


THE JOURNAL ON

ACTIVE AGING

2025, Volume 24, Issue 4



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The Journal on Active Aging®

The culinary & hospitality issue
2025, Volume 24, Issue 4

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The power of a choice

Nearly 25 years ago, I emptied my retirement savings to launch an enterprise that barely existed as an idea—the International Council on Active Aging®. From the outside, it was a gamble. From the inside, it felt like the only option. I believed that aging could mean something far different than decline.

Here's the thing about choices: They rarely stay contained. A single decision may look personal, but the effects ripple outward—through organizations, communities and families. Sometimes they echo across generations. You can't always predict where the ripples will land, but you can see when they've shifted the current.

That is, in many ways, the story of ICAA. Our mission, *Changing the Way We Age*®, rests on a simple conviction: Wellness is the heartbeat of life. It isn't one grand gesture. It's the accumulation of thousands of small choices, embedded in the ordinary pulse of life.

Over the past decades, those choices have carried ICAA far. We've turned ideas into action—through industry research and think tanks, training and tools—each decision widening the ripple of wellness and helping leaders translate intention into everyday practice.

Now another ripple becomes a wave. Our next choice is to place culinary, nutrition and hospitality squarely within the framework of wellness. Expectations are changing as rapidly as demographics. Today's residents and members want authenticity, flavor, transparency and

agency. They know that the food they are served and *how* it is served shapes health, connection and daily joy.

This fall, we are officially launching the ICAA Culinary, Nutrition and Hospitality Network—a long-term commitment to making food not just better, but transformative. Together with partners Restaura and CrossCheck, we've created the ICAA Culinary and Hospitality Standards of Excellence and the ICAA Plate of Distinction. These aspirational benchmarks are inspired by the way Michelin stars once redefined dining—designed to recognize and celebrate when a meal eclipses nourishment and elevates life.

Efforts are already underway with the new division, as you'll read in the pages of this *Journal on Active Aging*®. The articles ahead—including our call to action—explore the many ways culinary, nutrition and hospitality can “change the way we age.” Thank you to guest editor Sandy Todd Webster, MSFS, a career journalist and editor of leading nutrition publications and a *JAA* columnist, for curating the educational content.

Beyond this special issue, the network will continue the conversation through twice-yearly think tanks, a monthly webinar series for culinary and wellness teams, and a new members' newsletter, all aimed at helping organizations align kitchens, dining rooms and culture with wellness values residents can taste and feel.

Looking back, the decision I made almost a quarter-century ago still surprises me. It was not the safest choice. But it

became the most important one, because choices don't just shape the present. They chart the course for how we live, and ultimately, how we age.

I invite you to join us in this next chapter. Read and share the insights in this *JAA* issue with colleagues. Explore the Standards of Excellence with your teams. Nominate your community for the Plate of Distinction. Take part in our think tanks and webinars. Together, let's elevate culinary, nutrition and hospitality into a signature experience—one that nourishes not only the body, but the culture of wellness itself. 🍷

Colin Milner, CEO
International Council on Active Aging®



Connect with Colin Milner on X (formerly Twitter), Facebook and LinkedIn.

A man in a pink polo shirt, white shorts, a white cap with a logo, and sunglasses is captured in the middle of a golf swing on a green field. In the background, another person is visible near a golf bag on a wooden stand, and there are some buildings under a clear sky.

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Industry news



Chefs, cooks and dietitians from CCL Hospitality Group's Unidine and Morrison Living gathered for the 2025 Puree with Purpose competition, celebrating culinary creativity and clinical nutrition in texture-modified dining for individuals with swallowing difficulties. Image courtesy of CCL Hospitality Group

Puree with Purpose 2025 competition: Dignified dining for people with dysphagia

CCL Hospitality Group's operating companies, Unidine® and Morrison Living, recently hosted the 2025 Puree with Purpose competition, highlighting the intersection of culinary creativity and clinical nutrition in texture-modified dining for individuals with dysphagia (difficulty swallowing).

The annual event brought together chefs, cooks and registered dietitians to craft safe, flavorful and visually appealing pureed meals that resemble traditional dishes. The competition reinforces the importance of dignity and enjoyment in senior dining. Competitors relied on whole food ingredients and natural thickening agents, ensuring that clinical nutrition goals were met without compromising flavor or presentation.

According to CCL's press release, more than 9 million Americans, many of them older adults, are affected by dysphagia, making texture-modified diets a critical

aspect of care. "As clinicians and culinarians, our mission is to deliver meals that meet the clinical needs of our residents and patients while offering the same sense of joy and anticipation that dining brings to all of us," says Ellen Lowre, CCL's vice president of nutrition, wellness and sustainability.

Coterie Hudson Yards hosts chef showdown

Coterie Hudson Yards in New York City marked National Culinary Arts Month in July 2025 by hosting its first Chef Showdown, a collaborative cook-off pairing celebrity chefs with residents. The event celebrated the role of food in fostering community, memory and creativity.

Held in Coterie's signature restaurant, The Brass Room, the showdown brought together award-winning chefs and restaurateurs Maneet Chauhan, Michel Nischan and Chad Welch. Each chef was paired with a resident sous-chef to craft dishes inspired by the residents' culinary memories. All dishes incorpo-

rated Wholesome Crave soup, created by James Beard Award-winner Nischan as part of his charitable efforts to provide meals that support a healthier planet and equitable access to wholesome food. (Wholesome Crave soups are served at all Coterie communities.) The star-studded event was emceed by celebrity chef Rocco DiSpirito, with residents and guests serving as judges.

Chef Chauhan and her sous-chef Walter took top honors with their spin on a shrimp "walking taco," a portable meal consisting of taco ingredients served directly in a single-serving bag of chips. Other dishes included Nischan's and resident Rita's shrimp with jasmine rice and Welch's and Mary's shrimp roll on brioche.

"At Coterie, we've seen time and again how good food brings people together. It creates conversation, evokes memory and builds community, all things that matter deeply to people of all ages," says Sarah Laloyan, senior vice president of operations. The luxury senior living brand is a collaboration between Atria and Related Companies.

The Chef Showdown highlights the potential of engaging residents directly in cooking experiences. Pairing residents with culinary professionals, celebrating personal food stories and highlighting wellness-oriented ingredients can strengthen community culture, promote social connection and create memorable dining experiences that go beyond the plate.

Bon Appétit report highlights food literacy impact

As senior dining teams increasingly become part of the wellness ecosystem, a new report from Bon Appétit Management Company offers a compelling case for integrating food literacy into every meal served.

In its newly released *Food Education Impact Report*, the company outlines how it

has brought food education to life across its national network of corporate and college cafés—hosting more than 50,000 interactive events since launching its formal education program in 2020. These events include hands-on cooking classes, waste reduction demos, local farm visits and nutrition workshops. More than just programming, they're designed to shift behaviors and foster deeper awareness around where food comes from, how it's produced and what it means for personal and planetary health.

The same concepts—engaged learning around food, place-based education and cross-departmental partnerships—can be adapted to 50-and-over communities to foster not only better eating habits but also cognitive engagement, emotional well-being and social connection.

“At Bon Appétit, we believe food education is a powerful tool for change,” says Terri Brownlee, MPH, RD, LDN, vice president of wellness and food education. “As our global food system becomes more complex, ensuring that our communities understand the social and environmental complexity of that sys-

tem—along with the effect of food on our health—is all the more important. This report showcases the impact of our teams' creativity and commitment to cultivating a more informed and thoughtful food culture, one plate and one conversation at a time.” View the full *Food Education Impact Report* at <https://www.bamco.com/blog/introducing-the-food-education-team-impact-report/>

Modern Luxury DC honors Inspir Embassy Row

Inspir Embassy Row, a luxury assisted living and memory care community in Washington, DC, was named the winner in *Modern Luxury DC's* “Best Of” awards in the senior living category. Announced in July, the annual awards celebrate standout brands in design, hospitality, wellness and lifestyle, as voted by readers and editors.

“This recognition is a testament to our commitment to redefining what senior living can be,” says Shane Herlet, MGS, co-CEO of Maplewood Senior Living and Inspir, a Maplewood brand. “We are incredibly proud to offer an elevated life-

style rooted in purposeful design, vibrant community and world-class care in one of the city's most iconic neighborhoods.”

Set within a historic building, Inspir Embassy Row features elegantly appointed assisted-living and memory-care residences, gourmet restaurant-style dining and curated cultural programming. The community combines award-winning architecture, holistic wellness programs and personalized care to empower residents to pursue a wellness-driven lifestyle. Located steps from Dupont Circle, the property is intended to balance the energy of the city with a serene, sophisticated environment.

Table 1912 reopens with refreshed concept and local focus

Western Home Communities has re-opened Table 1912, a fine dining restaurant located on its Cedar Falls, Iowa, campus. The restaurant blends elevated Midwestern cuisine with thoughtful hospitality.

Continued on page 12

Moves and more



NEXDINE recently promoted Jeremy Tavares. Image courtesy of NEXDINE Hospitality

Hayes Barton Place in Raleigh, North Carolina, has named **Wayne McFarland** as culinary director. He brings more than 20 years of food service and hospitality experience and will lead the community's culinary team in delivering memorable dining experiences ... NEXDINE Hospitality in Mansfield, Massachusetts, recently

promoted **Jeremy Tavares** to the role of chief operating officer, executive vice president. Tavares now oversees enterprise-wide operations for the dining and hospitality service management company, including business performance, service delivery, operational strategy, and cross-functional execution. He also continues to lead the company's culinary, nutrition, health and wellness, guest experience, and brand experience teams ... Trilogy Health Services, LLC, has promoted **Eric Johnson** to vice president of culinary programs and innovation. A longtime leader in the organization's culinary vision, Johnson will spearhead key initiatives including the launch of the **Trilogy Culinary Academy**, a test kitchen focused on innovation, brain-healthy recipes and seasonal

menu development ... Freedom Plaza **Executive Chef Jaime Simoes, Jr.**, has been named the **2025 Life Care Services “Chef of the Year”** after winning a three-round, Chopped-style cook-off in Houston, Texas. His tilapia and couscous dish earned him the national title, a USD\$10,000 prize and cheers from residents back home in Sun City Center, Florida ... Compass Group® USA was named a **Best Employer for Excellence in Health & Well-Being** by Business Group on Health for the fourth consecutive year. Among its offerings, Compass recently expanded its well-being program through the Headspace app, giving associates access to exercises, resources and one-on-one support at no cost.



Western Home Communities' reopening of its fine dining restaurant Table 1912 features a refreshed menu crafted by Executive Chef Matt McDonell that highlights local ingredients while incorporating globally inspired techniques. Image courtesy of Western Home Communities

The reopening marks a renewed commitment to community connection and culinary excellence and illustrates the value of combining elevated cuisine, local sourcing and thoughtful service to create dining experiences that foster resident engagement and community pride.

The refreshed menu, crafted by Executive Chef Matt McDonell, highlights local ingredients while incorporating globally inspired techniques. Dishes range from bacon jam croquettes to salmon roulade, each designed to showcase seasonal flavors. “Our menu tells the story of local Iowa ingredients, seasonal inspiration and heartfelt cooking. We can’t wait to share it with new and returning guests alike,” said McDonell.

Kris Hansen, CEO of Western Home Communities, added, “The reopening of Table 1912 is a meaningful step forward in our vision of bringing people together through excellent food and genuine hospitality.” Visit <https://www.table1912.com> to see the seasonal menu and learn more.

PSL, Culinesse form dining joint venture

Presbyterian Senior Living (PSL), a nonprofit provider of aging services, has partnered with Culinesse, LLC—a boutique dining services management company specializing in hospitality-driven programs for senior living communities—to launch Three Oaks Senior Dining, LLC. The new mission-driven dining management company seeks to serve multilocation senior living networks, beginning with PSL’s own life-plan communities.

The partnership combines PSL’s operational expertise with Culinesse’s hospitality-focused dining approach. “With Three Oaks, we’re creating a dining experience that’s not just about food, but about fostering community, choice and wellness,” says Dan Davis, MA, president and CEO of PSL.

According to Culinesse cofounders Lisa Schairer, MBA, RDN, and Mitch Possinger, MBA, Three Oaks was created around the idea that exceptional dining can spark joy, build community connections and support overall well-being. The initiative will

emphasize resident-centered culinary programs, enhanced training for dining staff, and scalable service models that align with nonprofit values. For culinary and wellness leaders, the approach illustrates how dining services can move beyond meal delivery to become an integral part of community culture and resident engagement.

Phased implementation is now underway across PSL communities, with expansion to other senior living organizations expected in the coming years.

