

Rethinking
the

Dining Experience

in Long-Term Care

Enhancing the long-term care dining experience encourages nutritional intake, resident independence, social relationships, and overall well-being. It may be time to introduce a more resident-centered dining service at your facility. Several popular trends are outlined here.

by | *Shellee Roloff*

There are several ways to drive a culture change in your facility, but few as influential as elevating the dining experience. Since mealtime is an important time of the day for your residents, improving the dining experience can foster resident independence, enhance resident nourishment, and encourage friendships

You'll also see an increase in overall resident well-being and satisfaction in your facility. And, since dining is a major influence on new residents when deciding where to live, it makes perfect sense to create the very best dining experience in your facility to attract prospective residents.

To improve the way meals are presented and served in your facility, it may be time to implement a new dining service. But before you do, consider how each dining service will affect your residents, staff, and your overall foodservice efficiency.

Restaurant Service Empowers Your Residents and Wins Their Loyalty

One of the hardest adjustments residents make when moving into a long-term care facility is losing the ability to make simple choices. By implementing restaurant service in your dining room, you can introduce choice back into your facility and gain resident loyalty.

Why your residents will love it

With restaurant-style service, residents will be reminded every day of the importance your facility places on their independence, flexibility, and control over what they want. They'll be so impressed by this simple yet thoughtful effort, approval will resonate through your facility long after the elimination of a more traditional program. Plus, sophisticated china, elegant flatware, and cloth napkins can dress up your tabletops even more for a classy look sure to get noticed.

Why it will work in your facility

Offering cook-to-order flexibility doesn't have to overwhelm your kitchen staff. Even a rotating menu with limited selections gives residents the ability to make their own meal choices, and adds variety to their day.

Other considerations for restaurant service

Fluorescent lighting can detract from the mood of your dining room; however, residents shouldn't have to strain to see their food or navigate the dining area. Strike a balance by placing lighting fixtures over tables to give light where it's needed most.

Family-Style Dining Fosters Resident Friendships Without Straining Your Staff

Family-style dining is an easy way to encourage resident friendships—and making friends is important to establishing a thriving facility where residents want to live.

Why your residents will love it

A casual, familiar setting is particularly beneficial to new residents because it provides a comfortable way for them to make new friends and adjust to new surroundings. Family-style dining also allows residents to have more control over their food intake. From bowls and baskets on their table, residents are able to serve themselves as much as they want of the foods they enjoy, and none of the foods they dislike.

Why it will work in your facility

Family-style dining is great for your kitchen staff because they can gain efficiencies in preparing larger batches of select items. In addition, prospective residents and their families will be impressed by the strong social bonds in your facility, which are further strengthened with family-style dining.

Other considerations for family-style dining

Select serving pieces that are easy to pass. Serving pieces should also be

light enough for residents to grasp with ease. Keep beverage refills handy tableside with insulated pitchers that feature tight-fitting lids to prevent spills.

Buffet Dining Adds Variety to Your Residents' Day

Residents can become bored with mealtime when it's the same routine day in and day out. A quick way to get residents excited about your dining experience is to introduce buffet dining.

Why your residents will love it

Similar to family-style dining, buffet dining is casual and fun. It also brings the wonderful smells, which normally stay in the kitchen, out to your residents. Buffet dining grants residents greater control over their choices and portions. To really spice things up for your residents, try a cuisine-themed buffet, a Sunday brunch, a summer picnic, a holiday feast—the possibilities are endless! You can also generate excitement by using a menu board for your upcoming buffet. In addition to chafing dishes to keep your buffet foods warm and appetizing, residents will enjoy made-to-order cook stations, perfect for omelettes, pancakes, or even a meat carving station.

Why it will work in your facility

Occasional buffets can easily be set up by your staff in several locations: an existing dining room, common area, or an activity room. What's more, your kitchen staff won't be overtaxed. A buffet can have as few as two main entrees and just a handful of side items, which is much easier than preparing a full menu of made-to-order selections. You can also turn a simple, long table into a buffet line with the addition of an attractive tablecloth, preferably one that is stain resistant. Tables with fold-up legs can be easily transported to any area in your facility for simple set up.

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Room Service Adds a Personalized Touch That Makes Mealtime Special

This type of service is usually supplementary to another program. It is customized for each resident, private, and allows for more choice at mealtime. Plus, it is an effective way to serve bed-bound residents.

Why your residents will love it

Like restaurant service, this type of dining emphasizes the importance your facility places on the residents' independence and ability to make their own choices at mealtime. And, personalized attention goes a long way in making residents feel valued. Fine china, stainless steel domes, and elegant glassware and flatware further enhance the room service experience for your residents.

Why it will work in your facility

A made-to-order menu doesn't have to burden your kitchen staff. Even rotating selections give residents the ability to make their own meal choices, and add variety to their day.

Consider the Needs of Alzheimer's Residents at Mealtime

Caring for Alzheimer's residents presents many challenges and takes careful planning, especially during mealtime. To ensure Alzheimer's residents get the nutritional intake they need and enjoy a pleasant dining experience, you should consider everything from the dining environment to the menu itself.

Environment

Set the scene for a peaceful dining experience, so residents focus on mealtime, not on distractions.

- Be consistent with your furniture placement.
- Play soft, relaxing music.
- Use soothing colors on the walls, such as peach, pale pink, ivory, beige, lavender, and light blues and greens.
- Use a flat paint instead of semi-gloss or high-gloss to decrease glare.



- Consider carpet to reduce noise.
- Avoid over-stimulation caused by a television, too many people, or simply excessive noise.
- Don't use flooring products that are shiny and cause glare.

Place Setting

Make sure residents are easily guided to their meals for greater nutritional intake.

- Keep the table setting simple.
 - Clear the table of items that may distract residents.
 - Avoid patterned plates and tablecloths.
- Use contrast between the color of your food, the color of the plate, and the tablecloth.
 - A majority of residents, many who don't suffer from Alzheimer's, are visually impaired and contrasting colors help them to identify where the food is, which in turn increases their nutritional intake.
- Consider substituting a bowl for a plate, or using a plate guard to help residents eat more easily.
- Use spoons with large handles instead of forks. Provide only the needed utensils to prevent distractions.
- Use a travel mug or spill-proof cup for soup and beverages.

Menu

Tailor your menu to make meals easier for residents to eat.

- Serve smaller meals more often, rather than three large meals a day.
- Try placing just one type of food at a time on the plate to avoid distraction.

- Residents with Alzheimer's are most alert and hungry in the morning.
 - Offer more food at breakfast or serve several breakfasts.
- Serve finger foods such as cheese, small sandwiches, kabobs, fresh fruits, or vegetables.
- Sandwiches made with pita bread are easier for residents to grasp.
- Put condiments on food before serving it.
- Serve soft foods such as apple-sauce, cottage cheese, or scrambled eggs.
- Bring tantalizing smells into the dining room to increase residents' appetites.

Meal Time

Make the process less burdensome to ease resident frustrations with mealtime.

- Use straws that bend for drinking.
- To help residents catch on to the motion of eating, place the fork or spoon in their hand and help guide the utensil to their mouth.
 - Use simple, easy-to-understand instructions.
- Check the food temperature. Your residents may not be able to tell if it is too hot to eat.
- Use memory aids to remind residents about mealtimes. Try a clock with large numbers, an easy-to-read appointment calendar with large letters and numbers, or a daily schedule board.

Summing it Up

Rethinking the dining experience in long-term care can result in improved intake and happier residents. It's worth it to explore your options! ■

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For more ways to enhance the dining experiences for your residents, talk to a Direct Supply foodservice professional at (800) 634-7328.