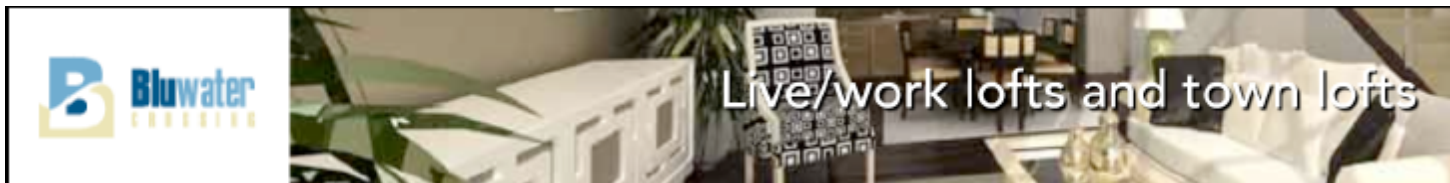


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College Cuisine 2.0

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Today's dining hall denizens demand more healthful food

By Eleanor Yang Su

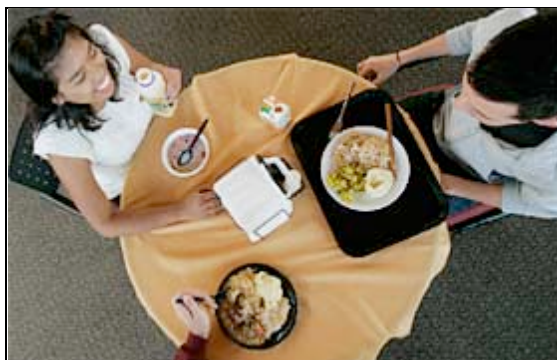
UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

February 23, 2007

Sushi made-to-order. Organic fruits and vegetables. French fries made without artery-clogging trans fats.

College dining halls (don't call them cafeterias) have been shedding their image as assembly-line servers of mystery meat.

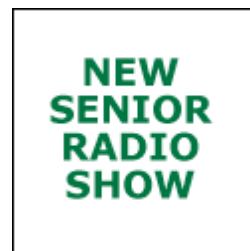
Campuses from UC San Diego to Ohio State University have switched cooking oils to eliminate trans fats, which can increase cholesterol levels and the risk of heart attack. UC Berkeley opened the first certified organic college salad bar last April – to growing demand. Colleges are still serving pizzas and burgers, but they've expanded their repertoire to include other cuisines, such as Indian, Middle Eastern and Thai.



JIM BAIRD / Union-Tribune

Students Grace Castillo and Wes Kovarik sampled the fare at UCSD's Cafe Ventanas on a recent Wednesday night, when the school's newest dining hall offers adventuresome or upscale cuisines. Kovarik ordered the Liberian rockfish.

Many people might not associate the \$11.1 billion, mass-produced college dining industry with the "slow food movement," which encourages using locally grown organic produce to make dishes from scratch. And yet more than 200 college dining officials from around the world gathered in Long Beach this week to discuss slow food and organic produce, and to hold a culinary contest reminiscent of the Food Network's "Iron Chef."



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College officials say the changes have been fueled by today's health-conscious students, who have grown up watching celebrity chef shows and traveling and sampling food abroad. They're accustomed to the quality and variety of restaurant dining, and aren't shy about leaving campus to find it, industry analysts said.

Recently at the University of San Diego's Torero Grille, students waited in line as a sushi chef tucked crab meat and salmon into rolls and drizzled them with sauce.

Sitting outdoors overlooking a canyon, USD freshman Brent Klovstad ate a plate of spicy tuna rolls while talking with a colleague. Nearly half the students on the patio ate sushi.

"One thing I insisted on before choosing a school was checking out the dining facilities," Klovstad said. "I had to make sure I liked the food. It's similar to the dorms. If I didn't like the dorms or the food, I wouldn't go to the school."

Healthful changes

Five pans sizzled on the stove with fresh-cut vegetables. A long line of students snaked through the cafeteria, waiting to order their customized penne pasta at San Diego State's Cuicacalli dining hall.

"Tomatoes and zucchini and chicken, no sauce," one student said to a cook.

"Everything but the olives, in Alfredo sauce," the next student said.

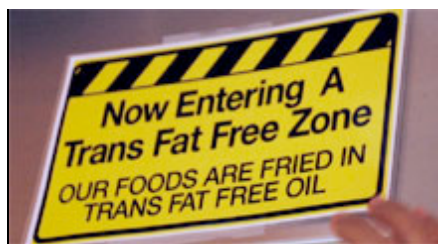
Across the brightly lit cafeteria, a cook called out names using a wireless microphone to let students know their burgers were hot off the grill, garnished with delicately sliced tomatoes, pickles, lettuce and onions.