Strategies for grocery retailers to better serve older adults

Grocery retailers have opportunities to better meet the needs of older adults, according to Jeff Weiss, MBA, president and CEO of Age of Majority, a marketing consultancy headquartered in Gloucester, Massachusetts. In a recent blog post, Weiss outlined practical ways stores can adapt—such as accessibility improvements and curated food selections—that reflect older adults’ health needs and culinary interests.

“Wide, clutter-free aisles and clear signage with large, legible fonts can make navigating the store easier,” Weiss wrote. For people with mobility challenges, seating areas and accessible restrooms can further enhance the experience.

Personalized assistance is another key factor. Training staff to help with bagging groceries, reaching high shelves or offering recommendations “can make a significant difference,” Weiss said. He also suggested designating specific shopping hours to create a quieter, less hurried environment.

Technology, if thoughtfully applied, may support older shoppers as well. User-friendly self-checkout systems or mobile apps that help locate items could encourage brand loyalty. “Don’t assume all older adults are technologically challenged,” Weiss cautioned, recommend-

ing tutorials or staff guidance to ensure access for everyone.

Weiss also pointed to the value of curated products and community engagement. Highlighting low-sodium, high-fiber or high-protein foods can address dietary needs, while cooking classes, tastings and health screenings create “a welcoming environment and helps build a loyal customer base.” *Repurposed with permission from Jeff Weiss, Age of Majority.*

Centicor launches integrated dining services platform

Centicor, a new company under the Phoenix3 Collective, has launched a comprehensive suite of dining and hospitality services designed to support healthcare, senior living, education, and corporate and leisure organizations.

The company combines the capabilities of Innovative Hospitality Solutions (IHS), CrossCheckSM and Centicor Procurement Services to offer consulting, program management, quality assurance, and procurement solutions across in-house and outsourced dining operations.

“We created this unique suite of services to empower organizations to define their vision for dining services, assess their current operations, identify opportunities for improvement and accelerate their path to success,” says Centicor CEO Dana Johnston, MDiv. “Our customized solutions in program management, operational consulting, compliance work and procurement are tapping an unmet need in the market.”

Founded in 2006, IHS provides operational assessments, menu development, regulatory readiness, workforce training, technology optimization and design support for both self-operated and outsourced dining programs. CrossCheck delivers data-driven quality assurance across more than 160 criteria, ensuring compliance with industry regulations and contract requirements. Centicor Procurement Services provides category management, spend oversight and supply chain optimization.

“Whether building or sustaining an internal operation or managing a third-party

foodservice arrangement, Centicor is poised to deliver measurable results,” says Matt Mundok, president of IHS.

Memory support dining promotes dignity and engagement

In observation of Alzheimer’s & Brain Awareness Month in June, Providence Point in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, enhanced its Maple and Cedar memory support neighborhoods with Cura Hospitality’s Connections Memory Support Dining Program. The program integrates chef-inspired innovations, staff training, and engagement tools to help residents with Alzheimer’s disease and related dementias enjoy meals with dignity, according to a Cura Hospitality press release.

Baptist Senior Family, Providence Point’s parent company, recently received a LeadingAge PA innovation award for its collaboration with Carnegie Mellon University on feeding care technology and for its life plan community’s redesigned memory neighborhoods, which feature calming colors, smaller activity zones, and spaces tailored for resident engagement.

A signature element of Cura’s program is “Conversation Starters,” a set of 5-by-8-inch cards featuring nostalgic images and questions to encourage dialogue. “My supervisor Megan Hulick went a step further and created Pittsburgh Pirates baseball and Pittsburgh Steelers football conversation starters,” says Cheryl Torre-Rastetter, Cura food service director at Providence Point. “They are a huge hit with residents and staff... it has encouraged residents to share their life experiences.”

Cura also incorporates aromatherapy and Handcrafted Delights (pastries, cookies and scones baked on-site) to stimulate appetite and create positive at-home dining experiences. The use of blue dinner plates and Cura’s Puree Creations further support residents with swallowing difficulties while maintaining visual appeal.

“Providence Point has been such a huge supporter of Cura’s Connections program, and as we know, partnerships are the key to success for positive resident outcomes,” Torre-Rastetter adds.

[Ed. LeadingAge’s recognition of Baptist Senior Family/Carnegie Mellon University appeared in the “Tech news” department in the last *Journal on Active Aging*[®] issue. International Council on Active Aging[®] members can access Issue 3 in the *JAA*’s online archives for 2025 at <https://www.icaa.cc/journal.php>]

Level up: Education pathways for culinary professionals in senior dining

As the role of food in wellness and aging evolves, culinary professionals in senior living are uniquely positioned to lead. Two innovative educational programs offer a next step for those ready to deepen their impact and advance their careers.

CIA master’s in Culinary Therapeutics: This newly launched coursework is part of the Culinary Institute of America’s growing Master of Professional Studies portfolio. The program focuses on translating nutrition science into culinary practice, preparing chefs and food leaders to work at the intersection of taste, health and wellness. <https://masters.culinary.edu/culinary-therapeutics-masters-degree/>

Cornell’s Dining Innovation in Senior Living certificate: Offered through eCornell, this course explores the unique operational and emotional components of foodservice in aging communities, from memory care dining to service innovations that boost quality of life and satisfaction. <https://ecornell.cornell.edu/courses/healthcare/dining-innovation-in-senior-living/>

Simpson launches Vibrant Minds program to promote cognitive wellness

Simpson, a Pennsylvania regional retirement system, has launched Vibrant Minds, a new initiative promoting brain health and cognitive wellness at Simpson House, Simpson Meadows and Jenner’s Pond. The program combines nutrient-rich meals with social dining experiences, staff training and adaptive hospitality strategies to support cognitive function, engagement and independence for residents.

Continued on page 14



Simpson announces the launch of Sodexo's Vibrant Minds program, which offers nutrient-rich meals that support brain health and cognitive wellness. Image courtesy of Simpson/Send2Press Newswire

“At Simpson, we take a proactive approach to wellness and believe that nourishing the mind is just as important as nourishing the body,” says Simpson President and CEO Carol McKinley, PhD. “With the Vibrant Minds program, we are creating an environment that stimulates cognitive function and fosters meaningful connections, with nutrient-rich meals specifically curated to enhance brain health.”

Developed in partnership with Sodexo Seniors, the program includes more than 500 science-based recipes featuring brain-boosting ingredients like leafy greens, berries, omega-3-rich fish, plant-based proteins and microbiome-friendly foods. Dining experiences emphasize colorful plating, adaptive tableware and sensory engagement, while immersive empathy training helps staff better understand residents' experiences.

“We engage with residents during mealtime, getting to know their wants and needs to give them the best experience possible,” says Greg Blumenthal, district manager of Sodexo Seniors. “The Vibrant Minds program reflects our shared purpose to create better everyday experiences and build healthier lives

for all.” Visit <https://us.sodexo.com/industry/senior-living-services> to learn more about the program.

New WTWH Healthcare awards celebrate culinary innovators in senior living

WTWH Healthcare, a division of a B2B media and events company in Cleveland, Ohio, has announced the inaugural DISHED Senior Living Dining Innovation Awards Class of 2025. The awards recognized the culinary professionals transforming senior living dining in the categories specified below:

Culinary Canvas recognizes leaders driving excellence in how dining programs are showcased across marketing channels, including imagery, video, social media, and other dining-related media content. These award-winners included: Anthony Polito, Harbor Retirement Associates; Ignacio Jacobo, The Aspenwood Company; John Pietrangelo, LCS; Marisol Huizar, Sunny Rose Senior Living; Picasso Petion, Maplewood at Strawberry Hill; and Scott Edmunds, Brookdale Senior Living.

Elevating the Experience showcases innovators raising the bar on programming and service with the goal of boosting the senior living dining experience. Professionals honored in this category included: Aking DeLeon, Juniper Village at Newark; Joe Hassel, Presbyterian Living; Larry Atwater, Sage Oak of Denton; Laura Holdsworth, Brookdale Senior Living; Lorenzo Nolasco, Oak Cottage of Santa Barbara; Matthew Steele and Paul Lemke, The Springs Living; Richard McCreadie, Inspir Embassy Row; Ryan King, The Arbor Company; Steven Weintraub, Inspir Carnegie Hill; Tom McGuigan, CCL Hospitality Group; Victor Casado, Northbridge Companies—Stone Hill at Andover; and Woo Seo, Aegis Living.

Operational Optimizer highlights operational trailblazers implementing new approaches and models to gain efficiencies, improve the bottom line, build stronger

workforces and elevate overall operations, while maintaining and enhancing resident satisfaction. Individuals recognized in this category included: Ashley Garnett, Benchmark Senior Living; Benno Garwood, The Springs Living; Brian Gallo, Priority Life Care, LLC; Corrine Montiel, Westminster Terrace Senior Living; Jason Smith, The Springs Living; Missy Raponi, Benchmark Senior Living; Nick Paxton, The Gables of Westerville; Pretoria Cheely, Sodexo; Steve Serdar, Presbyterian Living; and Wanda Manzueta, CCL Hospitality Group.

Palate Pleaser honors chefs and other food and beverage professionals for their innovations in menu creation, use of ingredients, and culinary techniques. The award-winning individuals included: Angel Bravo, Astoria Park Senior Living; Guy Tino, Benchmark Senior Living; JP Hascoat, Peconic Landing; Lacey Rainey, Benchmark Senior Living; Larry Campbell, The Palace Group; Lucas Pettway, Maplewood at Darien; Patrick Armstrong, Northbridge Companies—Avita of Stroudwater; and Petros Kyriazis, Trico LivingWell.

Partner in Innovation recognizes individuals serving senior living dining programs in a vendor capacity, through technology, equipment, ingredients, and more, with an emphasis on how their overall efforts have supported their clients' ability to innovate. WTWH Healthcare honored Matthew Thompson, Restaura Hospitality Group, as this category's winner.

“The innovators we're recognizing with these awards demonstrate what senior living can be at its best, as they create menus and experiences that nourish the body and the soul, facilitating exciting new culinary discoveries while also providing comfort to residents,” said Tim Mullaney, vice president and editorial director with WTWH Healthcare. 🍴

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Nutrition research news



Photo: Galina Afanaseva. Image courtesy of Galyafanaseva.com

Mediterranean diet plus lifestyle changes lowers type 2 diabetes risk in older adults

When paired with reduced calorie intake, moderate physical activity and professional weight-loss support, a Mediterranean-style diet can cut the risk of type 2 diabetes (T2D) by nearly one-third, according to a large international study led by researchers at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and 23 Spanish universities.

Published in *Annals of Internal Medicine*, the study followed 4,746 adults aged 55–75 with overweight or obesity and metabolic syndrome—but no diabetes at baseline. Participants were part of the PREDIMED-Plus clinical trial, the largest nutrition and lifestyle randomized trial in Europe.

After 6 years of following the cohort's health outcomes, researchers found:

- **Reduced risk of T2D:** There was a 31% lower risk of T2D among partici-

pants who combined a Mediterranean diet with calorie reduction (~600 fewer calories per day), moderate physical activity and professional support, compared with those following the Mediterranean diet alone.

- **Modest but meaningful weight loss:** The intervention group lost an average of 3.3 kilograms (7.28 pounds) and reduced waist circumference by 3.6 centimeters (1.42 inches), versus 0.6 kilograms (1.32 pounds) and 0.3 centimeters (0.12 inches) in the control group.
- **Absolute risk reduction:** About 3 fewer cases of diabetes per 100 people.

“We’re facing a global epidemic of diabetes,” said Frank Hu, MD, PhD, Fredrick J. Stare Professor of Nutrition and Epidemiology at Harvard’s Chan School, as quoted in a university press release. “With the highest-level evidence, our study shows that modest, sustained changes in diet and lifestyle could prevent millions of cases of this disease worldwide.”

Coauthor Miguel Martínez-González, MD, PhD, professor at the University of Navarra, highlighted the practical implications: “Adding calorie control and physical activity to the Mediterranean diet prevented around 3 out of every 100 people from developing diabetes—a clear, measurable benefit for public health.”

The Mediterranean diet emphasizes fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, nuts, healthy fats (especially olive oil), moderate intake of dairy and fish, and minimal red meat. Prior research has shown it improves insulin sensitivity and reduces inflammation, both important for diabetes prevention. **Source:** Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, August 25, 2025. **Citation:** *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 2025, Epub August 26, 2025; <https://doi.org/10.7326/ANNALS-25-00388>

Nostalgia and comfort foods may boost meal enjoyment for older adults

Prepared meals designed for older adults may get higher marks if they evoke nostalgia, provide comfort and offer a variety of textures, according to research from Washington State University (WSU).

