

## Assisted Living

# Elevate Your Dining Experience

Dining program improvements can drive wellness, resident satisfaction and occupancy goals. »BY RICHARD B. SCHENKEL



goal is to respect the dignity and culture of the community you serve, you have to take these differences into account.

### FRESH FOOD

Does fresh food mean a pre-packaged meal that is fresh out of the oven? Does it mean that you have prepared a fresh meal from pre-cut, frozen ingredients? Or does it mean that everything in the meal is prepared from locally sourced fresh ingredients?

To make the concept more manageable, consider fresh food as a continuum. Your goal is to move from “can to pan” towards meals made from scratch and cooked to order with the finest seasonal and, where possible, organic and locally sourced ingredients.

Each move along this continuum improves the nutritional content, flavor, texture and appeal of the food. Each move increases the level of skill required by the staff that prepare the meals. And each move elevates the influence of your dining program on resident satisfaction and occupancy goals in your facility.

In addition, there is mounting evidence that organically grown fruits, vegetables and grains offer significantly higher levels of many nutrients and lower exposure to nitrates and pesticide residues than their conventionally grown counterparts.

Research by students at Truman State University in Missouri found organically grown oranges contained up to 30 percent more vitamin C than those grown conventionally.<sup>1</sup> In another study, levels of antioxidants in sustainably grown corn were 58.5 percent higher than in conventionally grown corn. Levels of antioxidants in organic strawberries were 19 percent higher than in those grown conventionally.<sup>2</sup> ▶

Executives in communities that serve the growing senior population recognize that high quality dining programs are critical as they strive to meet resident satisfaction and facility occupancy goals in a competitive marketplace.

Senior dining programs facilitate social interaction, support health and wellness objectives and provide a critical link to the lives and communities of residents. A variety of progressive strategies are being used to elevate the dining experience in senior communities and improve resident satisfaction scores.

### TRACKING TRENDS

Last summer, we surveyed a cross-section of executives from long-term care communities

to identify trends in the marketplace. The results confirmed our own observations and clearly identified three critical issues:

- fresh vs. convenience foods
- resident choice in food selection and dining options
- service that upholds resident dignity.

The greater the organizational commitment in each of these areas, the more successful the executive considered his or her dining program to be.

Senior communities are complex, and the needs and expectations of residents in independent or assisted living communities are very different from those in skilled nursing or memory care environments.

Also, tastes and preferences vary widely in different regions of the country; so does access to fresh, local ingredients. If your



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JEFFREY LEESER