When the decision was made to renovate Hampshire Dining Common on the campus of the University of Massachusetts – Amherst (UMass), Dining Services had a lofty goal: to create a facility with healthy world cuisine, served in a sustainable manner, while also building community.

The renovation is part of an eight-year, $65 million renovation project for UMass retail and residential locations. “Hampshire was the kickoff,” said Garrett DiStefano, director of Residential Dining. “We wanted to get this particular residential location in order because we have a Commonwealth Honors College opening up that is a five-minute walk away from this particular location. We are going to have an additional 1,500 students on campus. We had to make sure that we were able to accommodate them.”

Even without the addition of these customers, the dining common was in need of renovation. “The facility is almost 50 years old,” he said. “The structure of the building itself was not changed in that time. The original setup of the building was a confined dining area where you would grab a tray, walk down the line, be served a hot entrée, continue on to grab a beverage and sit down. There were two rooms like that. Structurally, we didn’t do a lot in the 50 years, but we did improve equipment.”

Although the design of the facility was outdated, it was well regarded by those who ate there. “It has some of the highest food scores on campus,” said DiStefano. “The students who went there expected that the food was going to be good. Even with the antiquated setup we had, the food was consistently kicked out at a high level. That dining common happens to be where a lot of our athletes eat — giving us even more impetus for us to move the dining common in the most healthy direction that we possibly could.”

Part of the renovation process was to update its accessibility and improve seating. “Another important aspect of it was to increase its efficiency, moving it to a LEED silver building,” he said. “That is important to us because with the sustainability aspect of it, we want to make sure that we are doing our part to set the trend and take responsibility for our actions here. By doing so, even with the design of the building, we wanted to make sure that we had that focus in mind.”

The new Hampshire has an oval design. “As opposed to the marché concept, where you have things scattered throughout the dining common, the oval, or as we affectionately call it ‘The Egg,’ allows us to keep all of the cooking facilities under one central area,” said DiStefano. “Things can play off of each other with multi-use pieces of equipment and serving areas, with the exception of our gluten-free area, which has to have a single use. We get a lot more flexibility and efficiency out of it, and not to mention the efficiencies from the point of view of the production, where everything is done in the serving area. It is very easy to do just in time cooking because the chefs can see what the volume is like, and ramping up or ramping down production is very easy to do.”

“The Egg” also has an entertainment purpose. “From an entertainment point of view, you come upstairs and see this beautiful dining facility that is simply put together, but also has everyone working together, with the smells, the noise, the feel of watching your food being prepared right in front of you,” he said. “Students have the opportunity to see what they want across the dining common. There are lines of sight throughout the location, so when you come up, you can see from one end through the oval to the other side.”

He continued, “We want to keep it open, and we want to keep it bright so that it is a very welcoming, comforting, communal type of environment. You will see the action right at the stations. You’ll see the stir-fry being cooked right in front of you. You’ll see the Latin station where we have tortillas that are made to order.”

Authenticity and customization were important when creating the stations. “We wanted to make sure that all of the concepts
great,” he said.

Stir Fry features a style of cooking that has been popular on campus for years. “We have taken that to the next level and allowed students to have an easier customization in terms of being able to see all of the vegetables in front of them,” said DiStefano. “It is going to be an authentic type of stir fry. The idea is that we are working more toward filling up the plate with vegetables and protein; the last thing they add is two ounces potentially of chicken, shrimp or beef. We want them to see that they have a wide variety of options in front of them before they take it.”

The Grill will be unlike anything one might expect from a station with this name. “Traditionally, the idea of a grill station is just going to be burgers and chicken and whatnot,” he said. “This is going to take it to the next level. We are doing Mediterranean items. We are going to be doing meatless items, like butterbean burgers. We are going to be doing salmon sliders.”

Like all of the stations, The Chef’s Table will feature healthier choices. “We are going to be focusing a lot on reduction of sodium, more healthy oils and fruits and vegetables,” said DiStefano. “When our students come up, it is no longer going to be what the protein is in the center of the plate, it will be more along the lines of the grains and vegetables, and making them in an appetizing way. By nature, they are going to consume more of a healthier item. We are going to make it fresh in front of them, so it is going to be the action item, allowing for the customization of it.”

At the Noodle Bowl, students will be able to customize their dishes with a variety of noodles, toppings and broths. “One thing that we noticed in trends with Southeast Asian cooking is the one-bowl dish is really unique in the sense that students can customize their own plate, it’s filling and it tastes...
Sushi has long been a popular item on campus and, naturally, Hampshire will have a station devoted to it. “We have a state-of-the-art sushi bar, and you would be hard-pressed to see anything like that but at a fine-dining restaurant,” said DiStefano. “Students have the ability to choose customized rolls, utilizing a wide variety of different ingredients.”