“Malnutrition is quite prevalent in people over 60 because food may be available, but they won’t eat it if they don’t like it,” said Carolyn Ross, MD, MPH, professor in WSU’s School of Food Science, as quoted in a university press release. “We want to walk a line where food is tasty, convenient and full of nutrients.”

The study, published in the *Journal of Food Science*, involved 81 participants with an average age of 71 who tasted 2 breakfast meals (meat-containing and vegetarian) and 2 desserts (chocolate and vanilla pudding). They rated the meals on liking, comfort, nostalgia and texture. The researchers found:

- **Nostalgia matters:** Foods tied to personal memories, such as a grandmother’s cookies or family barbecues, were rated more favorably.
- **Comfort drives preference:** Items labeled as “comfort foods” scored higher, with cheese emerging as a standout ingredient.
- **Texture variety is key:** Participants preferred meals with a mix of textures, from soft and creamy to crispy and firm. “And for older adults, who may not be able to eat the same firm and crispy foods they once could, keeping as much texture variety as possible is still important,” said Ross.

According to the authors, meal-liking increased when comfort and nostalgia were triggered, while perceived comfort decreased when flavors weren’t strong enough—especially with cheese-containing dishes.

Although the study of food nostalgia is a less established avenue of food science, Ross explained that there is more data about comfort foods, adding that cultural differences also impact preferences.

The research highlights opportunities for culinary and wellness teams to improve members’ and residents’ nutrition by designing meals that balance convenience, nutrition and emotional appeal. “This is a huge and growing population,” Ross emphasized. “We want to help keep them healthy and happy for a long time.” **Source:** Washington State University, February 11, 2025. **Citation:** *Journal of Food Science*, 90(1), e17655, 2025, first published January 25, 2025; <https://doi.org/10.1111/1750-3841.17655>

Dairy Council of California highlights nutrition’s role in healthy aging

With California’s 60-and-over adult population projected to reach 1 in 4 by 2040, nutrition leaders are spotlighting the importance of diet in supporting vitality, independence and quality of



Healthy aging is the focus of 2025’s The Healthy Eating TABLE resource. Image courtesy of the Dairy Council of California

life. The Dairy Council of California has released the latest edition of *The Healthy Eating TABLE*, a publication that translates and amplifies the latest science on nutrition and dairy foods. This issue focuses specifically on healthy aging.

“Nutrition can be a powerful tool in helping older adults maintain health, mental sharpness and a better quality of life,” said Amy DeLisio, MPH, RDN, CEO of the Sacramento-based organization, in a press release. “This edition of *The Healthy Eating TABLE* highlights actionable insights that can inform care, shape programs and support public health strategies.”

Alongside research highlights and expert perspectives, the edition introduces a new evidence-based handout designed to support community nutrition education for older adults. Available in English and Spanish, the resource is intended for use in a variety of settings—from clinics and classrooms to workshops and community outreach events. To expand its reach, a partner-driven evaluation and webinar are planned.

By pairing practical tools with scientific evidence, the Dairy Council aims to spark collaboration among wellness and healthcare professionalism, educators, and community leaders on strategies to promote healthy aging through nutrition. The 2025 *Healthy Eating TABLE* is available online at <https://dairycouncilofca.org/learning-resources/research->

[insights/detail/the-healthy-eating-table-june-2025](https://dairycouncilofca.org/learning-resources/research-insights/detail/the-healthy-eating-table-june-2025). **Source:** Dairy Council of California, June 27, 2025

Less processed diets promote greater weight loss than ultra-processed diets

A new British trial published in *Nature Medicine* offers evidence that the degree of food processing—not just nutrients like fat, sugar or salt—can influence health outcomes.

The randomized, crossover study, led by researchers at University College London (UCL), compared minimally processed food (MPF) diets with ultra-processed food (UPF) diets in 55 adults with overweight or obesity. Participants followed each diet for 8 weeks, with a 4-week “washout” period in between. Both diets were nutritionally matched to the United Kingdom’s *Eatwell Guide* recommendations, and participants were free to eat as much, or as little, as they desired.

Key findings

- Weight loss was nearly double on the MPF diet (–2.06%) compared with the UPF diet (–1.05%).
- The MPF diet produced a larger daily calorie deficit (290 kcal versus 120 kcal).
- Craving control improved significantly more on the MPF diet: twofold greater overall craving reduction, fourfold for savory cravings and nearly double the ability to resist the food most craved.
- Both diets led to small improvements in body weight and composition, likely because they were healthier than participants’ normal diets.
- No significant differences were seen between diets for secondary health markers (e.g., blood pressure, cholesterol), though researchers said longer studies are needed.

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“Though a 2% reduction may not seem very big, that is only over 8 weeks and without people trying to actively reduce their intake,” said lead author Samuel Dicken, PhD, of UCL’s Centre for Obesity Research, in a UCL News report. “If we scaled up these results over the course of a year, we’d expect to see a 13% weight reduction in men and 9% reduction in women on the minimally processed diet, but only a 4% weight reduction in men and 5% in women after the ultra-processed diet. Over time this would start to become a big difference.”

Professor Chris van Tulleken, MD, PhD, a coauthor from the UCL Division of Infection & Immunity, pointed out the policy implications: “The global food system at the moment drives diet-related poor health and obesity, particularly because of the wide availability of cheap, unhealthy food. This study highlights the importance of ultra-processing in driving health outcomes in addition to the role of nutrients like fat, salt and sugar. It underlines the need to shift the policy focus away from individual responsibility and on to the environmental drivers of obesity, such as the influence of multinational food companies in shaping unhealthy food environments,” he told UCL News.

In the same UCL report, senior study author Professor Rachel Batterham, PhD, from the UCL Centre for Obesity Research, added that while both diets improved nutritional intake compared to participants’ typical eating patterns, “Choosing less processed options such as whole foods and cooking from scratch [are] likely to offer additional benefits in terms of body weight, body composition and overall health.”

The authors conclude that national dietary guidelines, which currently focus on nutrients and food groups, may need to address food processing explicitly. Access the *Eatwell Guide* at [https://](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-eatwell-guide)

www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-eatwell-guide. **Source:** University College London, August 3, 2025. **Citation:** *Nature Medicine*, 2025, published online August 4, 2025; <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-025-03842-0>

Sugar metabolism may play protective role against Alzheimer’s

A new study from the Buck Institute for Research on Aging has uncovered an unexpected player in brain health: glycogen, a stored form of sugar. While glycogen is usually associated with the liver and muscles, researchers found that neurons in both human and fruit fly models of tauopathy (a group of neurodegenerative diseases including Alzheimer’s) also build up glycogen—and that this accumulation may worsen disease progression.

The study, published in the journal *Nature Metabolism*, shows that excess glycogen in neurons interferes with the cells’ ability to manage oxidative stress, a hallmark of aging and neurodegeneration. The culprit appears to be tau, the protein that forms harmful tangles in Alzheimer’s.

According to lead author Sudipta Bar, PhD, tau appear to bind to glycogen and block its normal breakdown, leaving neurons unable to protect themselves from damage.


When researchers boosted activity of glycogen phosphorylase (GlyP)—the enzyme that breaks down glycogen—they saw promising results. Neurons redirected sugar metabolism into a protective pathway, reducing oxidative damage. In fruit flies with tau-related disease, enhanced GlyP activity even extended lifespan.

This new study challenges long-standing assumptions about glycogen in the brain, “and it does so with striking implications,” said the study’s senior

researcher, Pankaj Kapahi, PhD, in a NeuroscienceNews.com press release. “Stored glycogen doesn’t just sit there in the brain; it is involved in pathology.”

The team also found that dietary restriction naturally enhanced GlyP activity and improved tau-related outcomes in fly models, suggesting that diet could play a role in protecting brain health. Drugs that mimic dietary restriction, such as a compound called 8-Br-cAMP, produced similar benefits. These findings may help explain why GLP-1 drugs (e.g., Ozempic and Wegovy), already used for diabetes and weight management, are showing promise against dementia.

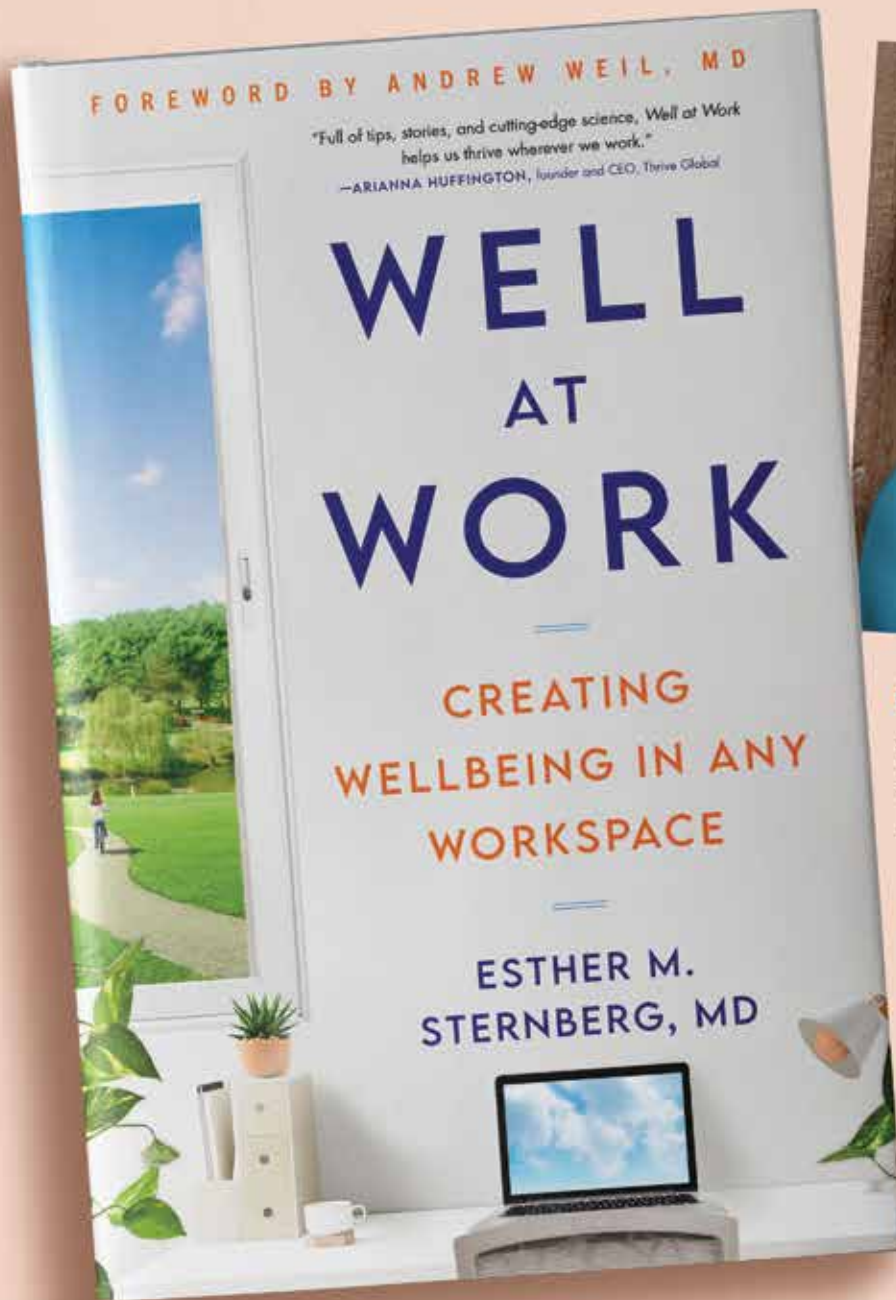
Importantly, the researchers confirmed similar glycogen buildup and protective effects of GlyP in human neurons derived from people living with frontotemporal dementia, pointing toward real-world therapeutic potential.

This work highlights glycogen metabolism as an unexpected hero in the brain, Kapahi said. “By discovering how neurons manage sugar, we may have unearthed a novel therapeutic strategy: one that targets the cell’s inner chemistry to fight age-related decline.” **Source:** Buck Institute for Research on Aging, July 1, 2025. **Citation:** *Nature Metabolism*, 7(7), 1375–1391, 2025; <https://doi.org/10.1038/s42255-025-01314-w> 

ICAA Research Review. Stay up to date with current research by reading ICAA Research Review: Wellness news you can use, the online newsletter of breaking news in health, wellness and demographics. Published 12 times each year, ICAA Research Review is emailed to International Council on Active Aging® members. For more information, visit www.icaa.cc or call ICAA toll-free at 866-335-9777.

