



SENIOR LIVING

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# EXECUTIVE

## THE DINING & NUTRITION ISSUE

Emerging trends and  
practical tips for the  
evolving senior living  
dining landscape





# Innovations in Memory Care Dining and Service

By Debbie Reslock

**S**haring a meal can be one of life's most gratifying moments, but the joy of dining can quickly be lost for those living with the challenges of Alzheimer's or other dementias. The right setting and food structure can play a big role toward restoring self-confidence and quality of life.

In fact, the chance that a resident will continue to try and eat increases if mealtime is made easier and more pleasant. The National Institute on Aging (NIA) at the National Institutes of Health suggests the following six tips for making mealtime more enjoyable for those with dementia:

- View mealtimes as opportunities for social interaction. A warm and happy tone of voice can set the mood;
- Be patient and give the person enough time to finish the meal;
- Respect personal, cultural, and religious food preferences;
- If the person has always eaten meals at specific times, continue to serve meals at those times;
- Serve meals in a consistent, familiar place and way whenever possible; and
- Avoid new routines, such as serving breakfast to a person who has never routinely eaten breakfast.

Person-centered dining programs encourage participation by supporting independence, preferences, and the opportunity for social interaction.

## What's good for the heart is good for the brain

But what we eat also matters. When the heart-healthy Mediterranean diet was combined with the sodium-reducing DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diet, a hybrid was found to not only be good for the heart but for the brain as well.

Developed at Rush University Medical Center through a study funded by NIA, the MIND diet (Mediterranean-DASH Intervention for Neurodegenerative Delay), was discovered to lower the risk of developing Alzheimer's disease between 35 percent and 53 percent, depending on how closely it was followed. MIND diet fare includes leafy greens and other vegetables, nuts, berries, beans, whole grains, fish, poultry, olive oil, and wine. Foods to be avoided or limited include red meats, butter and stick margarine, cheese, pastries and sweets, and fried or fast food. In the study, those who rigorously adhered to the MIND diet plan had the best outcomes, but individuals who only moderately followed the diet still saw significant results.

## Meeting the challenges of dining and dementia

Of course, the right brain nutrition does little if it is not eaten. One of the bigger challenges for those with Alzheimer's is

combating weight loss while maintaining independence and dignity while dining. Those managing the challenges of the disease can be overwhelmed with too many choices or distractions or find themselves unable to sit long enough to get through a meal.

Combining both the latest in nutrition and dining best practices, three senior living providers have shared their most innovative programs resulting in optimal dining experiences for residents with Alzheimer's or other dementias:

### Integrace

Copper Ridge, an Integrace community, serves those with Alzheimer's and other dementias in Sykesville, Md. It includes an onsite neurocognitive clinic for diagnosis and treatment and an institute for research and education. It is also home to The Bistro, a restaurant adhering to the MIND diet that can help residents and their families rediscover the joys of mealtime, according to Rusty Mitchell, executive director at



*Fresh Bites at The Bistro at Copper Ridge*





Copper Ridge. For their dining programs, Integrace partners with Unidine Senior Living Culinary Group.

We eat first with our eyes and that may never be more important than to the resident who needs puréed food, said Bill Rodgers, general manager of Unidine Senior Living Culinary Group. So, at Copper Ridge, they thicken a resident's meal to the right consistency and then pipe it out with pastry bags, so the plate of food actually looks like food. "If it looks like carrots, the brain will tell you it's carrots. But if it looks like an orange ball on the plate, they may not even take the first bite," he said.

Any opportunity to restore a resident's independence should never be missed. The Bistro also offers "Fresh Bites" for those who have been prescribed finger foods or who may struggle to stay seated or hold utensils. "If eating is hard, we know they can lose interest and then not eat at all," Rodgers said. Using chicken salad sandwiches on small brioche buns as an example, he said those who can't sit through a meal can pick up one to eat while walking and then get redirected back to the food to have another.

But one of the greatest benefits of The Bistro may be that it offers families and loved ones a chance to eat together again, like they once did. Going out to eat in a restaurant can be overwhelming and apprehensive for both, Mitchell said, but now they have the chance to enjoy this experience in a welcoming and understanding environment.

"The anxiety of cognitive challenges often causes people to stay at home but now they come here and find they are also forming social and support networks."

### Watermark Retirement Communities

Working with a grinding and food combination process developed by Grind Dining, Inc., Watermark Retirement Communities, headquartered in Tucson, Ariz., branded their program Thrive Dining™. The program supports those who have limited use of utensils and may have limited desire to eat with others.

