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Defying a Stereotype With Gourmet Dishes

Wendy Carlson for The New York Times

The employees at New Milford Hospital use ingredients from local farms or the hospital's rooftop garden



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By WENDY CARLSON

NEW MILFORD, Conn.

IT'S lunchtime in New Milford and Mayor Patricia Murphy is dining in the most unlikely place: the hospital cafe.

The pecan-crusted chicken tucked beneath a fresh sage velouté did not pique Ms. Murphy's interest, nor did the celery root bisque with its subtle essence of fennel. Instead, she made a beeline for the chicken [salad](#) with tart cranberries, fresh herbs and toasted almonds.

“Sometimes I find myself sitting at my desk thinking I’ve just got to have some of that chicken salad; it’s the best,” Ms. Murphy said.

The mayor is one of a growing number of diners making pilgrimages to the hospital’s bistrolike cafe, drawn by the affordable, gourmet entrees, prepared with ingredients from local farms or from the hospital’s own rooftop garden.

Haute cuisine, or even chicken salad jazzed up with cranberries, is a radical departure from bland, unappetizing hospital fare. Mystery meat doused in murky gravy, those soggy vegetables, the acid green Jell-O and the congealed tapioca [pudding](#) soon may be on the wane. This spring, the Culinary Institute of America began offering its first cooking course geared to the health care industry, a sign that the movement for [local food](#), or at least more palatable food, is making inroads.

Several hospitals in Connecticut — including Danbury Hospital, which merged with New Milford Hospital in October to form Western Connecticut Health Network — are affiliated with Planetree, a nonprofit organization in Derby that espouses a health care model based on healing mind, body and spirit. And better-tasting, more nutritious food is an important part of the group’s philosophy.

[John Turenne](#), former executive chef of Yale University’s Sustainable Foods Project, is a consultant to these and other institutions seeking sustainable food services. Among health care facilities, he said, New Milford Hospital’s cuisine is an anomaly because it is so comprehensive, using fresh, local food, serving gourmet recipes and attracting diners from the community.

The hospital revamped its food service operation more than two years ago in the wake of dismal patient food ratings and an aggressive healthy-food initiative. Out went the deep fryer, and the hospital hired an outside food service vendor, [Unidine](#), that agreed to adhere to the hospital’s directive against canned or processed foods.

Food is prepared largely from scratch, using locally grown ingredients when available and [antibiotic](#)- and hormone-free poultry and meats. Patients’ meals are served on regular plates; drop-in diners use paper dishes, but that’s the only difference, said the hospital’s dining services director, Kerry Gold.

The hospital’s food service rating soared, said Marydale Debor, a former vice president of external affairs at New Milford Hospital and a co-founder of [Plow to Plate](#), a grass-roots effort to bring local food and agriculture to the hospital and the community. Ms. Debor also established the cafe’s daily Senior Suppers, which became so popular with senior citizens that a second sitting was added.

“We started off changing the hospital food to set an example for our patients,” Ms. Debor said. “But the cafe has become a real fixture in the community.”

“I never anticipated we’d wind up faxing our menu to Home Depot, the post office or the mayor’s office,” Ms. Debor said.

Word got out that Mr. Gold — a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America trained in classic French cuisine — was cooking up lunch menus featuring specials like grilled pork topped with polenta and accompanied by garlic mashed potatoes and sautéed kale at the bargain price of \$5. Diners began trickling into the hospital, which is just opposite the Village Green, and near a catering business and a few restaurants.

“Of course, people look at you a little funny when you tell them you are going to the hospital for lunch,” said Paula Burns, a dance studio manager. Ms. Burns is a loyal patron, largely because of the hospital’s farm-to-table cuisine. “The idea they use produce that’s very fresh and prepared in a healthy way and is affordable is appealing,” she said.

The hospital receives deliveries from five local farms, but cooking what comes in is sometimes challenging, even to the most seasoned chef. Mr. Gold has figured out ways to prepare nontraditional vegetables: roasting eight-ball squash, sautéing dinosaur kale, ramps and fiddleheads. A bumper crop of butternut squash gave rise to the cafe’s popular squash [risotto](#) with local corn, sage and honey. An unexpected delivery of tulsi basil, long used in India for its healing properties, yielded herbal tea.

“We have real culinary experts in our kitchen; these are not just people opening bags of frozen foods and dumping them into a fryer,” Ms. Debor explained. “These are chefs who know how to work with herbs and a wide range of ingredients.”

Rafael Walters, the executive chef, recalled the time he wrangled with a bag of stinging nettles. “That was a first for me,” he said. “I thought I better put on some gloves.” After soaking the nettles in water (to remove the stinging chemicals), Mr. Walters sautéed them with onions and garlic and made soup.

As for that old hospital standby Jell-O, Mr. Gold said he reserved it for patients with dietary restrictions. Otherwise, the dessert case is stacked with fresh fruit and homemade desserts like rhubarb crisp. The rhubarb, Mr. Gold noted, is from a farm less than 10 miles away.

Buying local is expensive and labor intensive, Mr. Gold said, so he offsets the increased cost by buying less red meat and serving low-cost alternatives: protein-rich quinoa citrus salad and portobello burgers, for example. With help from community volunteers, Mr. Gold also installed a rooftop garden adjacent to the kitchen where he grows lettuces, eggplant, [tomatoes](#), peppers, herbs and whatever other vegetables he can squeeze into the small plot. Along the outside of the garden, cucumbers, butternut squash, wild scallions and herbs thrive between the drainage rocks, and pole peas and morning glories wend their way up and around the chain-link fencing.

“We get a tremendous amount of food out of this little garden,” Mr. Gold said. “Even during the winter, I love going into the garden and grabbing a handful of lavender for our lavender orange scones. They don’t really taste like lavender, but they are aromatic, which is soothing — and healing.”

Matthew Gelfer, a regular at the cafe, calls it “food with integrity.” Mr. Gelfer often gets take-out for dinner, if it makes it that far. “The squash risotto was so good I ate half of it in my car on the way home,” he said, “and the rest in the driveway of my house.”

But the cafe has reaped more than accolades from its patrons. Last January, the 33-seat dining area was remodeled with money contributed by former patients and employees.

“It’s a real gem, especially since it’s been gussied up a bit,” said Darren Reid, a software designer and cafe regular.

The cafe’s new look — sage-green walls, natural wood-grain tables, chairs and flooring, bead-board paneling and bamboo shades — add to the open-air bistro atmosphere. Still, it’s hard to forget where you are when you are sitting next to a table of surgeons in scrubs.

“That’s the only drawback,” Mr. Reid said. “I’m really squeamish, so when they start discussing medical procedures, I really have to work to block out the gore.”