Made-to-order meals are dominating the college cafeteria scene. More recently, schools are eliminating trans fats from cooking oils.

UC San Diego, San Diego State and USD have cut trans fat oils from fried and baked foods at their dining halls – SDSU as recently as last August.

Several local college officials spent months testing alternative oils that don't alter the flavor.

"It was a pretty major deal for us," said Alan Moloney, UCSD's associate



Overview

Background: Today's college students have more sophisticated palates and are demanding more healthful and diverse food on campus.

What's changing: Colleges are providing more nutritious options, eliminating trans fats from their cooking oils and providing more upscale offerings, such as made-to-order pastas and sushi.

The future: College cafeterias are becoming more like restaurants, offering fewer all-you-can-eat options and more pay-as-you-go meals. Students are urging colleges to make dining halls more environmentally responsible, use more biodegradable products and recycle more.

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director of housing and dining services. "Once we worked it out financially, it was pretty easy to decide."

The standard soups and sandwiches are still around, but the offerings have multiplied. Dining options on a recent night at SDSU's cafeteria included a Thai noodle bar with chicken and seafood, stuffed tomatoes with orzo, and gyro and feta cheese pizza.



PEGGY PEATTIE / Union-Tribune

Bathed in steam from bubbling pasta, chef Victor Gonzalez cooks up customized dishes at San Diego State's Cuicacalli dining hall. Made-to-order meals are a hot trend on the college cafeteria scene.

USD has expanded its vegetarian and vegan options, and it introduced made-to-order sushi and an organic salad bar last month.

"Students expect the latest and the best," said Loryn Johnson, USD's marketing and development manager for dining services. "They go out to eat a lot, and they're out there at San Diego's finest restaurants."

UCSD provides students with an opportunity to try adventuresome or upscale cuisines on Wednesday nights at its newest dining hall, Cafe Ventanas. Students can enjoy a "fine dining" experience with selections such as prime rib or scampi, or global theme nights that offer ethnic cuisines from places including Africa and India. More than 300 students usually show up.

"It's for monotony breakers," Moloney said.

Growing costs

The recent improvements and broadened selections have boosted food prices in many cases, but dozens of San Diego students interviewed say it's worth it.

"The prices have gone up a little, but I'd rather have good food," said Burleigh Drummond, a UCSD sophomore eating a hummus and turkey ciabatta sandwich last week at the OceanView Terrace cafeteria.

If anything, several students said they would prefer even more healthful and varied options.

"If the food is not good, I'm not going to eat it," said UCSD freshman Ariel Whitson.

The demand for higher-quality food has stoked sales for colleges across the country. On-campus student dining purchases rose 3.4 percent in the past year, according to a survey released this month by *Food Service Director* magazine.

And sales are projected to increase by 5 percent next year, according to food consulting firm Technomic Inc. As college dining services have become more business savvy, they've come under increasing pressure to boost revenue for schools, said John Lawn, editor-in-chief of *Food*

Management magazine.

At UCSD, the dining facilities raked in \$22.7 million in revenue last year, while spending \$20.4 million. San Diego State's dining operation took in \$17.2 million and spent about \$17.1 million – far better than five years ago, when its costs exceeded revenue by more than \$1 million.

No more all-you-can eat

College officials say they are using upscale markets such as Whole Foods and the restaurant industry as models, rather than other universities.

Many have shifted away from the all-you-can-eat system to more varied options, including grab-and-go meals and declining-balance meal plans that allow students to pay for individual dishes.

The grab-and-go market, which includes wrapped sandwiches, fruit cups and similar portable meals and snacks, has grown dramatically in the past two years.

Advertisement



USD provides grab-and-go options at all its retail facilities, and has seen sales grow 25 percent in the past year. SDSU officials say their portable food business has tripled in the past two years.

“Students today are too busy in their daily lives to sit down and enjoy a meal,” said Paul Melchoir, associate director of SDSU's dining service. “They eat on the run. They eat in classrooms.”

Another trend that college officials expect to have a big impact in coming years is a greater focus on environmental issues in college dining.

Many colleges, including several in San Diego, buy produce from local growers. That results in fresher fruits and vegetables, and it's better for the environment, officials said, because it requires less shipping and fewer fertilizers.

SDSU started a program in the fall that composts fruit, vegetable and meat trimmings from the cafeteria. So far, the campus has diverted 28 tons from the Miramar Landfill.

USD officials say they're considering switching from paper and Styrofoam packaging to materials that are biodegradable and made out of sugar cane.

“We're finding that the generation we're serving now really cares about these issues,” said Kim LaPeau, marketing coordinator for residential and student services at UC Berkeley's Cal Dining. “They're asking us questions like, 'Where does the food come from? How is it grown? How far did it

travel?' They're more curious about what happens to the food before it's served.”

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