

Sparky's Place

Meeting Students' Needs

The newly renovated "Sparky's Place" main dining hall at Merrimack College in North Andover, Mass., was designed to meet the diverse needs of today's students, and also recognizes one special long-time employee.

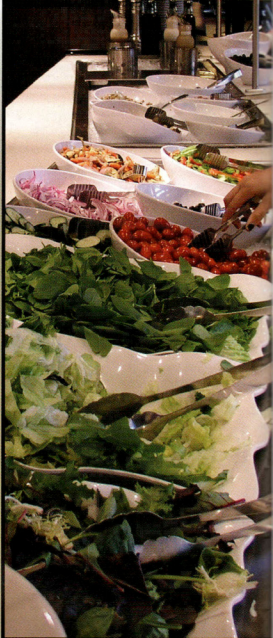
The hall was originally built in 1947 and up until 2000, it was known as Gildea Hall. After a renovation, it was known as Crossroads Café.

"It had last been renovated 10 years ago and with feeding, we have 1,400 students on the meal plan," said Karen Upton, marketing specialist with Sodexo, the campus foodservice provider. "For 10 years, three meals a day, it was really getting a little dated, and it was just time. We have partnered with the school for almost two decades now, and as a team, we decided it was time to take it to the next level. More and more, dining and sense of community is so important on campuses, especially for retention. We knew it was time."

To find out what the students wanted in the renovation, the dining staff did intercept surveys with small computers. "We surveyed the students and we asked them about their food preferences and the attributes that were most important to them when it came to dining," she said. "The overwhelming top three were convenience, nutrition and variety. That helped us drive the equipment set and the setup for the stations, the menu planning and things like that. That really helped us get a sense of the pulse of the students and what they were looking for."

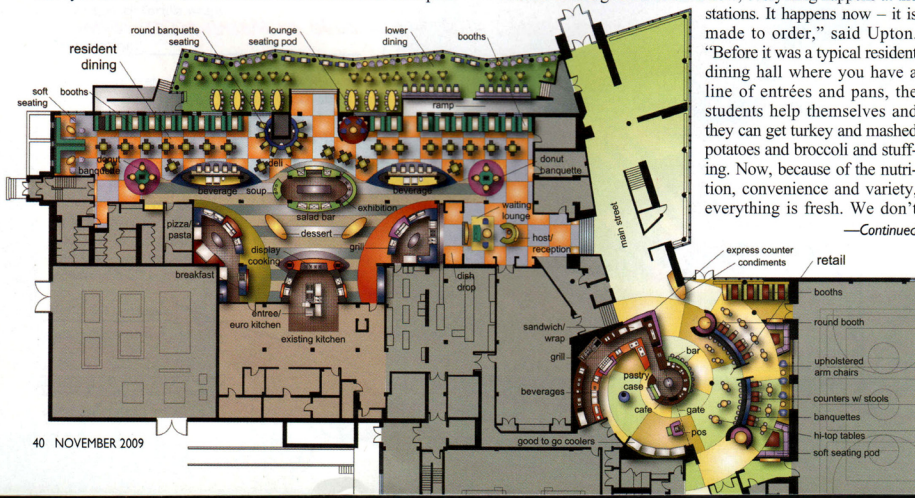


The newly renovated dining hall at Merrimack College in North Andover, Mass., was named after longtime food-service worker Cynthia "Sparky" Ouellette. Pictured here (left to right), Merrimack College President Ronald Champagne, Jeannette Ouellette (Cynthia's mother), Ouellette, Sodexo District Manager Varun Avasthi and Sodexo Operations Manager Matthew Vaillente.



The biggest change was the move to display cooking. "Instead of being in the kitchen now, everything happens at the stations. It happens now – it is made to order," said Upton. "Before it was a typical resident dining hall where you have a line of entrées and pans, the students help themselves and they can get turkey and mashed potatoes and broccoli and stuffing. Now, because of the nutrition, convenience and variety, everything is fresh. We don't

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use frozen vegetables. We don't use canned vegetables. We try and bring everything in fresh and make sauces from scratch."

