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Designing concepts that engage diners

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By Alaina Lancaster (</profile/alaina-lancaster>)

June 15, 2016

It's no secret millennials crave adventure in their dining experience—about 40 percent seek out any food that's new and different, according to The Hartman Group. The mystery is how to keep younger generations of consumers engaged as experiential dining quickly becomes the status quo. Noncommercial foodservice operations are getting savvy, anticipating this demand and throttling adaptable spaces forward. Watch out, action stations—new engaging and flexible innovations are afoot.

Moving pieces

Wichita State University designed a platform for the city's blossoming commercial food truck culture, inviting endless dining options for the Kansas university. WSU transformed a portion of a vacant golf course on campus into a food truck plaza; opening in June, independent food truck operators will be welcome to set up shop at the site.



“Wichita State has a large international student population, and the current mix of establishments isn’t fulfilling their needs,” says Tracee Friess, director of communications for the Research and Technology Transfer department. “[The city of] Wichita has a strong, diverse food truck industry that will provide a wider range of dining options.” The plaza will have four stalls for food trucks and tables between each stall where guests can sit and enjoy their eats.

Fully Equipped

When Deloitte University—the learning and development hub for the Westlake, Texas-based financial services firm’s 70,000 employees— opened The Market in 2011, the layout focused on four malleable food stations. This allows the space to transition between mealparts with completely different offerings—say, Caribbean for lunch and then Spanish for dinner. Communal seating in the dining room is designed to encourage engagement and networking; there is not a single two-top table.

In the past year and a half, The Market’s team also began investing in new mobile equipment. Roll-up gyro meat roasters, grills, griddles and induction blocks bring the kitchen wholly into the dining space and allow greater flexibility in offerings. The mobile cookery and complimentary meals (yes, everything is free) encourage guests to experiment, says Mike Jackson, director of food & beverage. “It’s just part of Deloitte’s goal to make the experience ever-evolving for the customers,” Jackson says. In the spring and fall, equipment is moved outside to entice DU guests to dine on the 200-seat patio.

Fresh Meat

At Western Michigan University (<http://www.foodservicedirector.com/industry-news-opinion/news/articles/western-michigan-u-renovation-feature-dining-neighborhoods>)’s new Valley Dining Center, opening this fall, the “Traditions” station is purposefully vague. Stocked with carving equipment, rotisseries, smokers, fryers and charbroilers, the station is able to switch from healthy, made-to-order fare to more indulgent food on a dime, says Judy Gipper, director of dining services for the Kalamazoo, Mich., university. The station is located near an entrance, so while the rest of the center shuts down, Traditions can sling late-night munchies. “This station is going to provide us with the ability to change,” she says.

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