Whether individuals have cognitive issues, Parkinson's, or even dental problems, Thrive Dining offers a culinary solution



*Thrive Dining pre-entree sorbet service at Watermark Retirement Communities*

by serving a fully balanced meal with a program that also promotes dignity and independence, said Watermark's national director of dining services, Rob Bobbitt. In fact, it's the exact same food everyone else is eating; it's just in finger food form.

"We take the same food and convert it to a Thrive Dining meal. In the past, finger friendly diets in senior living were usually fish sticks, chicken tenders, or sweet potato fries. But to have to eat that three times a day and for the rest of your life? Not at Watermark," Bobbitt said. "Now you can have what's on the menu just like everyone else."

Bobbitt added that they plate each meal to look attractive. "Whenever we're served a meal, we look at our plate first. The aroma comes second," he said. "So we make sure to focus on the plate composition to be attractive and appealing [to the eye]."

According to Bobbitt, it's a priority that what's on the plate is a complete, balanced, and nutritional meal because if someone isn't eating that, it leads to immediate health decline. But then Watermark takes it a few steps further.

They first give out warm hand towels scented in lavender, rosemary, or a citrus base. "It's great to see residents put it up to their face because it feels and smells so nice," said Bobbitt.

Next, they serve a citrus type of sorbet, but not as a palate cleanser. "It's actually been proven to increase meal intake. It causes you to salivate and is similar to the response when you walk into a kitchen when someone's cooking. It triggers the same sensation," Bobbitt said. "It's amazing to watch the residents light up."

Dining is about much more than just nutrition. It invokes so many memories and coming together with family. But it's not the same when everyone else has a complete meal with so many choices except for you. So, Thrive Dining is a game changer, Bobbitt said.

"We're so excited to offer this. It's not only great for the residents, but it pushes the culinary team to a higher level," said Bobbitt. "And it's not just in preparing the food, but plating, presentation, and service. It also ups our game."



*Chefs preparing brain healthy ingredients at Silverado.*

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**“At this stage of their life, we want to help them eat well but also enjoy what they eat,” said Giampietro.**

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As far as following the MIND diet components, Giampietro said it’s easier to integrate into the menu than one might think. “We changed our pasta and breads to be whole grain. We added quinoa. But for our population and their families, these may not be foods they grew up with so you need to educate and communicate with them. Have them try it and then adjust where needed.”

Silverado also goes to local senior centers and hospitals to do cooking demonstrations, as well as educate and share information on brain healthy cooking.

“Sometimes we host the public in our community and cook items right in front of them, so they can see how easy it is to incorporate into their daily menu at home,” Giampietro said.

Dining programs aren’t one-size-fits-all, according to Giampietro, and it doesn’t work to roll one out like it is. It needs to be case by case, he said, engaging and understanding resident behaviors that may affect mealtime. “It’s important to work with them and come up with an individual solution.”

### Restoring dignity with dining

The struggle for those with cognitive issues only continues to worsen as the disease progresses, as does the loss of autonomy. So any solution that can lessen the reliance on others shouldn’t be overlooked. And the results are real.

“Imagine seeing someone agitated at mealtime and 100 percent dependent on assistance who is now able to dine by themselves and who may even indicate that they want more,” said Bobbitt. “Families come up and hug the caregivers. They’ve never seen their loved one eat that much and now they have their dignity back at mealtime.” ■

### Silverado

Also focusing on prolonging their residents’ cognitive capabilities, Silverado, whose home office is in Irvine, Calif., incorporates the MIND diet components in their menu, said vice president of culinary services, Nick Giampietro. This includes using whole grains, fresh vegetables, berries, beans, and olive oil. But he said it’s not too far off from what they’ve always prepared for their senior population.

Giampietro cautioned that any change needs to be incorporated slowly. “You can’t eliminate everything they liked or are used to from their diets,” Giampietro said, “like all red meat or foods with saturated fats.” So, Silverado provides brain beneficial selections that offset the other choices. “This way they can still enjoy a dessert because they’re also getting other healthy foods.”

Balancing taste, nutrients, and preferences is also required, especially for those in memory care who struggle to keep weight on. Giampietro said they do make ice cream and desserts available. “At this stage of their life, we want to help them eat well but also enjoy what they eat.”

The goal at Silverado is to serve the same food no matter what a resident’s prescribed diet may be. If a resident requires finger food, they take the menu that day and transform it. “We believe this helps them maintain their independence by being able to feed themselves if they’re not able to use a fork. It’s respectful for them,” said Giampietro.

“If the menu includes meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and green beans, we would make the meatloaf into meatballs and the mashed potatoes may become a potato wedge to go along with the green beans that they can eat,” he said.



*A brain healthy meal at Silverado*