

That's not hospital food

Being in the hospital isn't something any of us wish for ... or having someone we love there isn't any better ... and if feeling rotten isn't enough, the meals they bring you used to rank right up there with school lunches for palatability ... that meant mystery meat, cardboard covered with a pasty sauce or something a neon-ish green that one can only guess is kryptonite. Not only that, but it was usually cold, even if it wasn't supposed to be.

Well, guess what? That's no longer the case, at least at Bartow Regional Medical Center. Stuck there for about 36 hours recently, some of us were exposed to what could rank up there with modern medical miracles: tasty, appealing and hot meals. Say what? The moons and stars



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must have been properly aligned or we entered an alternate universe...

Of course, the meals weren't for me, they were for my beloved, but when he didn't choke on the first bite, I had to take a taste — or two...

The first meal arrived unannounced and unexpected, as was the BRMC sleep-over, but its harbinger was a delightful young woman with a cheery smile and the most upbeat attitude you can hope for ... I don't remember the food that first delivery, but I remember Carmen. She apologized that he had no choice in what she served and said she'd be back to take

my husband's order for breakfast. Back to take his order? What? This isn't a restaurant is it? No, it's the hospital isn't it?

After Carmen made her tray retrieval rounds, she bounced back in asked if my husband wanted whole grain pancakes with bacon and syrup or old fashioned oatmeal with raisins and diced pears for breakfast ... he asked if he could get eggs and she said she'd get back to him. Well, we never expected to see her again ...

Lo, and behold, it's the next morning and here comes Carmen with her loaded tray ... it's pancakes, bacon, pears and scrambled eggs! "I told you I'd try to get you some eggs," she said. And she did.

And, he said, somewhat surprised, "They're pretty good."

Ditto for the pancakes.

When Carmen came back for the third time in our brief stay, she was armed with more than a tray. She had a menu with her and a pen. She wasn't there just to be nice, she was there to take his order. You heard me, to take his order!

She handed him a menu that looks like a fairly upscale carte from a mid-scale restaurant. It has selections by day of the week and meal to be served, i.e. breakfast, lunch or dinner. Because we were there for a Monday supper, had had a Tuesday breakfast, the option was for a Tuesday lunch.

Carmen said the choices were Italian meatloaf with broccoli and whipped potatoes or soup and an egg salad sandwich.. Because he's not big on a huge lunch, he opted for the soup

and sandwich, asking if he could substitute chicken noodle soup for the proposed classic tomato. "No problem," Carmen says.

Later, on cue, the vivacious Carmen brings in the lunch tray...just what he ordered. Soup, and egg salad sandwich. "This is really good," he says, "especially the egg salad."

The entire scene was replayed again...this time focusing on the dinner menu: the options were roast turkey with dressing and gravy with mixed garden veggies, peaches and a cookie or a chicken salad wrap with macaroni salad, the fruit and cookie. Since we were busting out, we declined to order, knowing our release would be before dinner was served.

The whole point of this discourse is this: the meals on the printed

menu were not the standard or heretofore normal for hospital food. They seemed to be selections from a nationwide yuppie-ish restaurant. They include western chili pasta, lasagna roll-ups, Tuscan turkey sandwiches, baked ziti, garlic her rubbed pork loin, slow-cooked braised beef ... just to name a few.

It seems that hospitals, or Bartow's anyway, have finally figured it out..if you eat well, you get well. Of course, my patient had no dietary restrictions, so we can't vouch for the low salt, or carb-restricted fare.

Hospital stays are rarely fun, in fact most are barely acceptable. But, somehow, looking forward to a decent meal took the edge off. For that BRMC gets a big tip....and Carmen gets a gold star ...