

Buffalo Opens State-of-the-Art Crossroads Culinary Center



The new \$12 million Crossroads Culinary Center (C3) at the University of Buffalo (UB) in New York is a unique facility — and that is just the way that they wanted it to be.

“We took a completely different approach on building this,” said Jeff Brady, executive director of UB Campus Dining and Shops. “Two years prior to the groundbreaking, we assembled a team of upper management and started touring the country. We went to 20 different universities, 12 independent restaurants and three or four chain restaurants. We painted a vision of what we wanted to do.”

After these tours, the team sat down with students, who Dining refers to as “stakeholders,” to find out what they were looking for. “We heard things from our stakeholders that were really loud and clear,” he said. “They wanted a place that was going to offer fresh food, healthy food, the ability to customize their own plate and a restaurant environment. It is what they grew up with. It was what they were looking for.”

With these thoughts in mind, Dining searched for a team to design a facility that met its vision. “What was very important to us, when you deal with architects, a lot of times, they want to sell you their vision of how the dining center should look,” said Brady. “We wanted to make sure the architecture firm we hired understood that it was going to be our vision.”

After interviewing many potential partners, the school hired Kideney Architects, a local firm, and Roth Consulting Group. With the new members of the team selected, they conducted more tours. “We took the team to Purdue University in West Lafayette, Ind.,” he said. “We took them to a couple of restaurants during the planning stage. We pulled ideas from the different universities and chain and independent restaurants. One of the things that was really important in this tour, is we really learned from other directors, chefs and managers what worked and what didn’t; if they had the opportunity to do it over again, what would they do? We learned from their mistakes.”

When the design was complete, they came up with a feature to enhance the freshness and customization students were looking for — no back of the house. “No prep kitchen, nothing,” said Brady. “Everything is done out in front of the guest. We have two supporting walk-ins on both sides of the marché. We knew we had to have that. We also designed the place so that every exit was equipped to fit pallets because where the dining center

is situated, we have a lot of student traffic. We didn't want the trucks going through the tunnel area where students are crossing because it is built below a residential hall. We made sure the designers made all of the doors capable of handling pallets because all of these deliveries are done on pallets and on an honor system, meaning they are dropped between 1 and 7 in the morning when no one is here. That has worked out really well."

When students enter C3, they are met by one of the most extraordinary features of any dining hall in the country. "The first thing guests see in the grand entrance lobby is five large flat-screen digital menu boards for each of our stations," said Ray Kohl, marketing manager. "We have them positioned in the entrance doorway. Knowing what we were expecting for counts and the amount we were going to see in the marché area, one of the main goals using these digital menu boards was to have them

boards and live camera feeds on their own. "It was really working with our IT department and understanding that speed of service to get the guest to start making decisions at the entrance of C3, instead of walking around the whole marché, because it is so large," he said. "We knew that that would be problematic, so our IT department and team collaborated, and we thought it would be a great idea. Not only could we advertise, but we could also show live pictures of the food, and we just thought it was a win-win idea. We didn't see it at any other college."

While it is encouraged that students make their choices before reaching a station, individual menus are still available to them, both at the stations and on the Web. "We see most of the students now, their behaviors have changed," said Brady. "I will watch and see that as soon as they go into the lobby, they look up at the screens in anticipation of what's on the menu tonight. We find that to be much more successful than directing them to the Web."

The students have a lot to choose from when reviewing the digital menu boards. In addition to working with Roth Consulting, Dining worked with several manufacturers to design the stations.

The first station guests come upon after the menu boards is Oregonos, a pasta station designed with Rosina Foods. "We put that right at the front door for many reasons," he said. "It is probably the most cost-effective station. Everybody loves pasta."

They chose Rosina for several reasons, one of which is that they are local. "We didn't want to duplicate anything else we already do on campus," said Brady. "We hired Rosina, along with restaurant consultant Charlie Baggs, who does a lot of work for some of the major Italian chains. We brought them on board, gave them an overview of our vision."

Rosina and Baggs created more than 100 recipes for the station. "We tasted all of those recipes with many panelists, and those panelists include some students, faculty and staff," said Brady. "We really let them decide what they liked, what they thought a value was. They looked at plate presentation, taste profile. We came up with the agreement that we were going to use 84 of those dishes on a rotation basis on a four-week cycle."

Blue Dragon is C3's Asian station. "What is really unique about that is when we developed that station, we wanted to get someone local who knew Asian food inside and out," he said. "We were fortunate enough to hire Steve Chin, who owned a local Asian restaurant. We were wowed by his food, his creativity, his authentic recipes. He created the whole menu. The students are really wowed by the station."

The school worked with Nestlé Professional on the Global Noodle Station, which features international noodle soup dishes. "The student comes up, picks the vegetables and the protein if they would like one," he said. "We take that in a pho bowl, put it into a re-thermalizer that has a hint of spices in it and leave it there for about 30 seconds. We then drain it and we have three broths every night from a different part of the world. It can be

Campus Dining made sure to provide the students with a feeling that they were involved with the school's composting efforts.



decide before they walked in and walked around the marché. We wanted them to know exactly what stations they wanted to go to."

The digital menu boards really help with traffic flow. "Knowing what type of traffic we were expecting here, that at some point in time there might be a line, we didn't want to flood the marché area and all of the different stations," he said.

Another unique feature of the central menu boards are live video feeds from some stations. "Being able to hold back that line a little bit, we also wanted to infuse into those digital menu boards the option of live video," said Kohl. "Some of the stations actually have cameras positioned over the top of them. It is very similar to what you would see on the Food Network, to actually show them the live cooking that is happening, or what is being made that night. As an example, the Blue Dragon Asian area has a camera stationed over the wok, where you can see the chefs preparing, whether it is the lo mein or the fried rice. Adding that form of entertainment for the students while they are waiting adds something to that area as well — and it helps them decide what they might want."