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Food tech news



Mill's system transforms kitchen scraps into shelf-stable 'Food Grounds,' boosting household food recovery rates and reducing overall waste. Image courtesy of Mill Industries

Mill expands impact with food recycling system

Mill, a San Bruno, California-based food recycling company, reported new data in June 2025 showing measurable momentum toward its goal of eliminating food waste from landfills, says a PR Newswire press release. To date, households and workplaces using Mill's quiet, in-kitchen food recycling devices have kept nearly 10 million pounds of food out of landfills.

Unlike traditional composting, Mill's system dries and grinds scraps into shelf-stable "Food Grounds," which can be used locally, composted or sent back to Mill to be converted into a chicken feed ingredient. Internal customer data show strong behavior change: Food recovery jumped from 26% to nearly 90% once households began using Mill, while nearly half of customers said they now waste less food overall, citing changes in cooking, shopping and food storage habits.

Mill also released an updated life-cycle assessment (LCA), drawing on over a year of real-world use data from tens of thousands of devices. The analysis found that the typical Mill household avoids 735 kilograms of carbon dioxide—

equivalent emissions (CO₂e) per device used annually through better food scrap management and reduced food waste behaviors. For households previously landfilling food, the benefit rose to 899 kilograms CO₂e avoided per device used/year, according to the press release.

Beyond individual households, Mill reported results from its first community partnership with Phoenix, Arizona-based R.City, a local farm and composter. By incorporating Mill's Food Grounds, R.City achieved a fivefold growth rate, improved collection efficiency and expanded customer capacity fourfold, all while cutting thousands of garbage truck miles from city streets.

For culinary operations, Mill's model highlights how food waste technology can serve both environmental and operational goals. Devices like these may support waste diversion targets, lighten trash loads, and encourage staff and residents to adopt less wasteful purchasing and cooking habits—while strengthening connections to local farms. Visit <https://www.mill.com/lp/lca> to learn more about this technology and to study its *Estimating Mill's Climate Impact* report.

Moorings Park expands nutritional data analysis pilot

With a base of health-conscious residents craving more nutritional data, Moorings Park Communities in Naples, Florida, is building upon a program piloted in May 2024 that provides detailed nutritional data.

The successful pilot in one of its Grande Lake's restaurants has since been expanded to all three of Moorings Park Communities' restaurants, providing residents with nutritional data—including calories, total fat, saturated fat, trans fat, sodium, total carbs, protein, dietary fiber, cholesterol and sugars—for every menu item served.

Unlike commercial restaurants with static menus, senior living communities frequently update offerings, making the challenge of consistent nutritional analysis a notable operational achievement. By implementing this program, Moorings Park is setting a new benchmark that aligns dining services with its commitment to innovation, wellness and personalized care.

"This program is about more than information, it's about supporting health span and overall wellness through everyday decisions," says Jessica Brinkert, MBA, the organization's executive director of Successful Aging. "We now have residents asking for the nutritional value of every ingredient in each dish," she shares. "We're not there yet, but that's clearly the direction this is headed. Already, we have people utilizing the data to customize their orders. For example, asking the chef to substitute an item that they feel is a healthier choice. In most instances, we're able to accommodate them."

The pilot received valuable feedback, leading to refinements that enhanced its effectiveness. Nutritional data is now available in multiple formats for convenience and accessibility. Printed information can be found in each restaurant,

with digital access provided through each neighborhood's website. Soon, the data will also be accessible via a Moorings Park mobile app, allowing residents to review nutritional content anytime, anywhere.

For operators, the initiative illustrates how food tech—in this case, data collection, analysis and digital presentation—can enhance both resident satisfaction and health outcomes. By integrating nutrition transparency into daily operations, dining teams can support informed decision-making, foster engagement with wellness goals, and accommodate personalized dietary preferences without adding workflow burden.



The proprietary Thimus T-Box technology uses neuroscience to measure and quantify diners' emotional responses, offering new insights into how guests experience food and hospitality. Image courtesy of Thimus

CIA partners with Thimus to measure emotional response to hospitality

In May 2025, the Culinary Institute of America (CIA) announced a new collaboration with Thimus, a company that uses neuroscience to study emotions connected to food and dining. With funding from Alamance Foods, the CIA is now using Thimus's proprietary T-Box technology to measure and quantify guests' emotional responses to hospitality experiences.

The project is planned to unfold at the CIA's Hospitality Academy in San Antonio, Texas, as well as its School of Culinary Science and Nutrition in Hyde Park, New York. Researchers aim to capture data on factors such as interpersonal warmth, eye contact and other service interactions—elements that often define hospitality but have been difficult to measure objectively.

“We are truly excited to explore this new arena for research in the fields of food and beverage and hospitality education,” says CIA provost Mark Erickson, MBA. “...it can be easy to overlook the importance of genuine hospitality—eye contact, warmth, and a feeling that, until now, could not be quantified.”

The findings are expected to inform new CIA curricula that train future hospitality leaders to design experiences fostering stronger emotional connections with guests. Mario Ubiali, founder and CEO of Thimus, calls the partnership “a natural fit,” combining the CIA's expertise with Thimus's technology and research network.

For senior dining operators and hospitality leaders, this type of research could provide fresh insight into how residents experience service. Beyond food quality, emotional connection at the table can play a critical role in resident well-being, satisfaction and social engagement. Learn more about the T-Box at <https://thimus.com/solutions/>

Tech tools for less waste, more impact

Food waste, excess packaging and inefficiencies in the kitchen aren't just environmental concerns, they are operational challenges that senior living communities face daily. A new foodservice technology solution from Topanga, a California-based enterprise startup, is offering one potential fix—and seeing early traction in senior living.

Topanga's platform pairs two complementary tools:

- **ReusePass**, a reusable container program that replaces disposable packaging with a trackable system residents can participate in; and
- **StreamLine**, a data capture system that maps food from prep to post-service, providing visibility into production, waste and labor usage.

One of the early adopters is The Waters of Eden Prairie, a high-acuity senior living community in Minnesota. The team there rolled out ReusePass earlier this year, allowing residents to opt into a

closed-loop container program for meals delivered to rooms or common areas.

“Residents responded positively,” says Page Schult, cofounder and CEO of Topanga. “It's a tangible way to participate in sustainability, and staff appreciate the consistency and reduction in packaging waste.”

While full impact data is still being gathered, preliminary insights suggest fewer single-use containers, streamlined back-of-house operations and improved tracking of food usage and waste.

The technology supports a broader trend of bringing enterprise-grade solutions into senior dining, an area that has historically lagged corporate and college foodservice in tech adoption. The data Topanga provides can help operators right-size production, track resident meal preferences and reduce overprepping—three areas that directly impact both bottom line and resident satisfaction. Visit <https://topanga.io/> to view the case study.

Dairy alternatives expand wellness opportunities

The global dairy alternatives market—valued at \$35.3 billion in 2024 and projected to more than triple by 2035, according to a report published by Meticulous Research®—presents both operational and wellness opportunities for senior dining programs.

Plant-based products can support resident health, streamline operations and reduce environmental impact, all while meeting rising demand. Lactose intolerance, dairy allergies and chronic conditions such as heart disease and diabetes are driving adoption of plant-based dairy alternatives. These include alternative milks, yogurts, cheeses and butters.

Plant-based alternatives are versatile: Oat and almond milks perform well in baking, sauces and beverages, while barista-quality products support resident-favorite lattes and cappuccinos. By consolidating around multipurpose plant-based SKUs (stock keeping units), operators can reduce inventory complexity while offering inclusive

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During its IFT FIRST event, the Institute of Food Technologists recognized the 2025 Achievement Award recipients and the newest class of IFT Fellows—honors considered among the highest in the global science of food community. Image courtesy of the Institute of Food Technologists

options for those with allergies, intolerances or other dietary restrictions.

These products are part of the fast-growing food technology sector, where science and innovation are reshaping traditional foods to improve sustainability and health outcomes. Advances in fortified and functional products, premium lines and retail-ready formats mean that plant-based dairy is moving from niche to mainstream. Operators who integrate these options can meet the expectations of residents accustomed to plant-based diets and position their programs as innovative and inclusive. Visit <https://www.meticulousresearch.com/product/dairy-alternatives-market-5128> for the full report.

IFT honors 2025 Achievement Award winners and IFT Fellows

The Institute of Food Technologists (IFT®), a nonprofit scientific organization committed to advancing the science of food, recognized the recipients of its 2025 Achievement Awards and the newest class of IFT Fellows during its annual event and expo IFT FIRST, held July 13–16 in Chicago, Illinois.

Being elected an IFT Fellow or receiving an IFT Achievement Award is considered one of the highest honors in the science of food community.

“It was an honor to recognize these outstanding individuals at IFT FIRST this year,” said Christie Tarantino-Dean, MPA, CEO of IFT, in a press release. “Their work exemplifies the power of applying expertise to real-world challenges, and their contributions are helping to drive innovation, inspire collaboration and advance a more sustainable global food system.”

The 2025 IFT Achievement Award recipients included: Mark Barenie (Distinguished Service Award); Kanika Bhargava, PhD (Excellence in Education Award); Martha Cassens, MS (Distinguished Career Award); Levente Diosady, PhD, PEng (Lifetime Achievement Award); Robert Gravani, PhD (Outstanding Partnership Award); David Lundahl, MS (Sensory & Consumer Sciences Achievement Award); Kasiviswanathan Muthukumarappan, PhD (International Food Security Award); Prateek Sharma, PhD (Outstanding Young Scientist Award); Fidel Toldrá, PhD (Research & Development Award); Purnendu C. Vasavada, PhD (Humanitarian Award for Service to the Science of Food); and Meijun Zhu, PhD (Achievements in Microbial Research for Food Safety Award).

The 2025 Class of IFT Fellows includes Eva Almenar, PhD; Maria Leonora Lotis

Francisco, PhD; Jung H. Han, PhD; Sooyeon Lee, PhD; Marleny D.A. Saldaña, PhD; and Subramaniam Sathivel, PhD.

“Becoming an IFT Fellow is among the highest honors in the field of food science,” says IFT Board President Christopher Daubert, PhD. “This honor celebrates those who have made a lasting impact through significant service, scholarship, leadership, and contributions to IFT and the profession.”

Functional beverages gain traction

Functional beverages—ranging from gut-health tonics to clean-energy drinks—are one of the fastest-growing segments in the beverage industry, according to a press release by Equity Insider. The growth is fueled by rising health consciousness, demand for immunity and mood support, and interest in nonalcoholic and low-sugar alternatives. Major players are investing heavily in new formulations and national distribution for this segment of food tech.

For senior dining teams, functional beverages can provide new tools to enhance wellness offerings. Drinks with prebiotic fiber, vitamin fortification or low-sugar formulations can support resident digestive health, hydration and overall well-being while offering flavorful, visually appealing options.

Incorporating these beverages into meal programs, hydration stations or social events allows operators to meet diverse dietary needs, accommodate moderation-focused residents and align with sustainability goals through plant-forward ingredients.

As functional beverages become more mainstream, culinary teams that experiment early with these products can differentiate their programs, foster resident engagement and integrate food-tech innovations into daily operations—without relying on conventional sugary sodas or alcohol-centric beverages. ☺



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Nourishing the future

of active aging

ICAA deepens its commitment to culinary, nutrition and hospitality as central catalysts of wellness

by Sandy Todd Webster, MSFS

Across cultures and throughout history, sharing food has been one of humanity's most unifying rituals. We break bread in celebration and in sorrow, in daily rhythm, and at life's milestones. Meals bring us together, build trust, heal us and knit the fabric of community.

At the International Council on Active Aging®, we believe that every meal

served in our member organizations can be a meaningful, intentional opportunity to nourish the bodies, minds, spirits and social health of diners. In the same way that we continue to build a foundation for culture change through a multidimensional model, we will now also sharpen our focus on culinary, nutrition and hospitality as essential, interconnected catalysts of wellness.

Our call to action recognizes food not merely as sustenance, but as a powerful vehicle for health, connection, culture and identity. Guided by ICAA's Culinary and Hospitality Standards of Excellence and ICAA's Plate of Distinction pro-



gram, we invite leaders across sectors to join us in advancing this vision for food and dining as key components in a multifaceted view of health that considers the whole person. [Ed. See the article on pages 54–60 for more about the new standards and the award program, created by ICAA in collaboration with Restaura and CrossCheck.]