Even The Bake Shop will feature healthier options. “We are working on a variety of bakery items featuring a lot of fruits, a lot of smaller items, plated desserts, customized items, infused whole grains,” he said. “This is the area we are going to continue with the healthy and tastes-great combination. It is not wrong to have a dessert at the end of the day, but you can have a great dessert that isn’t full of fat, but is full of fruit and natural cane sugar. You are just getting a little bit of sweet, but you are also not feeling guilty eating it.”

One station that is a holdover from the pre-renovated Hampshire is Latin. “Latin cuisine was one of the most popular that we featured before it closed,” he said. “We are taking Latin to the next level in terms of it’s not going to be a burrito or taco station. We will still serve smaller versions of things like that, but we want to open up students’ minds to Latin culture, utilizing chefs like Lilliana de La Vega.”

He continued, “We have asked ourselves, ‘How can we freshen things up? How can we make it something that makes it difficult to choose what you want to eat at this particular station?’ The station is set up with a tortilla maker. We are making them throughout the day. We have a wide variety of cold and hot wells set up so we can have a wide variety of ingredients that we can use to put together made-to-order items for the students. This is going to be a station that is not going to focus on one different area. We are looking at all of South America and the Caribbean to draw on to make this a station that students really enjoy.”

Mediterranean will feature Italian cuisine and more. “You are looking at Italian, Greek, North African, Southern Spain—all of these types of cuisine are going to come into play when we set up this station,” said DiStefano. “We are going to be using recipes that might be unique to different regions of the area. We are not just focusing on one area, because it can get stale after a while. The healthier proteins are part of the diet, and we are going to infuse it with great, healthy oils.”

Students who want to soothe their pasta craving can head to Pasta Pronto. “We are going to have three different sauces every single day,” he said. “It is going to be light sauces. We wanted to make sure we were focusing on developing sauces that weren’t your traditional ones. We will still have your marinara and Alfredo every now and again, but there are hundreds of different sauces out there, and we have different types of chefs that have come through here who showcase different types of Italian cuisines. They can customize their dishes. We are using Barilla pasta and some of Chef Bruno Wehren’s recipes and his expertise as well.”

Street Food will feature tapas all day. “It is going to be small items that one would see on street carts basically throughout the world: everything from Southeast Asian cuisine to things that you might see in Seville, Spain,” said DiStefano. “These are the things that we are working on to try to showcase a variety of cuisine.”

The Deli will also be a station unlike any other one might find on another campus. “To start off, we are doing a lot of in-house baked breads,” he said. “The deli bread is no longer your plain white bread. Our bake shop is making four different types of breads we use in our deli. We are featuring low-sodium cold cuts. We have hummus that we are using for spreads, a variety of fresh ingredients and trimming that down so it is not overwhelming. We will have half sizes, too. So you can have a half sandwich along with a soup or salad or noodles. The students can have a lot of little things, not just a lot of one thing.”

When it comes to beverages, students will be able to create their own at The Juice Bar. “It is a full juice bar that is going to have everything from infused waters to teas to smoothies to pulped beverages,” said DiStefano. “We are going to treat that like any other station that would be set up on a rotating basis. For the most part, we will set up a few standard types of beverages we will feature every day. We will also have that customization aspect to it. Students can have a carrot, spinach kale smoothie if they want to.”

For the more than four percent of students on campus with a gluten intolerance — and those looking to avoid gluten — there is Gluten-Free. “There have been a variety of different schools of thought,” he said. “This isn’t going to be your station where if you have an intolerance, you have to go to it — you are going to want to go to it. This is going to be a mainstream type of area where we will utilize a variety of different recipes. Yes, they do not contain wheat, but we can do a lot with recipes to make it interesting and fresh.”

He continued, “We’ve worked out a variety of recipes we’ve had historically — some items that have been popular, some that we are trying and introducing. Students who come to this dining facility can eat within the common population of their friends. They don’t have to worry about having to go to a separate dining room. We want to make sure that it is a welcoming, communal environment, and that is one of the building blocks we are using to do that.”

Sustainability was a large part of the planning of the facility. “We are going to have an urban permaculture garden out front,” said DiStefano. “This particular garden is going to be set up so it is on raised concrete, so that students who live in more of an urban environment can see how a garden could thrive in all different types of environments.”

All seafood served will be sustainably sourced. “We want to make sure that we are using sustainable ingredients within our recipes,” he said. “We have been passionate about sustainable seafood for a number of years now.”

Compostability is important as well. “All of the waste we would generate for the dining facility is for the most part compostable, with a very small part that would make its way to a landfill,” said DiStefano. “This particular facility will do over 10,000 meals a day, 12,000 meals to start. It is going to be very popular. We want to make sure that we are focusing in on reduction of waste.”

DiStefano is excited for the new Hampshire and its future. “It is an ongoing process, and we are really looking forward to having that interaction. The ability to be as close to students as we can with this particular building, with the open floor plan, using student feedback and the number of years of planning, we are really excited about having a building that is not solely focused on what today’s students want, but what tomorrow’s students are going to be looking for as well.”