Brady said that they came up with the centrally located menu

North African on Monday. It could be Chinese on a Tuesday. It is an extremely healthy option. We are really happy with the success of the station.”

Strictly Vegetarian features a different spin on meatless options. “We really wanted to make it a station that vegetarians would look forward to trying every night,” said Brady. “Sometimes, you are limited in your options, so we went out and we really put it in our chefs’ hands to create the station and put a wow to it. It offers hummus and all those types of vegetarian dishes that the students are looking for. We have seen a lot of students go to that station. They really like the job we have done with the station.”

The salad station, Seasons, is located next to one of the walk-in coolers. “We did that because we wanted to show how the product comes into the restaurant from the market and from the market goes into the walk-in cooler to the prep table and the next step is obviously the salad bar,” he said. “We try to make a homemade dressing there weekly. We are really gearing toward the light dressings, the more healthy dressings. We give them a choice of three greens, every type of toppings out there, we put proteins out there, be it tuna fish or some type of chicken.”

UB teamed with Rich’s for Baked Creations, which features pizzas. “One of the things that we are always challenged with here at the university is that we have a good population from Long Island and New York City,” said Brady. “It is probably up to 30 percent. In that neck of the woods, they are known for New York-style pizza. We just couldn’t get that down pat, and they let us know it. We partnered up with Rich’s, from whom we had already been purchasing all of our dough. We told them we wanted to make the station unique. We use impingers, but we wanted to do a personal pan pizza New York-style. They went back to their R&D, came back to us two months later with a product. We made the product in one of the dining centers. We served it to the students. We surveyed the students and pretty much the response was to serve it immediately.”

Rich’s created another aspect to the station — the ability for chefs to create handheld calzones. “They get the personal pan pizza dough, slice it in half, put in different types of ingredients, close it and put it through the impinger,” he said. “Students really love it. It helps us because there are areas we might over produce in, like our Churrascaria. If we overproduce in that area, we can use the protein over there the next night.”

The Churrascaria, or Brazilian rotisserie, is located in the Carve Station. “It was positioned farthest away from the door because it carries the highest cost,” said Brady. “It is a real show-cooking area. As the students go down the line, it starts off with a special appetizer area that really starts the experience off. There are all kinds of combo salads there, different types of hummus, different cheeses. Then they pick up the starch for the night and their vegetable. Then they go to the carving area, in the Churrascaria and they are carving it to order right there. Football players are there every night.”

Another unique station is Premier Entrée. Using an extra swipe of their meal cards, which are operated on the CBORD Gold system, students can get a premium entrée. “It is always an upscale item whether it is a New York Strip steak, stuffed salmon or prime rib,” said Kohl. “By utilizing that camera right above that station and having it out to that live feed in the lobby, students can now see that premier entrée and it might entice them to get it. It is a plated dish. It has its own separate starch and vegetable that isn’t served anywhere else on campus that night. It is really that added treat.”

After guests order their entrée to their own specifications, they are given a pager. “We take their name and give them a pager for that restaurant experience,” said Brady. “They will go and get their beverage and dessert. When that pager goes off, they are guaranteed a hot meal with a great plate presentation, and they really like it.”

Foundations 1846 is the comfort food station, and features traditional favorites like a burger bar, fajitas and a taco bar. Temptations, the dessert area, features Rice Krispies treats, apple pie and cheesecake made on campus. It also features fresh-made Belgian waffles from Carbon’s Golden Malted, with the UB brand.

For Awaken, the breakfast bar, the school partnered with General Mills. “We offer eight different cereals, regular milk and soy milk,” he said. “It is very interesting because we went with the Silk brand and we put a dispenser with the soy milk by the cereal and by one of our beverage stations. We are seeing a trend now that the students are using soy milk for their cereal rather than regular milk. It is pretty interesting.”

Another unique feature of C3 is the dish area. Brady had been encouraged to go with an accumulator, but decided against it. “We didn’t go with an accumulator because we knew our staff inside and out,” he said. “They are very used to working in a small footprint and are really productive in the dishroom. I didn’t want the extra expense; we didn’t need it. One of the things we noticed at some of the other schools was that they made the window too small and there was a bottleneck in that area. We extended our dish area and put a 14-foot window in.”

That window also helped to get the students more involved with the school’s composting efforts. “We wanted to engage the students in this practice, because once you engage them, they think they are making a difference and making an impact,” said Brady. “We went back to the consultant and designed an area where we had ambassadors stay there to show the students how to scrape their plates and other customer waste into a trough that is pushed by water. What happens is, the food waste goes into the trough, is pushed by the water into a Somat that grinds it up, extracts the water, puts it into buckets and takes it right to a dehydrator right onsite.”

Another important aspect of the project was keeping things as local as possible. “We wanted to hire as many local people as tradesmen,” he said. “We wanted to buy as many materials as we could locally. Along with that, when we got into the smallwares for the operation, we started to look for china manufacturers around the country and there aren’t many of them. One happened to be in our backyard: Niagara Ceramics. We customized all of our plateware. We also went out to Liberty Tabletops for our flatware. We made sure that we purchased all of our silverware there. It is high-end silverware.”

All of these items give the students that restaurant experience. “When the students wanted the restaurant experience, we wanted that experience with the plateware, the flatware,” noted Brady. “It was our first dining center that we actually brought glass into the operation. Everyone thought that we made a mistake because it would be very costly, but I have not seen a glass broken down there yet. It has really elevated the student experience.”

That elevated experience has led to a great deal of success. “We have gone from 700-725 to 1,500-1,800 counts daily now,” said Brady. “We had 300 more join the meal plan. A lot of staff and faculty come in now.”