1. WHY THIS AND WHY NOW?

1. Demographics and expectations are changing

By 2040, 81 million adults aged 65 and older are expected to comprise 22% of the US population.¹ With an estimated

\$7.6 trillion in annual spending power, this group—which drives what is often referred to as the Longevity Economy—is shaping new expectations around service, lifestyle and wellness.² In the dining sector, that translates to demand for higher-quality food, greater variety and seamless experiences.³

Boomers and Gen Xers, the next major cohort of 50-and-overs, are demanding more intentional, enriching and health-supportive lifestyles.⁴ They value transparency, customization, sustainability and culinary experiences that reflect their lifelong identities and values.^{4,5}

2. Nutrition is central to prevention, resilience and recovery

Approximately 80% of older adults live with at least one chronic condition including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis and cognitive decline.⁶ An abundance of evidence links dietary patterns to both the prevention and management of these conditions.⁷ Nutrition-responsive care models, especially those grounded in a “Food is Medicine” (FIM) framework, are gaining traction as cost-effective and clinically significant interventions.⁸

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Nourishing the future of active aging *Continued from page 25*



Our vision is aligned with the core tenets of lifestyle medicine and the FIM movement, both of which position food-related choices as a cornerstone of preventive and therapeutic health strategies. Lifestyle medicine, a clinical discipline long advocated by the American College of Lifestyle Medicine, emphasizes evidence-based interventions such as whole-food, plant-predominant nutrition; physical activity; stress management; and social connection to prevent, treat and even reverse chronic disease.⁹

Similarly, the FIM paradigm recognizes the therapeutic role of food in improving clinical outcomes and enhancing quality of life. Interventions such as medically tailored meals and groceries, produce prescriptions, and culinary education have been shown to reduce hospital admissions,

lower healthcare costs and improve nutrition security.^{10,11}

ICAA believes FIM principles support not just longer lives, but healthier and more purposeful ones. ICAA's commitment to science-based, culturally respectful and ethically grounded nutrition aligns directly with these approaches, ensuring that food is a proactive tool for health—not a reactive burden.

3. Food is fundamental to quality of life, social interaction and community satisfaction

Dining programs are among the most visible, impactful and emotionally resonant services in 50-and-over communities. Research shows that food quality and dining experience are primary drivers of

resident satisfaction, occupancy and reputation.^{12,13,14} The dining room is where wellness comes alive daily through meals that foster physical health, mental clarity, a sense of belonging, and joy.

4. Sustainability is imperative

Our food choices are among the most powerful determinants of both human and planetary wellness. Food systems account for approximately one-third of global greenhouse gas emissions, with animal-based products contributing disproportionately to this carbon footprint.¹⁵ As climate instability, soil degradation and biodiversity loss accelerate and directly impact food quality, it is no longer sensible to separate environmental sustainability from nutrition or wellness.¹⁶ The two are inextricably linked.

In collaboration with the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, the Culinary Institute of America's Menus of Change initiative emphasizes the urgent need to shift toward plant-forward, environmentally intelligent dining models that reflect current nutrition science and ecological realities. Their research-backed principles call for reducing red meat consumption; promoting whole vegetables and fruits, whole grains, dark leafy greens, beans, legumes, nuts, and seeds; sourcing sustainably grown produce; reducing consumption of ultra-processed foods (UPFs); and embracing biodiversity on the plate.¹⁷

Healthy soil produced through organic and regenerative agriculture underpins this vision. Crops grown in living, nutrient-rich soil are more likely to be flavorful and contain higher concentrations of key vitamins, minerals and phytonutrients than those from depleted or chemically treated fields.^{18,19,20}

Sustainability is not a passing fad. We believe it is a public health imperative and a defining opportunity to change culinary ecosystems. By sourcing regeneratively, reducing food waste, limiting UPFs and embracing climate-smart menus, we believe in nourishing members and residents

while protecting the ecosystems that sustain us all.

5. Hospitality is a universal principle

True hospitality transcends service. It is an ethos of attentiveness, dignity and respect. In ICAA member locations, it means co-creating food and dining hubs that enhance the inclusion, meaning and human connection that drive wellness. It means honoring cultural preferences and traditions, supporting autonomy, and designing every aspect of the dining experience to reflect and uplift the diverse lives of the people we serve.

6. Technology can transform foodservice

Food technology isn't about automation for its own sake. It's about aligning innovation with the values of safety, choice and care. By integrating such tools, communities can build more resilient, responsive and resident-centered dining programs. At ICAA, we see digital tools and AI-driven systems as catalysts for better health, not as replacements for human connection. When applied thoughtfully, food technology elevates the dining experience while strengthening the core values of wellness, nutrition, hospitality, sustainability and food safety. Food tech also holds potential to drive savings that can be reinvested in ingredients, culinary experiences and teams.

II. ICAA'S VISION: FOOD AS A DRIVER OF HEALTH, COMMUNITY AND MEANING

We envision a future in which mealtimes in all environments are:

Whole and wholesome: Menus are grounded in evidence-based frameworks such as the Culinary Institute of America's Menus of Change, the principles of Lifestyle Medicine, and insights from Blue Zones. Eating patterns are plant-focused, centering on whole grains, vegetables, beans, legumes, nuts, fruits and lean proteins. Menus limit saturated fats, sodium, added sugars and UPFs while maximizing flavor, variety and functional impact on wellness.



Communal and joyful: Dining spaces are lively hubs of connection, celebration and cultural expression. Participants engage in menu planning, chef interactions, cooking classes and themed events that reflect their passions and backgrounds. Each mealtime affirms dignity and reinforces social bonds.

Personalized and science-based: With guidance from chefs, registered dietitians and wellness professionals, delicious, nutritious customization turns diners into raving fans. Meals are tailored to individual needs and preferences, including low-sodium, vegan, kosher, gluten-free, and renal or other specific eating options.

Sustainable and ethical: We encourage sourcing from local farms (especially regenerative and organic) and sustainable

fisheries and aquacultures. We believe in minimizing single-use packaging and food waste; inviting producers to the conversation; and cultivating partnerships through farmers' markets, culinary tourism and food education initiatives.

Practical and scalable: Culinary innovation thrives when it is operationally sound. We support leverage of smart technologies—from digital menus and feedback tools to reservation and meal ordering apps—to streamline operations and elevate resident experiences. Multiple dining venues, including casual cafés, formal dining rooms, in-room options and outdoor spaces reflect the varied rhythms of active lifestyles.

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Nourishing the future of active aging *Continued from page 27*



III. CORE BELIEFS: ICAA'S 'NORTH STAR'

These guiding principles reflect the heart of our mission. They are the compass by which we make decisions, set priorities and measure success. We share them as a model for ICAA member communities and partners who seek to elevate food, dining and hospitality as the foundation of a 360-degree wellness approach. We hope they serve as both inspiration and practical direction for building vibrant, healthful and connected communities through the shared act of nourishing others.

- ICAA believes in evidence-based wellness through nutrition—not fads or false promises. We uphold

the highest standards of scientific integrity. We acknowledge that the scientific body of nutrition evidence is dynamic, layered and ever evolving. Our programs are grounded in research; supported by credentialed professionals; and free from dogma, hype, pseudoscience and unregulated wellness trends.

- We believe in whole, minimally processed food as the foundation for wellness-based foodservice. We champion meals centered on minimally processed, biodiverse and nutrient-rich ingredients. While individuals may explore dietary supplements, we encourage them to do so in consultation with medical providers or registered dietitians. We remain committed to whole food as the most direct, delicious and effective path to wellness.
- ICAA supports responsible food systems that minimize waste. We believe every step of the food cycle—from farm to purchasing to plate—should honor the resources and labor behind it. We support technologies, training and operational strategies that reduce waste, respect farmers and their teams, and reflect environmental responsibility.

- ICAA celebrates the diverse food traditions, values and needs of all people. Dining programs are inclusive, responsive and co-created with members and/or residents to reflect who they are.
- We support human-centered hospitality. ICAA believes in the power of service, story and connection. Even as we embrace innovation and technology, we emphasize that relationships—not transactions—are at the heart of every dining experience.
- We advocate transparency and trust in sourcing and preparation. We support resident curiosity and requests for accountability about where food is grown and sourced and how it is prepared. Open kitchens, procurement clarity, chef interactions and ingredient integrity are all part of the culture we wish to foster.
- ICAA believes in dining as an act of human connection. We value meal-times as essential moments for socialization, community-building and celebration. We encourage teams to design dining environments and experiences that reduce isolation, spark conversation and strengthen relationships.
- We encourage sustainable, regenerative practices that support planetary and human health. This means aligning procurement and menu development with environmental stewardship. From biodiverse, regenerative farms and local sourcing to climate-smart proteins, we support food systems that nourish people without compromising future generations or our planet.
- We promote excellence without ageism. We believe all participants in ICAA member organizations deserve creativity, quality, deliciousness and dignity in every culinary experience.
- ICAA supports mutual recognition of professional scope and expertise across multidisciplinary teams. We value the training and contributions of all who support health through nutrition—chefs, dietitians, wellness directors, hospitality professionals, farmers, fishers and care teams. We encourage collaboration while honoring each discipline's scope of practice to ensure safe, ethical and effective outcomes.

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Nourishing the future of active aging Continued from page 29



For 22 years, Sandy Todd Webster, MSFS, was the Editor in Chief of *IDEA Health & Fitness Association's content—including the award-winning IDEA Fitness Journal and IDEA Food & Nutrition Tips—the fitness industry's leading resources for fitness, wellness and nutrition professionals worldwide. She now writes the Journal on Active Aging's "Nutrition" column.*

Webster is a Rouxbe-certified professional plant-based cook and a Precision Nutrition Level 1 Coach who recently completed a master's degree in Sustainable Food Systems through The Culinary Institute of America. She combines these passions with evidence-based, practical journalism to continue inspiring others to make the world a more just, healthy and regenerative place. Visit www.sandytoddwebster.com for more information.

IV. OUR APPROACH: CONVENING FOR IMPACT

ICAA will lead this movement by convening a collaborative ecosystem of C-suite leaders, foodservice experts, chefs and their talented teams, registered dietitians, hospitality professionals, wellness directors, suppliers, designers, researchers, policy advocates, and service providers.

Together, we will:

- Advance interdisciplinary dialogue on the future of food, aging and wellness.
- Promote continuing education grounded in scope of practice, ethics and evidence.
- Develop toolkits, assessments and benchmarks to support implementation of this vision statement, the ICAA Standards of Excellence and the ICAA Plate of Distinction award program.
- Share case studies and success stories through immersive events and publications.
- Collaborate on research that links food and dining to health outcomes, satisfaction and equity.


V. THE PATH FORWARD

This is not a trend; it is a way of life.

ICAA views the evolving roles of culinary, nutrition and hospitality as opportunities to enhance lives, support wellness, build culture and extend vitality for people and planet. From kitchen and dining room design to ingredient sourcing, and from staffing models to mealtime rituals, every detail matters.

We invite leaders, communities, professionals, suppliers and organizations across culinary, nutrition, hospitality, public health, foodservice, agriculture, product development and active aging to join us in realizing this vision.

Let us nourish with purpose. Let us serve with warmth and respect. Let us make

every meal a moment of wellness-inspired connection, vitality and meaning. 

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Leveraging food excellence as a business strategy

These four case studies show how culinary, nutrition and hospitality innovation drives multilayered ROI

by Laura Quaglio

When Sven Gierlinger became chief experience officer for Northwell Health® in 2014, he used an informal survey to discover why some patients would “probably recommend” the health system instead of “definitely recommend.”

“We wanted to know ‘What’s the difference between good and great?’” he says.

“It became very clear that food quality was a dissatisfier,” says Gierlinger. “What that meant was that we did all this great work—and our patients had a great clinical care experience—but because they had a bad food experience, they downgraded us.” Case in point: One hospital was making all its meals with no salt, even though only 10% of the population required a low-sodium diet. This led to piles of untouched food and soaring waste.

Still, leadership was resistant to investing in improvements—in part because the bar for hospital food has historically been very low.

Gierlinger had a simple proposal for the rest of the C-suite at one of Northwell’s hospitals. “I said, ‘Okay, that’s fine. You just have to eat the hospital food for one week, then we’ll talk,’” he recalls.

The leaders agreed—and pushed back their plates on Day Two.

“They said, ‘The mashed potatoes are like a tennis ball. You could throw them against the wall and have them bounce back,’” says Gierlinger. “I said, ‘Yep, that’s what I’m talking about.’ They said, ‘You’re right. It’s terrible.’ So we started the journey to change that.”

Enjoying the fruits of culinary innovation

Today, Michael J. Dowling, president and CEO of Northwell Health, gives Gierlinger and his team 100% support.

