

Cornell Holds “5 Days” Special Diet Challenge

The senior management team of Cornell Dining, as well as students and other members at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., recently spent five days following different diets and lifestyles to discover how their customers eat on campus.

“Our intent was two-fold,” said Michele Lefebvre, RD, CDN, director, Nutrition Management at Cornell Dining. “Not only does it give our frontline staff an opportunity to learn — they are going to get a lot of questions through the week. We are all going to be asking them, ‘What’s vegan? What’s gluten-free? What has dairy in it?’ We are going to force them to really learn what they are serving. I do food allergy training all the time and you can train, but when they are forced to really look at something, they learn it in a much different way.”

She continued, “It also provides our managers and staff with a different perspective. It has given them an opportunity to create new ideas, come up with some new menus, new stations and so forth.”

From Monday, March 3 through Friday, March 7, the more than 30 chefs, dining managers, staff members and students in the “5 Days” challenge ate breakfast, lunch and dinner each day at Cornell Dining’s eateries while adhering to one of six diets: vegetarian; vegan; dairy-free; gluten-free; dairy- and gluten-free; or kosher.

The challenge came about when Lefebvre was talking with a campus chef about the increase of students who have special dietary needs. She approached Gail Finan, director of Cornell Dining, who was all for it.

“We want all of our customers to have a wide variety of healthy and delicious dining options to choose from every day,” said Finan, before the challenge began. “Adopting a special diet for a week will help us understand the unique preferences and challenges of many students on campus, and enable us to better meet their needs.”

“The experiment went fantastically,” said Lefebvre. “We had amazing participation and a lot of eye opening. Our managers and chefs were amazingly surprised by eating on campus and following diets. They were really gung-ho about it.”

Team members shared photographs, meal descriptions, recipe ideas and daily successes and struggles on the “5 Days” blog at blogs.cornell.edu/5days. Prizes were awarded for the most creative blog post, best meal description and best photo.

Each team had to learn the restrictions of its selected diet — and where to find appropriate items on campus — on its own. The experience for all involved was positive.

“This was an amazing experience, one of the best of my career,” said Finan, who was on the vegan team. “I am very proud of what we do; walking in someone else’s shoes showed me that there are times we do well and times we can improve. I also found the experience to be fantastic for opening up conversation with our staff. Our staff was very helpful; everyone learned a little bit last week!”



A gluten-free bowl of rice noodles, chicken broth, tofu and assorted veggies

Those on the kosher team had one of the biggest challenges, according to Lefebvre. “I think a lot of people don’t really know the true kosher rules, where you kind of know what vegan is, so it took them a while to figure out. Our kosher dining hall is only open for lunch and dinner. It is on West campus, so for those people who are on North campus, it is not easy to get to. A lot of people found that there were a lot of grab ’n go items for kosher, but they had to really search for them. Now, they know where they are. With our vegan items, typically it says on the menu, ‘Vegan.’”

Assistant Director Richard Anderson was on the vegetarian team. “The 5-Day experience really opened up my eyes about how a vegetarian would fare in our operations,” he said. “What I found was that vegetarian diet options are abundant throughout board, retail, grab ’n go, coffee houses and convenience stores. There are many stand-alone menu items, and in the case of our board plan operations, ingredients available to our guests allow them to create even more.”

Michelle Leonetti, a student who participated in the experience, was able to really get a sense of what students with special dietary needs go through on a daily basis. “My biggest observation was that Cornell Dining has plenty of options available, but they are not as visible as they could be. In the blogs, people described the process of finding these options as ‘detective work.’ Instead of doing the detective work, I had the tendency to just default to what was simple or convenient, and settle for very basic choices because I was self-conscious, confused and didn’t have time. I feel like this is probably representative of what many students may feel on a daily basis.”

Lefebvre said that the participants will get together to discuss ways to improve the way the foods are presented to those with specific dietary needs. “We’re having everyone submit bullet points on their findings. We report to the student dining committee, and we hope to get some suggestions. Going forward, it is suggestions. Where do we want to go from here?”

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