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Colorado hospital food gets hip replacement

Bistros emerge where bland reigned, drawing the public and praise

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April Avila of Montrose Memorial Hospital's Lobby Grille removes a vegetarian pizza from the oven as chef Vincent Loco looks on. (William Woody, Special to The Denver Post)

Take a left inside the main entrance of

Montrose Memorial Hospital, and you'll run into the grim lines of chairs in the emergency-room waiting area. But follow your nose to the right, and you'll be welcomed by chili-lime crab cakes, grilled polenta, tapas plates and seared tuna with frizzled leeks.

Like a host of other modern hospital cafeterias, Montrose Memorial's Lobby Grille is following a trend that makes it tough to recall those old cramped and dingy institutional eateries with their steam trays of soggy offerings. The basement bastions of gelatin cubes and beef 'n' noodles have been transformed into front-and-center bistros serving haute hospital cuisine.

The tasty fare may have started out for the benefit of patients and expanded as a perk for employees and a comfort for patient visitors. But it has evolved into upscale cuisine good enough to draw in diners who have no other reason to be at a hospital — except that they crave marinated skirt steak or chilled mango soup.

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A machaca flat-iron steak with cilantro tomatillo and corn salsa is served at Parker Adventist Hospital. (Parker Adventist Hospital)

Chef-prepared gourmet fare rather than institutional meals isn't about profit. Most hospital cafeterias aspire to break even at best. And it isn't all about the food. There's a bit of marketing involved too.

Ads for doctors, classes

While they have the public dining on cedar-planked salmon and carrot and fennel soup, some are using tools such as flat-screen messages to advertise new physicians and medical equipment and promote hospital-based classes and support groups.

"It's a chance to showcase our hospitals," said Steven Summer, chief executive of the Colorado Hospital Association. "This is part of the recognition of hospitals as more community institutions, not just as places where you go in crisis."

But they certainly are places to go in a recession.

Hospital food ranges from pocket-change cheap to deeply discounted compared with restaurants serving similar fare.

"In this economy, you won't be able to find a better value in food," said



A fresh salmon filet is served with flat bread over a bed of spinach salad at Montrose Memorial Hospital's Lobby Grille. (Photos: William Woody, Special to The Denver Post (left); Parker Adventist Hospital)

Cornell Colbert, general manager of food services at Memorial Hospital North in Colorado

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Springs.

Memorial North's Terrace Garden Cafe last month did what a decade ago was unthinkable: It won restaurant-review praise in the local newspaper's Table Talk column for its Friday night seafood buffets and Sunday brunches.

At Parker Adventist Hospital's glassed-in, circular cafeteria, chef Daniel Skay is preparing for a national hospital-food competition on the order of the Food Channel's "Iron Chef." He thinks he has a winner with his machaca flat-iron steak with cilantro tomatillo and corn salsa.

Skay, who cuts his own steaks and seasons dishes from a decorative herb garden outside the hospital, said 300 to 400 people eat lunch at the cafeteria every day, a number helped by physicians who tell their patients to make time for a wonderful meal before or after their appointments. A local water board meets there regularly, and some folks make it a destination on their way to Denver International Airport.

Revenues up 200%

The Garden Terrace Cafe at Mercy Medical Center in Durango has become a favorite dining spot for construction workers on a nearby highway project and for business people who drive out from town to the hospital's new location, increasing the hospital's cafeteria revenues 200 percent since the new cafeteria opened. They rave about the \$5.95 jumbo salads featuring marinated flank steak and artichokes or blueberries and grilled chicken — items

costing at least twice that downtown. Made-from-scratch soups are only \$1.50 a bowl.

Rose Medical Center in Denver recently purchased two grills for barbecues outside the Rose Garden Cafe, and Montrose Memorial has just begun firing up a smoker outside the hospital's back doors each Thursday for a special summer offering of brisket, pulled pork, chicken and ribs.

"My whole goal is to positively affect people through food," said Mike Krull, a Culinary Institute of America-trained chef who has been responsible for moving Montrose Memorial from goulash to Thai red-curry mussels and balsamic bison burgers.

"Oh, it's wonderful. We were here last night and had pork picata, and today, we're having a chicken quesadilla and this poppy-seed cake. "We share meals so we can eat here for under \$6," said Boo Gilbert, who was just polishing off her fifth meal that week in the Lobby Grille with her husband, Everett. "I tell everyone around town that they should eat here."

That kind of word-of-mouth publicity is at work around the state and has made hospital-cafeteria regulars out of high school students, service clubs, Air Force cadets and retirees. Many of these diners may not know it, but they are getting lessons in healthy eating along with their mango-salsa tilapia and fresh tomato chutney.

Hospitals are using portion sizes, fresh ingredients and calorie counts as teaching tools.

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As Summer put it, diners are learning that a meal can be "healthy but exciting."

At Memorial North, the back of each receipt lists the nutrition information and calorie counts for each item ordered. The hospital also identifies "wellness" items on the menu, and after a diner has purchased five of these, the next is free.

Mercy Medical stresses the relaxing and comforting aspects of food as well. The cafeteria has an outdoor "healing garden" for dining, with shaded tables, a waterfall and sculptures.

"I think our hospitals are becoming wellness destinations," said Mercy spokesman David Bruzzese. "We have an environment promoting wellness rather than just focusing on the sick."

In many hospitals, patients won't miss that. If the cafeterias aren't visible inside front entrances, as they are in the newer hospitals, menu boards advertising the daily gourmet specials usually are. So are upscale coffee bars and gelato stands that hint at the fare to be found inside.

This haute hospital-cuisine movement may shift even further away from the days of canned green beans and stringy roast beef. Some hospital chefs are planning on expanding catering outside the hospital. Some are dreaming about special dinners made of all local ingredients, of farmers' markets and full gardens outside, of beer and wine licenses.

"Just think of us as restaurants," said Krull. "Very

good restaurants."

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