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Flames and flavor: Celebrity chef Susan Feniger brings unbounded energy and creativity to Alice B., a restaurant named a Los Angeles Times' 'Best Restaurant in California.' Beyond accolades, Feniger sees the true value in creating spaces where older adults can find community, connection and joy around food—'I wish my mother-in-law could have had close access to a private restaurant near her assisted living community,' she says, imagining what this model could look like for more people. Image courtesy of Alice B.



From concept to cuisine: Developers Paul Alanis (second from left) and Loren Ostrow (far right) partnered with James Beard-award winning celebrity chefs Mary Sue Milliken (far left) and Susan Feniger to create Alice B., a vibrant on-site restaurant at Living Out that connects residents to Palm Springs through exceptional dining and community. Image courtesy of Alice B.

“He loves what we’re doing around food, and he talks about it in his presentations,” says Gierlinger.

Patient response has turned more loving, too—as illustrated by letters like this: “For almost three weeks, you have served me love on a platter three times every day. ...I want you to know I will never forget how well your kitchen treated us and how grateful I am!”

Statistics bear out this anecdotal evidence. Food quality ratings jumped from the 9th to the 90th percentile for the whole health system and to the 98th and 99th for some Northwell facilities.

“I actually underestimated the impact that foodservice has on patient and staff experience,” says Gierlinger. “It’s far beyond what I thought it could be.”

Read on for actionable real-world stories of how Gierlinger and others brought culinary innovation to their businesses—with outsized impacts for all involved.

Living Out™ and Alice B. Palm Springs, California *Southern California’s first and only luxury 55+ active-adult community for the LGBTQ+ community and allies, with 150 residents*

When real estate developers Loren Ostrow and Paul Alanis designed Living Out they wanted residents to enjoy a safe, supportive and inclusive environment, while still feeling connected to Palm Springs. Ostrow approached award-winning chefs Susan Feniger and Mary Sue Milliken to head up an on-site but privately owned

restaurant and bar—Alice B., named for Alice B. Toklas, the life partner of writer Gertrude Stein.

“A spectacular restaurant and bar is a great place to bring people together,” says Ostrow. Having two celebrity chefs, he knew, would enhance the appeal of both businesses. “People understand that our ability to attract that quality of chef is indicative of our ability to offer quality in the entire Living Out experience.”

The complex also provides a daily continental breakfast, coffee bar and soft-serve ice cream (independent of Alice B.) as included amenities. “The breakfast is a major meeting place and a primary source of initial connection to new residents,” says Ostrow.

With a capacity of about 200 residents, Living Out isn’t enough to sustain Alice B., so Feniger and her team must balance the preferences of residents with the demands of a successful for-profit restaurant.

The fact that Alice B. has been named a *Los Angeles Times*’ “Best Restaurant in California” speaks volumes.¹ So does the comfort and repeated patronage of its resident clientele.

“Oftentimes people are pushed back into the closet [in senior living],” says Feniger. “Here, two men in their 80s coming down to the bar holding hands is the norm. At Alice B., they can be themselves.”

Lessons from Living Out and Alice B.

Get to know your guests

Managers and servers at Alice B. make it a point to get to know residents’ names and prioritize their reservations. Feniger circulates among residents at breakfast to extend an invitation and answer questions. She has also hosted a cooking class and wine tastings for residents, and the bar is home to a baby grand piano, with

biweekly music acts during the busy season. In addition to generating excitement, these events build camaraderie.

Bring local trends home

“In summer, we do lighter fare, like market fish with slow-cooked corn and sauteed market vegetables with salsa verde on top,” says Feniger. All the fish is sustainable, and all meat and proteins are antibiotic-free. Staying on trend adds excitement for residents, visitors, prospects and staff.

Design for flow and access

Ostrow and Feniger both noted that having an external entrance—in addition to the one in the lobby of Living Out—may have been better for both residents and the restaurant. A privacy screen has been added between the elevator bank and the Alice B. doorway, which has improved the look and flow of the area. [Ed. See the related article on front of house design on pages 46–53.]

Lead with purpose

Another way to source inspiration from Living Out: Let mission and values drive culinary innovation. For Living Out, that meant including a dining option that gives residents a place where they can be themselves while interacting with the wider community. For you, that may mean something different, such as exploring menu innovations that may help stem cognitive decline among residents and members.²

If your community has a large population of 80-and-older adults, consider infusing your dining program with offerings designed to enhance gustatory and olfactory senses. According to the US National Institutes of Health, 27% of people in this age group experience altered taste and 32% report an altered sense of smell.^{3,4}

Could it work for you?

At minimum, senior dining locations

can promote their menus and chefs, as Living Out does on its website under the header “Our Value Story.” Feniger says it’s worth considering. She wishes her mother-in-law could have had close access to a private restaurant near her assisted living community. She wonders what this model would look like at a lower price point near communities with subsidized, income-based or otherwise non-luxury housing. “There’s an energy, a liveliness, about making sure people can find community as they age,” she says.

The Sharon at SouthPark Charlotte, North Carolina *A life plan/CCRC serving about 425 residents ages 60+*

Chief Operating Officer of The Sharon at SouthPark, Milton McGowan, DBA, was hired seven years ago to help the

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Sell the sizzle: Add marketing to the menu

According to a 2024 market research study by Age of Majority for culinary services company Restaura, “nearly 70% of respondents rated dining experiences as ‘very important’ when choosing a [senior living] community. Aside from necessities (e.g., affordability, safety, accommodations and meeting needs), food quality is the most important ‘extra’ factor in their choice of residence.”¹

That study also found rising expectations for “dining experiences focused on quality, choice and personalization, with little confidence that this lifestyle currently exists in senior living communities.”¹

With nearly 70% of Boomers planning to age in place—where they (or their families) control quality, choice and personalization—it’s vital that foodservice providers not only deliver on these expectations but also convincingly *communicate* the excellence of the culinary experience.²

The culinary innovators interviewed in this article say they communicate about their culinary program as a matter of course. Some avenues include email, social media, website, print communications, posters, and word of mouth via residents, families and employees.

As you raise the bar, make sure you spread the word across the (charcuterie) board as you put the suggestions in this issue to use!

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Dr. Milton McGowian, DBA, chief operating officer of The Sharon at SouthPark, has led a dining transformation—renovating kitchens and dining spaces, retraining staff, and elevating meals with scratch cooking and refined presentation. His leadership was recognized with the 2025 Association for Healthcare Foodservice Award for Exemplary Leadership. Image courtesy of The Sharon at SouthPark

not-for-profit organization evolve from a third-party, buffet-style food service approach. “We knew we had to prepare for Baby Boomers, who have greater expectations for cuisine and culinary experiences, while still serving the needs of the Silent Generation residents, many of whom liked things as they were,” he says.



Image courtesy of The Sharon at SouthPark

An initial solution was to retain popular comfort foods while elevating the overall presentation—with better plates and plating, linens at dinner, and more scratch-cooked food. The budget also included a complete renovation of the kitchen and dining room, the creation of a bistro, and the retraining of staff.

“You’ve got staff who used to bus tables, and now you’re asking them to take direction from an expeditor and deliver food as a server,” says McGowian. The solution? Chef leadership. “The chef has to be at the cutting board, showing them different skills,” he says. “The chef is also the voice of reason. The catalyst for excellence. [The chef] tells them how to do something and make it great.”

McGowian says he’s constantly seeking new innovations at conferences, culinary

events and restaurants. That’s where he learned of the illuminated rechargeable menus now at Allison’s Fine Dining, the Sharon’s flagship restaurant. (They’re sold as LED Double Sided Illuminated Menus by King of Sparklers for about \$100 each.⁵) “They’re a wow factor,” he adds.

That ethic of constant innovation is on brand for The Sharon at SouthPark. “Next, we’re planning to build a privately owned restaurant on our site, along with mixed-use retail space,” he says. “We’re a market disruptor. We’re changing what senior living communities are.”

As for the food, it’s in such demand that The Sharon has partnered with meal-delivery services to fill orders for members of the Charlotte community. McGowian hopes they may choose, one day, to be residents, too.

“The way I view senior living and dining is that it’s infinite,” he says. There will always be innovations to be made. Our goal is to do the best we can while in this space, and when we leave, the next people can continue it.”

Lessons from The Sharon at SouthPark

Focus on details

Identify touch points for elevation—ambiance, plating and service standards. “Look at the details, focus on the steps, and the big things will take care of themselves,” McGowian says. The International Council on Active Aging Culinary and Hospitality Self-Assessment is designed to help you identify strengths, gaps and growth opportunities—and benchmark your performance against peers in your industry—which can help you determine the best next steps for you and your team. [Ed. See pages 54–60 to learn more.]

Go beyond surveys

In addition to a semi-annual food survey,

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NEXDINE
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At NEXDINE, dining goes beyond meals, it's a wellness-driven experience that nourishes the body, mind, and spirit.

We never rely on processed foods. Every plate features fresh, seasonal ingredients designed for health and flavor.

Our brand, Corfinity, redefines senior wellness with spa-inspired services like massages, reflexology, infrared saunas, and blue zone-inspired smoothie stations to create a true wellness lifestyle brand.

Our Blue Zone dining program uses fresh, wholesome ingredients to fuel energy, vitality, and longevity for active living.

A Complete Lifestyle Approach. From dining to wellness, we create experiences that support longevity, joy, and community every day.

People Who Care. Our Colleagues bring kindness, expertise, and passion to every interaction, always ready to share and support residents' wellness journeys.

We Create Amazing Experiences. We create amazing experiences by combining culinary artistry, personalized service, genuine hospitality, and innovation, bringing this approach to every interaction, even beyond our everyday services.



"The food is not processed; it's quality fresh food. It's five star. NEXDINE keeps trying things. The blue zone menus offer special choices to promote our well-being and nutrition. NEXDINE has delivered a pleasant dining experience."

-Michael Davito, Resident at Peconic Landing

Learn how we can transform your dining and wellness experience.
Email info@nexdine.com.



Amica's culinary philosophy starts with scratch cooking. Image courtesy of Amica Senior Lifestyles

The Sharon solicits input year-round via printed comment cards and tabletop QR codes—with help from survey provider WeCare Connect™⁶—to appeal to residents with different levels of tech savvy. Another innovation here: Nothing is anonymous. “We tell residents, ‘Thank you for the comment. We want to fix this.’ Then we do, and they’re even more forthcoming the next time,” says McGowian.

Elevate your culinary committee

McGowian insists residents on the culinary committee become ambassadors. “They can’t just complain about the green beans. They need to support the program,” he says. “They go to conferences with us. We work hand in hand. That’s why it works so well.”

Customize the model

“Know that smaller scale innovation doesn’t require luxury,” he says. “Focus on person-

alization, dignity and storytelling around meals. Those are things anyone can do.”

At the end of the day, says McGowian, all residents are people first. “Making that mindset shift from feeding to serving—that’s good for everyone.”

Amica Senior Lifestyles Toronto, Ontario, Canada

One of Canada's leading providers of premium, private-pay retirement residences, with ~950 culinary employees serving about 5,300 residents at 34 locations

“Years ago, at an industry conference, I overheard someone say they’re looking for an ‘affordable seafood solution,’” says Gary McBlain, national culinary director at Amica Senior Lifestyles in Toronto. “I thought, ‘That sounds like the worst thing ever. That’s not what I’m looking

Resources

Internet

Amica Senior Lifestyles

Websites: <https://amica.ca>;
<https://amica.ca/conversations/5-reasons-why-seniors-love-the-food-at-amica>

Living Out™ and Alice B. restaurant and bar

Websites: <https://www.livingout.com>; <https://www.aliceb.com>

Northwell Health®

Website: <https://www.northwell.edu/>

The Sharon at SouthPark

Website: <https://TheSharon.org/Lifestyle/The-Culinary-Experience/>

for.’ You’re eating 1,000-plus meals a year, right? I want the food to be *great*.”

When McBlain joined Amica 12 years ago, the classically trained Red Seal chef was pleased at the quality of the food—and he continued to elevate their approach. “Our philosophy is to buy as many raw products as possible to make meals from scratch,” he says. “It’s the secret to making residents feel like they have a personal chef.”

Scratch cooking makes it easier to accommodate almost any diet, he says. For example, residents with dysphasia (swallowing issues) can order nearly anything off the menu, and the chefs will modify it to suit their needs. While some things, like a turkey sandwich, don’t puree well, he says, “We provide a pureed version of a hot turkey dinner that tastes really good—and looks really good.” That includes serving it at a formal place setting with a fresh garnish.⁷

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Transformation may cost less than you think

Innovation doesn't always mean "more expensive," says Milton McGowian, DBA, chief operating officer at The Sharon at SouthPark. "We were strategic with our food vendor partnerships. We centralized purchasing and production. We try to forecast as much as possible to reduce waste. We invested in team development to reduce turnover. This July, we were \$33,000 under budget for food for the year."

