

Company cooks up new meaning for ‘hospital food’

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Would you like a handmade burger of locally sourced beef on herb focaccia bread with spicy Korean mayo and sweet potato fries? Feel free to swap the red meat for free-range chicken or a portabello mushroom.



It sounds like the menu at a trendy new restaurant or food truck. In fact, it's the cafeteria at Northside Hospital on Pill Hill, where Sandy Springs-based Morrison Healthcare cooks up meals for everyone from patients to the public.

Welcome to a new era where the once-dreaded term “hospital food” now means higher quality and more choices.

“Food’s an ever-evolving journey,” said Jeremy Rhodes, Morrison’s regional director of operations. “It’s not just about nourishing the body anymore.” Morrison is trying to stay ahead of trends driven by TV cooking shows, food trucks and better awareness of the role of the dining experience in patient health, he said.



A customer orders a custom burger at Morrison Healthcare's cafeteria in Northside Hospital. (Photo John Ruch)

Or as Bryan Penland, Morrison’s senior director food and nutrition at Northside, put it more simply, it’s getting away from expectations of “red Jell-O, blue Jell-O.”

All Northside cooking is done on-site under Executive Chef Tim Wade, who previously ran the kitchens at Atlanta’s Hyatt Regency hotel and the Chateau Elan Winery and Resort in Braselton, Ga.

As a company, Morrison has transformed in response to dining trends. It began life in 1920 as Morrison’s Cafeteria, an Alabama-based restaurant chain that was highly popular for decades across the Southeast. The Ruby Tuesday restaurants joined the company in the 1980s.

In the 1990s, Morrison shifted out of the restaurant business into three divisions—all based in Sandy Springs—providing food service to hospitals and senior living facilities and housekeeping-type services to both. Morrison now is owned by U.K.-based Compass Group, which provides food services in such places as military outposts and oil rigs, and locally to such facilities as the Georgia Aquarium, the Georgia Dome and the new Falcons stadium.

Morrison Healthcare serves hospitals around the country and locally, including Northside’s neighbor, Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta Scottish Rite. The company’s philosophy is “the power of choice,” said Penland, and that choice includes customized contracts to serve a hospital’s unique demands.

At Scottish Rite, that includes hotel-style room service available anytime—a feature young patients and their families praised during the new Ronald McDonald House opening earlier this year.

At Northside, Morrison provides all food service except a standalone McDonald's franchise, and that means running several mini-businesses to keep different sorts of customers happy. On a given day, Morrison serves about 1,500 patient meals; serves 500 to 800 staff and visitors in the cafeteria; and cooks more than 175 meals in the doctor's lounge. The company also operates a coffee stand called the Lotus Blossom Café and caters such in-house events as board meetings.

On the retail side, Morrison has a semi-captive audience of busy staff who need fast meals—but who also can get bored eating at the same place every day.

Those handcrafted burgers are part of a new “micro-concept” menu, inspired by food trucks. Three days a week, the cafeteria offers fancier, handmade menu items—a little more pricey, but more customized—and has the staff wear a different style of uniform to add to the atmosphere. Morrison commissions restaurant-style demographic research to come up with the concepts.

“We're not winging this,” said Rhodes. “It's not a bunch of old guys sitting around saying, ‘Let's do a burger concept.’”

But Morrison's main job is acting as the hospital's food department. Penland works on-site and supervises 125 hospital employees.

“We're here for the patients,” Rhodes said, and Morrison aims to offer them a similar menu of choices within the bounds doctors and nursing staff set. Penland said patients always have hot and cold meal options, and if the patient doesn't like either one, “we can accommodate most patient requests.”

“If you get a turkey sandwich with flatbread and hummus...it makes them want to eat, makes them stronger,” Rhodes said of the health benefits of better menu choices.

“Our food and nutrition service is an integral part of the care that Northside provides,” said Lee Echols, Northside's vice president of marketing and communications. “We are proud of the exceptional quality of the cuisine, food selections and service that our staff provide.”

Morrison also pre-plans for disasters that bring in mass casualties or damage the hospital. It's not abstract to Penland, who led a DeKalb Medical Center kitchen staff trapped by the 2014 “snowpocalypse,” or to Rhodes, who was running a New Orleans hospital's food service when Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005 and stayed through flooding and looting. “[If] we can boil water, we can make food,” said Penland.

More typical is Morrison's planning for patients' special events. Penland said one young patient recently missed his prom when bone marrow treatment went longer than expected. Morrison cooked up a “five-star meal” and nursing staff threw an in-room party. “We had a prom for him in his room,” Penland said. “The smile he had made even the hard days you have in food service worth it.”

“Other than births, it's not a great experience” to be in a hospital, said Rhodes. “The highlight of your day, typically it's a meal...We hope to be the highlight of someone's day.”

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