Another change is that all entrées are now plated and ready to go for students. "It has definitely helped with the nutrition factor because students don't necessarily take 12 ounces of turkey and six ounces of potatoes, and they never have vegetables," she said. "Now that it is plated out, there is a salmon filet and there is a rice pilaf and there is a serving of asparagus on the plate."

While students can still order a customized plate, the new service method has helped with throughput.

Upton said there is another "fantastic" side effect of serving this way. "With the whole scare with the avian flu and H1N1, there are individual plates, so it is not a lot of students going through a buffet line and the food being exposed. They are now only touching one plate."

Another factor in the nutrition component is that the school has switched to square plates and bowls from Homer Laughlin. "They are smaller than the 'older' style that encour-



aged everyone to overeat — assisting in leading to the obesity epidemic and the freshman 15/20," Upton explained.

A very unique addition to the dining hall is an area called My Zone, a little pantry/small kitchen off to the side of the dining hall that is a designated allergy-free zone. "It is gluten free, dairy free and peanut free," she said. "They have their own microwave, their own toaster. There are about 12 students who use it. It isn't a lot, but we know this is growing semester after semester and it is very important to student enrollment and retention. It is very important to parents when they are looking at schools, if their child has certain dietary needs."

The 12 students work with the chef, who will have special items already prepared for them in the refrigerator.

Merrimack is also one of the first schools to have an aspreto location, Sodexo's ethical coffee and tea brand, which has already been successful. "Our prior coffee offerings probably only sold three pots a day," said Upton. "Now, we are selling nearly 1,000 cups a day. It is all sustainable and we use all-natural coffee and tea products. It is dedicated to reducing the amount of materials used. Everything is chosen to respect the environment and respect the communities in which we do business."

A part of the proceeds of the sales at aspreto goes to Sodexo's Stop Hunger Initiative, and sustainability is the core of nearly everything involved with the location. "All of the marketing collateral is printed on 100 percent recycled paper using soy ink," she said. "The backdrop for the coffee station is made of 100 percent recycled metal. We use post-consumer fiber in the cups as much as possible. We work with suppliers to reduce the carbon footprint. Even the wraps that go around the air pots are made of 100 percent post-consumer fiber. Even the tea racks are made with recycled metal and is covered in a renewable material."



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Design

Sparky's Place also makes use of local products. "We have what we call our Local Flavors campaign," said Upton.

"One week during the month, we highlight one local flavor. Last month we highlighted local apples. We did a display of apples and we do cards about each of the apples – what the flavor profile is, what they are good for, and we also have apple recipes during the week. It is an educational piece for the students as well. In New England, it is very tough in the winter, so maybe we will highlight local maple syrups or local cheeses. There are some farms in the area, which is fantastic."

In addition to the food offerings, the look and feel of the dining hall were changed, thanks to a design by Connor Architecture of Massachusetts. "We went from all round tables to rounds, ovals, booths that seat up to eight people," she said. "We have actually gained. If there were two students eating together at a round table, maybe some other students wouldn't sit down and eat with them because there were four or six other chairs at the table. Now that two can grab a two-top, there is seating that is not going to waste. It is more of a restaurant feel. It is unbelievable."



The front entrance also features a 42-inch screen that is broken into four sections. "There is a running banner on the bottom with news of what is going on in the building because it is in the campus center, so it is definitely a hotbed of activity on campus. Then we have the menu and we have scrolling messages about local food, sustainability. We let the student clubs send us information and we post it on the screen."

A Special Name

The hall is named after Cynthia "Sparky" Ouellette, who has worked in food service at that location for 31 years. Alyssa Wollman, a senior, submitted the name as part of a contest. "Every time I go into the dining hall, even if I'm having a bad day, I know I can count on Sparky to say hello to me and put a smile on my face. I know when I go to the dining hall, I am getting more than just food, but also treated friendly by someone who loves her job and the students who eat there."

"Because the space was so different and we really wanted to make it part of the community, we worked with Students Activities and we had a contest to name the new space," said Upton. "We opened the week before Labor Day and we had the contest as all students put in the name they thought it should be and submitted the story behind the name they chose."



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