Sven Gierlinger, chief experience officer for Northwell Health®, concurs. "Restaurants are all about efficiency. When you find chefs who know what they're doing, they can turn raw food into delicious food that's actually less expensive than processed food."

Start small: One ingredient at a time

Celeb chef Susan Feniger of Alice B. restaurant and bar notes that purchasing fresh foods in season can offer savings—as well as flavor and seasonal appeal. Investigating other options for frequently consumed items may help, too. For example, Northwell Health now saves \$250,000 a year across the organization after switching from what Gierlinger calls "the worst instant coffee you can imagine" to a contract with a local coffee company that provides organic roasted beans. "If you sign a long enough contract, they give you the coffee makers for free," he adds.

Use your purchasing power

Depending on how much you can order, you may be an attractive addition to local businesses' client list. "Our procurement department works with local vendors who really didn't see health-care as a market," says Gierlinger. "We used to buy bread that was loaded with preservatives and never grew mold, so it lasted a month or more. We now buy fresh-baked bread every day from the same local bakeries that fine dining restaurants in Manhattan use."

Pay your talent what they're worth

When The Sharon at SouthPark began asking employees to shift from a low-key "observer" role to a highly trained "server" role, McGowian ensured their wages rose, too. "You have to pay a competitive wage. We weren't going to ask them to do more challenging work without compensation."

Link efficiencies to performance

McGowian recommends giving culinary staff ownership of programs that find efficiencies. For example, the sous chefs at The Sharon are in charge of food waste programs in the kitchen. Their performance reviews reflect their success—and so does the overall bottom line.

Consider nontraditional ROI markers

Andrea Prashad, MPPAL, senior vice president of operations at Amica, adds that the culinary experience is central

to residents' daily satisfaction. "Poor dining or food quality can lead to early move-outs, complaints and/or negative reviews. Residences that offer variety, personalization and enjoyment have higher resident engagement. In addition, culinary events that include families foster stronger relationships and loyalty. Bottom line: Culinary is not just a hospitality perk; it's a powerful business driver that influences financial performance."

Remember you're feeding global growth

Beyond bringing value to your residents, organization and local community, culinary innovation is good business for the wider world. "According to global reports, the food service sector alone contributed over \$3.5 trillion to the global economy in 2024, employing millions across supply chains, technology platforms and hospitality sectors." [and] "As kitchens evolve into hubs of creativity and capital, the culinary world is clearly not just feeding people—it's feeding the future of global economic prosperity."¹

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Gary McBlain, national culinary director at Amica Senior Lifestyles in Toronto, Canada, brings a personal touch to his kitchens, where scratch cooking not only elevates flavor but ensures every resident—regardless of dietary needs—can enjoy beautifully prepared meals. Image courtesy of Amica Senior Lifestyles

McBlain also embraces technology that can improve customization. Amica recently piloted the use of a point-of-sale and kitchen management software system called MealSuite, which will roll out to all locations soon. The platform updates residents' preferences and health changes after breakfast, lunch and dinner, which helps improve forecasting, reduce waste and customize service. The platform's credit card reader also streamlines payment for family and friends who come to dine with a resident.

This people-first, quality-focused approach has paid off. "Last year, we had locations with food satisfaction scores of 98%, 99% and 100%," says McBlain, who was named 2025 Corporate Dining Executive of the Year by the Senior Dining Association.⁸

Elevating the dining experience has improved employee engagement, as well. "If you think about it, you're serving two customers," he says. "The first one, obviously, is the residents. But you're equally serving your team members. Make sure they have the tools they need, clear expectations and the ability to progress in their careers—and they're going to be happy. And happy team members are going to do a great job for your residents."

Lessons from Amica Senior Lifestyles

Hire and celebrate culinary talent

Amica looks to hire Red Seal chefs and people with experience in hotels, golf courses, cruise ships and fine dining. "They know what good quality food looks like and how to provide it," says McBlain. For cooks, sous chefs and others, Amica provides the Emerging Leaders program, which has helped employees rise through the ranks to culinary director and general manager.

Give chefs and their teams a starring role

Chef photos and bios are featured at each community's main entrance, and chefs are tagged on social media posts of their standout dishes. This "puts a face on the food," says McBlain. It also helps to attract future residents and top-notch staff.

Make room for creativity

The 28-day core menu, which changes daily, is used across all locations. "We encourage chefs to change 20% of it to appeal to their residents," says McBlain. This customization allows chefs to shine. So do special events like Amica's *Sip and Savour* series. Its recent Taste of the Philippines theme was conceived and executed by Amica's largest demographic

"At Northwell Health, we give the chefs the creativity to express themselves with the menu, and the dietitians help adjust the recipes for individual patients." The culinary directors and nutrition directors also get together in person once a month to discuss challenges and wins. "That's where the magic happens."

Sven Gierlinger, chief experience officer, Northwell Health

of culinary employees. "They're proud to highlight their culture and their food, which tastes fantastic," he says.

Apply the lessons

Over the years, McBlain has supported more than 200 different retirement residences, from community-based to ultra-luxury. Across the board, he says, one thing is always the same: Your team is comprised of real people who are cooking for real people.

"Having a chef who's making really good-quality, nutritious food really helps people feel better," says McBlain. "When people are happy with the food, they're eating more. They're healthier. They live a better life. And we're in the kitchen, helping make it happen. What can be better than that?"

Northwell Health Headquartered in New Hyde Park, New York

The largest health system in New York, with 105,000+ employees and 30 facilities serving more than 10 million meals per year

Sven Gierlinger calls culinary innovation his passion project, which is no surprise to anyone who peruses his résumé. He began his career as a professional chef in Germany before joining Ritz-Carlton and some luxury hotels in Europe. “I could put on my white chef’s jacket and jump behind the stove at any moment,” he says. “Which I did last year for one day when we had a staff shortage.”

So it’s not surprising that one of Gierlinger’s first steps in Northwell’s culinary transformation was to hire Michelin-starred Chef Bruno Tison as corporate executive chef in 2017. Tison was able to attract numerous other talented, experienced chefs who assisted him in training those who needed it. That has led to the establishment of “teaching kitchens,” which offer free lessons in healthy cooking and nutrition to team members systemwide.

“For example, chefs know a tomato’s flavor dies in the refrigerator,” says Gierlinger. “To get the full flavor of a tomato on your sandwich, our chefs use ripening racks instead. That’s the level of expertise in our hospitals,” he adds.

As for caregivers and medical staff, providing delicious food can “give them some time back,” he says. Family members don’t feel they need to bring patients food from home or a restaurant. And nurses, techs and other staff no longer have to field food complaints or send dishes back.

Some patients have reported that they’re so excited about the menu that they forgot about their ailments. And so many were begging not to be discharged before lunch that chefs began packing carryout containers for those leaving around 11



As Chief Experience Officer at Northwell Health, Sven Gierlinger recognized that poor food quality was undermining otherwise excellent care. His push for change helped transform hospital dining from a major dissatisfier into a cornerstone of patient experience. Photo: Lee Weissman. Image courtesy of Northwell Health

a.m. “I consider that a good problem to have—when patients want to stay longer because the food is so good,” he says.

Lessons from Northwell Health

Partner with local culinary programs

Three Northwell Health hospitals are approved externship sites for the Culinary Institute of America in New York. Gierlinger says this helps show young chefs the benefits of a career in health-care. That often includes better health benefits and work-life balance, compared with careers in hospitality or restaurants. One example: Dinner service at a hospital is winding down at the same time of day it’s heating up in restaurants.

Create a collaborative culture

“Typically, dietitians and chefs don’t get along that well because dietitians tell chefs what they can’t do,” Gierlinger says. “At Northwell Health, we give the chefs the creativity to express themselves with the menu, and the dietitians help adjust the recipes for individual patients.” The culinary directors and nutrition directors also get together in person once a month to discuss challenges and wins. “That’s where the magic happens,” says Gierlinger.

Continued on page 42



From ‘tennis-ball’ mashed potatoes a few years ago to this stunning plate? Yes, this is hospital food: monkfish with a black trumpet mushroom crust, fava beans and spring onions in saffron sauce—plated with Michelin-level finesse. Image courtesy of Northwell Health Chefs

Instill your mission in stakeholders

Northwell Health has created a Food and Nutrition Commitment that includes nutrition criteria, chef excellence standards, teaching kitchens and patient education, and assisting patients to find resources to address food insecurity after they’re discharged. This has helped standardize culinary excellence across facilities—and into the community.

Tailor the playbook for your team

Creating partnerships, fostering collaboration and communicating a clear mission, he believes, are within reach for any facility.

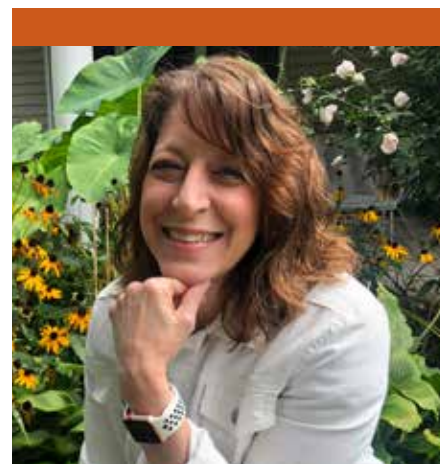
Today, Northwell Health is preparing for a culinary transformation with seven hospitals recently acquired from Nuvance Health®. “The good thing is, we have a playbook now,” says Gierlinger. “And the

goal is for our corporate team and Chef Bruno to get those teams to our level. We’re not just going there and working with them—but bringing them to our kitchens to show them how we do it.”

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Laura Quaglio has served as a nutrition editor for American Fitness, Fitness Journal, Quick & Healthy Cooking and Healthy Woman magazines, as well as editor of Prevention’s Guide books Outsmart Diabetes, Age Erasers and Women’s Health Today. She cherishes her still-vibrant memories of sharing blueberry scones, California cheeseburgers and ice cream sandwiches with her grandmother at her senior living community more than 20 years ago.



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Where hospitality and wellness meet aesthetics



Style, comfort and ROI for ‘front-of-house’ design refinements manifest in thoughtful details

by Shirley Eichenberger, JD, MA

The scent of ground coffee fills the air. A college student types on his notebook at a street-facing high-top. Nearby, a mother and daughter wait for a chai latte and hot chocolate. In the corner, an older couple shares freshly baked pastries and

laughter. It feels like a neighborhood café—because it is. But unlike most local haunts, this is The District Café at The Modena Reserve, a senior living community in Kensington, Maryland, designed to bring generations together.

Across the senior living industry, institutional dining layouts are giving way to flexible, hospitality-style spaces. Adults aged 50+ now expect restaurant-quality environments with variety, personalization, wellness-centered hospitality, and

culturally inclusive offerings, according to a 2021–22 survey of 110 senior living executives conducted by CCL Hospitality Group.¹ Forward-thinking leaders are redefining food service not just as an operational requirement, but as a strategic tool for wellness, satisfaction and competitive advantage.

Market leaders are transforming front-of-house senior dining environments—

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across both residential and day-based settings—into vibrant, high-impact culinary experiences offering multiple options. Some even include public-facing venues on assisted living campuses. “The days of one kitchen, one restaurant, one big cafeteria-style dining hall are gone. If you still have that, you’re not competitive,” says Dean Maddalena, founder and president of StudioSIX5, Austin, Texas.

Contemporary design intentionally shapes the resident experience to boost satisfaction while also meeting health and wellness goals. “Senior living communities are shifting from single, institutional dining halls to multiple venues—like bistros, wine rooms and public restaurants—that offer flexibility, engagement and brand identity. This is not a trend,” says Maddalena. “It’s a definite direction the industry is going in.”

This article introduces the dynamic paradigm in senior dining. It outlines evolving formats, explores design’s impact on wellness and presents the business case for upgrades. Whether remodeling a dated dining hall, planning a new build

or enhancing day-based food service, this article offers a clear blueprint for creating better dining—and better living.

The new dining paradigm

Senior dining today goes far beyond just food. It supports nourishment on every level—physical health, emotional wellness, social connection, brand identity and even revenue growth.

