

CU Boulder's Center for Community More Than Just a Name

The new Center for Community at the University of Colorado (CU) at Boulder is all about bringing students, faculty and staff on campus together. The dining locations in the center follow the community directive.

"The concept of the building in itself is to be the hub for the campus," said Cairon Moore, assistant director, Department of Housing & Dining Services. "All of the offices that are important for students' success are housed under one roof. It is the first time in CU's history and is probably fairly unique to most universities.

"When parents and students visit campus, it is kind of a one-stop shop. They can come to the dining office, which is next door to your meal-plan office and where you get your ID cards. You go upstairs and finance is there – anything they might need in one area instead of traversing across the campus."



She continued, "They wanted the Center for Community mainly to aid in the students' success - a place where students could go to find everything they are going to need to be successful during their college career. This way, it is a resource center and a place for students to feel comfortable just hanging out and getting a sense of community."

A key to that sense of community is the dining locations in the center. "We really wanted to take college dining to a whole new level," said Moore. "We wanted to take it a step further and do much more fresh, local sustainable cooking. The building itself is LEED Gold certified. We were trying to marry a dining center that was also sustainable from an energy standpoint, as well as in the food that we serve, which is difficult in Colorado because we have a very short growing season. We wanted to be able to feature fresh and natural products from our state, as well as around this area."

A major aspect of the dining locations was the desire to add an authentic international experience, as well as education, through micro-restaurants. "We wanted to hit on the cultures that we see here at the university, doing authentic cultural cooking and to be part of the students' learning environment, so that when they go to the Italian station, for instance, they are not just eating your typical pizza," she said. "They are also getting to enjoy foods from Sicily, Rome and Tuscany, so that they get a full understanding of how north, south, east and west in a country, the foods vary. We then tie in the education component with why they vary."

All of the international stations have simple names — the name of the cuisine followed by that culture's word for food. The Italian station is called Italian Cibo. "We chose to represent Italy because we know that Italian food in America is huge," said Moore. "We know that is going to be a hit with the students, and it is something that we can do that is very fresh. Making homemade pasta and adding fresh vegetables and meats and cheeses continues to give them something that they like, that they recognize and that is good for them."

Latin Comida features a variety of flavors. "It not only has the quintessential burrito, but we are also making our own tortillas," she said. "They are getting a fresh tortilla made right in front of them. They can also have an experience of food from Chile, Brazil, Argentina, the Caribbean, Spain or Puerto Rico."

With a large Persian population on campus, it was necessary to open Persian Ghaza, featuring the region's cuisine.

Asian foods are available at Asian Shi Pin. "It is set up like a two-sided buffet," said Moore. "Each day they have two different salads and they feature foods from both the Near and the





Far East. They have dishes from India, from Singapore, China, Korea, Japan, Indonesia and Vietnam.”

Wholesome Fields — a play on the school’s football stadium Folsom Field — features 42 linear feet of fresh salads, a deli and 20 feet of cereals. “We have a totally separate salad bar that is an A9-free area that is all allergen free,” she said. “All of our dining centers have an allergy-free zone where students can find gluten-free products, lactose-free milk, rice milk, soy milk — anything they may need to round out their meals.”

Smoke N Grill features comfort foods. “Students can always find hamburger sliders, hot dog sliders, chicken breast sliders, mac and cheese, broccoli, mashed potatoes, whether it was with garlic or basil,” Moore said. “It just depends on who is the chef. There is also a smoker there and a rotisserie.”

The Sushi micro-restaurant serves fresh-made sushi, including rolls featuring smoked salmon prepared at Smoke N Grill.

Other micro-restaurants include: Kosher, a moshiaich-supervised kosher kitchen; Black Coats, a chef’s station used for “guest chefs,” including the football coach, faculty area chefs and culinary apprentices; and Desserts, featuring fresh-baked cookies all day, various cakes and pies, hard-packed ice cream sundaes and made-to-order crepes.

A great deal of research went into every station. “All of our stations were two years in the making,” she said. “Each of our

dining centers took on a culture, worked through menu choices and tried them on their students to see if they liked it and what we could change. We went to our staff, who were from all areas of the world, and they had input into the recipe development.”

She continued, “This all led to a culmination on campus in August when we got the set of keys to actually get in there with our new equipment. It was learning new cooking techniques for our culinary staff. It was from our frontline employees to our chefs, working side by side developing recipes that would be authentic to their culture. It was a real community before we became a Center for Community.”

