they wanted a more intimate facility. “They told us that they didn’t like the big dining room at Pollock with the big sea of tables because it felt so vast and not intimate,” she said. “They loved Simmons because it was small and intimate. The architect (Mesher, Shing, McNutt) heard that and made sure with this renovation that the dining rooms are broken up into smaller pockets. It doesn’t feel like it is a sea of tables. The students said that in some areas they wanted to have TVs and quiet study areas or Internet.”

The students also wanted larger “community” areas. “They wanted bigger tables because at dinner, they hang out with more friends,” she said. “They all sit around the table like a family. At lunchtime, they might be sitting by themselves and want a smaller table where they don’t feel so self-conscious that they are

sitting by themselves.”

Also included in the focus groups were dining staff. “We included our full-time employees, our culinary, our executive chef, our bakers and our maintenance shop,” said Wandel. “These are the guys who are fixing the things we decided to get 20 years ago. They said, ‘Don’t get this brand, get this manufacturer. This one works well. Make sure when you put this equipment in that you have room for air circulation.’”

Dining Options

To meet the needs of the students who will be eating there, the dining hall has gone from a straight-line traditional cafeteria to a platform service.

“This is what we saw when we went to a number of the schools,” said Jim Hopey, assistant director of Pollock Dining Commons. “With platforms, a lot of the preparation is done right in front of the customer. Portion control and quality control are very important in that style of service. We will be plating a lot of the items up so customers can come and make their selection. That will be a big change in what we are used to.”

Pollock now features five stations. “We have a station called Swirl, which is basically our bakery café,” he said. “It will feature things like fresh-baked cookies, muffins, brownies, made-to-order crepes and Belgian waffles. The crepes will change throughout the day. We will also have bagels and toast, cold cereal, ice cream and ice cream specialties and coffee drinks.”

Plate will be a hot food station. “It will serve everything from the traditional college fare – burgers, chicken, fries to an Asian station,” said Hopey. “It will have things such as stir fry, lo mein, fried rice, egg rolls, sushi.”

The station will also feature barbecue, an item that was previously only done occasionally on campus, but requested by students in the focus groups. “We have done it, but not to this scale,” he said. “We have had a smoker in the past, although we have a bigger



smoker because it is so popular and we are featuring it more. The barbecue is made from scratch.

Leaf will have fresh fruit, fresh salads, deli items and paninis, as well as hot whole grains and hot vegetables. It will have a gluten-free menu for self-service for students.

“We dedicated a portion of the station to serve gluten-free items,” said Hopey. “It will have everything from gluten-free muffins, cupcakes, brownies, carrot cake, cookies. It will have things like gluten-free grilled chicken, which will be grilled by our staff in a controlled environment, cooled down, pre-packaged and labeled. There will be gluten-free bread, bagels. They are made on campus.”

He continued, “One of the things we want to make sure of is that this station will be clearly labeled as gluten free. Every item that we serve will have a gluten-free label that we developed. There will be a date on it. There will be initials of the person who packaged it. This will give the customer confidence that it was handled with care and integrity.”

Gusto will feature pizza and pasta specialties. “The signature equipment piece in there is the Rotoflex pizza oven,” said Hopey. “We decided to go with that because of the ability to do high volume. It is an all-you-care-to-eat facility, and of course, pizza is a very popular choice for the college student.”

Envy has a frost top and will feature chilled desserts like pudding and gelatins, as well as all condiments.

Expectations

Wandel has high hopes for the new facility. “We are hoping we can pick up an additional 15 to 20 percent for breakfast, but it’ll be more. It is hard to say. For lunch we are expecting about 20-25 percent. Dinnertime we are expecting a 50 percent increase, if not more.” —OCH