For Moore, a very big part of the micro-restaurants is the switch to a small-plate concept for the all-you-care-to-eat facility. “One of the things that we noticed in all of our facilities, particularly for freshmen, is that their mom typically makes a meal, and you either like it or you fix yourself a bowl of cereal or a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. When students first come on campus, when they go through the line, they just can’t make up their mind because there are so many choices. So they pile their trays or their plates full of everything and they only eat half of it. What we have done here is they have 10 different choices — they have 10 different micro-restaurants they can go to for their meal, but we serve smaller portions on smaller plates, so they are getting a couple of mouthfuls.”

This concept has been able to cut down on food waste.

“They will get two pieces of sushi, three pieces of edamame, ginger and a little bit of wasabi on the plate,” she said. “They can come back as many times as they want, but that is the serving size.”

The seating areas take cues from the micro-restaurants they are near. “Where the Italian concept is, the dining room has an Italian flair to it,” she said. “The ceiling has wooden cutouts that actually look like a town in Florence. What we tried to do is we wanted to make individual dining rooms — even though the facility seats 1,000 people — we wanted to make each



dining room and area unique and intimate so it didn't feel like a giant food court.

"We were very careful with alcoves and banquettes and high-back chairs in certain areas and housewalls, just to break the space and give intimacy for each seating group. In the Italian section, each of the booths has a lighting box on the side panel so students can adjust the lighting depending on their mood. I think there are 10 different lighting features so they can have mood lighting. There are different colors, different textures. They can have a multi-color rainbow."

Dining stations were designed with design consultant The Baker Group. "It was two years of sitting down with them fairly frequently to go through what our vision was, and also coming up with authentic-looking stations that really gave the feel of what we were looking for," said Moore. "We wanted to try to meld the old with the new in our design, so at least it was something that would be respectful to the culture, but also respectful to the time and the students and their need to be hip and sleek. I think we accomplished that with our design."

Community was obviously a very essential part of the design of the facility. "They are standing in line and waiting for food to be prepared as they like it, but because they are waiting for their food to be prepared in line, they are now talking to people around them, which I did not see in other dining centers," she said. "Here, because they are waiting in line for a couple of minutes, we are seeing a lot of the professors, a lot of the faculty and staff come in for lunch, which we did not see at a lot of our other dining centers. The chancellor may be waiting in line for her burrito and the kid in front of her turns around and they start a conversation. We are seeing a much better mix of the community from the faculty, staff and administration to our students. It is much more hands-on, touchy feely, everyone communicating."

With more customization of meals, the dining staff now has more interaction with guests. "It is forcing our service staff to talk to the students, which is making them understand why we talk about customer service so much because now they have to do a better job of customer service," said Moore. "They are enjoying their jobs more because they are really interacting with students instead of just refilling hotel pans of food."

In addition to the micro-restaurants, two retail locations are located in the building. "The WeatherTech Café, which has a corporate sponsor, opens at 11 a.m. and closes at 2 a.m.," she said. "They do smoothies, gelatos, fresh-tossed salads, made-to-order pizza. You can have your own individual pizza with whatever you want on it. If you like a chicken guacamole

UNIVERSITY of COLORADO

School: University of Colorado

Location: Boulder, Colo.

Enrollment: 30,000

Type of Operation: Self-Op

Number of dining facilities on campus: 5 dining centers, 5 Grab 'n Gos, 3 Convenience Stores

Approximate number of meals served daily: 11,000

Annual food/beverage purchases: \$5 million

Key Staff:

Amy Beckstrom, Director

Cairon Moore, Assistant Director

Matt Bratton, General Manager Center for Community

Kerry Paterson, Executive Chef



onion pizza, they will make that for you. They are made in a Wood Stone oven."

The other retail location is a full-service bakery." It is just like a commercial bakery in any town center," said Moore. "The beauty of that is a parent can call in and the bakery chef will make a cake for their son or daughter for their birthday. We have the typical bakery items like scones, croissants and breads, cupcakes, you name it."

Sustainability

As with so many dining facilities that are being built on campuses, sustainability was very much a part of the creation of the LEED Gold-certified Center for Community.

The use of natural light was maximized. "The lighting company worked on lighting panels to take advantage of the natural light we have," said Moore. "We have a lot of windows in our dining center. You have natural light coming from the ceiling of the central atrium. The entire dining center is surrounded by windows. They monitored how the light is from morning to night so the light adjusts based on the lighting outside, which is an energy saver, instead of just fully on or fully off."

In addition to the new equipment, some equipment was re-used from an underutilized dining hall that was taken offline. "It needed to be refurbished, there were some structural issues and it was time for that one to be put to bed," she said. "This dining center took over from that. It was a remote dining center. The new dining center is right in the center of campus." —OCH