“We’ve always thought about dining from a hospitality perspective. Culinary is one of our key areas of differentiation,” says Adam Kaplan, founder and CEO of Solera Senior Living in Denver, Colorado. “We don’t run it as a cost center like many operators. We look at culinary as a differentiator to drive and sustain occupancy, to increase resident engagement, to increase satisfaction and buy-in from our team members so we can drive high quality. Our pride is not about being the best at cost management but at being able to deliver the best. All

our development projects are at 95% or 100% occupancy with waiting lists.”

Philosophies driving the new dining paradigm

Three core design philosophies define this shift: hospitality, wellness and person-centered design.

Hospitality-inspired design elevates dining to hotel and restaurant standards. In the CCL Hospitality Group’s survey, over half of senior-living leaders cited “delivering high-quality food experiences” as a top challenge. Solutions reflect hospitality norms: restaurant-style venues, flexible hours, seasonal menus, and guest-friendly service. Dining is a lifestyle experience, not an institutional function. Quality drives resident satisfaction and positions food service as a hospitality asset—not just a necessity.¹

Wellness-inspired design promotes wellness through the built environment. It draws on the integrative model developed by the Andrew Weil Center for Integrative Medicine, which defines seven dimensions of wellness—physical, emotional, social, environmental, intellectual, spiritual and professional. The environment proactively supports physical, mental and social health.

“If you do a ‘one size fits all’ environment, it doesn’t fit anyone,” says Esther M. Sternberg, MD, research director at



With the buzz of a neighborhood coffeehouse, The District Café at The Modena Reserve in Kensington, Maryland, attracts generations over lattes, pastries and conversation—redefining senior dining as a vibrant, hospitality-driven experience



the Weil Center and professor of medicine at the University of Arizona with joint appointments in Psychology, Architecture, Planning & Landscape Architecture, Nutrition, and Wellness. “We need to design spaces to accommodate all sorts of people—different personalities, body types, ages, health conditions and more.” She emphasizes that wellness-inspired design must be personalized, interdisciplinary and crafted to help us engage in all seven domains.

Person-centered design prioritizes choice, autonomy and dignity. According to the same CCL survey, 56% of leaders cited personalization of food and dining as a top challenge—underscoring the need for design that reflects these values.¹ In practice, design is more fluid. “To me, it’s not about hospitality, wellness or person-centered design, it’s experiential—design tells a story,” says Maddalena. “The goal is to create a flexible environment that can adapt to the culture of the community as it evolves.”

Dining models

As senior dining evolves, communities are adopting new models to meet rising expectations. These go beyond fixed-hour, fixed-menu dining halls to include innovations in space, layout, menus, service styles, personalization and wellness.

Flexible, hospitality-driven approaches promote choice, connection and engagement. More communities are hiring hospitality-trained culinary directors and chefs to support this shift.

Here’s a sampling of available options:

Multiple-venue “dining district” models are gaining traction. Cliff Holasek, senior project manager at StudioSIX5 explains, “A shared central kitchen in one zone supports multiple sub-venues like a fine dining restaurant, coffee shop, bistro and wine bar.” This destination-driven model offers variety and sparks spontaneous engagement. “Each space has a different character that gives people different reasons to come together,” says Lauren Tines, project manager at StudioSIX5.

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Image courtesy of Solera Senior Living

Transforming design doesn’t require a full renovation. In residential and day-based settings, phased upgrades can drive major impact—when guided by vision. Experts urge communities to clarify values, goals and priorities, then act strategically.

This tiered playbook outlines front-of-house upgrades by budget level from quick wins to high-impact overhauls. Consider using a phased approach from these options that add up to major impact over time.

Low-cost upgrades

- Break up a sea of four-tops with banquettes, soft seating or varied table styles.
- Refresh table settings with modern glassware, menu covers, placemats and centerpieces.
- Adjust lighting to reduce glare, boost mood, improve visibility and support circadian rhythms.
- Showcase local artwork or historic photos to reinforce community identity.
- Pilot new concepts through pop-ups, guest chefs or cultural celebrations (e.g., Lunar New Year).
- Use soundscapes, visuals or scent cues to heighten ambience and orientation.

Mid-level investments

- Sub-brand each venue to boost variety and storytelling.
- Add a chef’s table, teaching kitchen or event dining experiences.¹

- Reimagine private dining rooms for “takeout nights” or small gatherings.
- Expand outdoor dining with gardens, views and shelter.
- Bring biophilic elements indoors—plants, natural light and nature views.
- Build feedback loops for co-creating menus and events.

High-impact enhancements

- Create a multivenue “dining district” supported by a central kitchen.
- Transform entry-facing real estate into a lifestyle café to attract residents, families and the broader community for coffee, light meals and conversation.
- Design immersive exhibition kitchens that double as chef’s stages, blending entertainment, education and engagement in an open-plan format.
- Reimagine space around lifestyle rhythms integrating layout, lighting, acoustics and décor to support cognitive ease, sensory comfort and natural daily flow.
- Develop themed or destination dining concepts like a rooftop terrace with sunset views, a wine-tasting room or a wellness lounge with spa cuisine.
- Incorporate adaptive dining technologies like dynamic lighting, acoustical zoning and flexible furniture systems to allow venues to meet evolving resident needs.

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Intentional design is moving dining beyond the single dining hall concept to bistros, wine rooms, and public-facing restaurants that elevate wellness, engagement and community identity. Image courtesy of Solera Senior Living

“We spend time considering each dining venue, with distinct names and original interior signage to create atmospheres,” says Kaplan.

Open-concept restaurants remove barriers between kitchen and dining areas, creating open spaces that stimulate the senses. Diners hear kitchen sounds, enjoy aromas and watch food prep for an immersive experience. Open kitchens often feature counters or seating where guests can watch chefs at work.

Public-facing restaurants invite intergenerational dining and community integration. The Alma at The Hacienda at Georgetown, Texas—designed by StudioSIX5—is the senior living industry’s first public-facing restaurant, according to its parent company MedCore Partners. It offers a local menu created by its James Beard award-winning chef, Stephen Pyles.²

Bistros offer a more intimate restaurant style for casual dining.

Cafés or coffee shops serve coffee, tea, other beverages, pastries and snacks. Diners relax and socialize without full meal service. These can be inter-

generational and public-facing like The District Café, as well as offering grab-and-go options.

Chef’s table and exhibition stations provide interactive dining experiences where residents engage with chefs. These stations offer cooking demos, tastings or themed pop-up meals. They reinforce transparency, excitement and engagement and are ideal for integrating global cuisines and wellness themes.

Outdoor dining areas extend mealtime into nature with patios, gardens or rooftop terraces. These spaces boost mood and support biophilic wellness design by combining fresh air, natural light and views with dining—while aligning with sustainability practices like landscaping and eco-friendly furnishings.

Wine bars, juice bars and smoothie stations are specialized beverage-focused spaces offering social engagement without full meals.

Private dining rooms let families or small groups gather for special meals and celebrations in quieter, more personal settings. These can also be used

to host “delivery experiences” where residents gather and order local cuisines unavailable on-site like Chinese, Thai or Greek.

Pop-ups or themed nights add variety with short-term or rotating concepts (e.g., taco night or Mediterranean tasting menus). They create novelty and anticipation and align with seasonal menus, cultural celebrations or wellness education.

Teaching kitchens host wellness-focused culinary education and cooking classes that support lifelong-learning and healthy eating. These can be particularly valuable for memory care programs.

Mobile and satellite stations (rolling carts, kiosks or self-service areas) bring food closer to residents, adding grab-and-go options. They support autonomy, reduce walking distances and meet residents where they are.

Garden-to-table dining integrates on-site growing spaces that bring fresh, hyperlocal ingredients into the kitchen. Residents with private herb gardens

can contribute to the food experience. This supports sustainability by reducing packaging and transport.

Therapeutic and modified diet options emphasizing Food is/as Medicine are becoming standard. Menus increasingly include choices for specific health needs—such as cardiac-friendly, diabetic or renal diets—as well as plant-based, gluten-free and lactose-free options for residents with food sensitivities and allergies. Many operators follow International Dysphagia Diet Standardization Initiative guidelines for texture-modified foods to support those with chewing or swallowing difficulties. Liberalized diets are gaining traction, emphasizing choice, dignity and quality of life while still meeting clinical needs.

In-room dining—prompted by the pandemic—continues to grow. Options include phone or in-person ordering, touchscreen kiosks and apps. A layered ordering approach serves residents with diverse digital skills, ensuring comfort and empowerment. Some use robots for delivery.

Multiuse dining rooms flexibly convert into lounges, wellness studios or event venues outside mealtimes. This flexibility maximizes use and ROI, adapting spaces over time. It also optimizes space for communities with limited square footage and busy program calendars.

Culturally responsive dining supports diverse resident backgrounds by accommodating cultural food traditions, meal customs and group dining styles. These spaces can adapt to cultural holidays and dietary needs to create a sense of belonging. For example, long communal tables or large round tables can accommodate multigenerational family-style dining for Lunar New Year or anniversaries, while separate prep areas can support kosher or halal menu needs for Jewish or Muslim residents.

Wellness-centered design in action

“Designing for wellness means creating spaces that support the full range of human experience—physical, emotional, social and even spiritual,” says Sternberg.

“It’s not about adding one feature. It’s about shaping the environment to enhance well-being in every sense.” [Ed. Learn more in the comprehensive Q&A interview the *Journal on Active Aging*[®] conducted with Dr. Sternberg in 2024.^{3]}

The International Council on Active Aging[®] (ICAA) has long advocated using the seven dimensions of wellness as a framework for shaping environments that optimize health, engagement and quality of life. In alignment with this model, researchers and design experts have identified key elements of the built environment that can be enhanced to support wellness in senior- living dining settings.^{4,5,6,7}

1. Fostering familiarity and comfort

A growing body of research emphasizes the need to make dining spaces feel less institutional and more like home. Researchers identify “familiarity and home-likeness” as essential to supportive environments.⁴ Design strategies that support this include warm lighting, domestic-style furniture, soft finishes and home-scale layouts.

These familiar elements may reduce anxiety and reinforce dignity. A cozy atmosphere signals safety, belonging and normalcy—helping residents settle in, engage and enjoy meals. Breaking a large room up into smaller, more intimate spaces fosters social connection and feels less institutional.

2. Creating an optimal sensory environment

Sensory cues from lighting, sounds and smells profoundly shape dining experiences. Lighting should be adequate, glare-free and layered to support function and mood. Residents need to see food clearly, read menus and recognize faces. Light should stimulate the senses without overwhelming them.⁴ Sternberg recommends a lighting analysis to reduce glares and support better sleep patterns, which are often disrupted in older adults. She notes that the healthiest light matches circadian rhythms with brighter, more blue-based light in the morning to stimulate better sleep at night and warmer more red-based lights toward the end of the day.

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The ROI of better design

Best-in-class dining operations both elevate the experience and deliver measurable business value. Adam Kaplan, founder and CEO of Solera Senior Living, offers four key categories for evaluating the return on investment from front-of-house dining upgrades.

Brand differentiation

- Position the community as a market leader.
- Reinforce a premium identity of quality, style and lifestyle.
- Attract prospects aligned with hospitality and wellness values.
- Generate referrals and media buzz through standout features.

Occupancy and retention

- Convert more prospective residents to move-ins after showing design upgrades.
- Increase resident satisfaction and length of stay.
- Maintain waiting lists and reduce turnover.

Increased revenue

- Justify premium rates through enhanced perceived value.
- Upsell through à la carte pricing for wine, cocktails, private dining, etc.
- Boost participation in fee-based special events.
- Open public-facing venues to generate ancillary revenue.

Improved team engagement

- Boost morale with a professional, attractive setting.
- Improve workflow and reduce burnout.
- Strengthen recruitment and retention.



Hospitality- and wellness-inspired design are redefining senior dining—where restaurant-style venues, seasonal menus, and guest-friendly service meet environments that nurture physical, social and emotional well-being. Image courtesy of Solera Senior Living

Acoustics matter equally. Excessive noise is a frequent complaint among both residents and staff in senior living environments.⁵ Acoustic ceiling panels, softer materials and quieter equipment can create calmer mealtimes and more conversation, significantly improving experiences for both residents and staff.

Smell plays a powerful role. Pleasant aromas like fresh baking can entice appetite and draw residents, while institutional odors—like cleaning products or waste—can suppress eating desire. Smart ventilation and layout and material choices can isolate unpleasant odors while enhancing positive ones. Sternberg recommends using materials that do not absorb odors, without compromising aesthetics and hygiene.

3. Supporting orientation and independence

For residents with memory loss or cognitive decline, orientation cues and sightlines are essential to reduce stress and promote independence. Clear signage,

consistent color palettes, recognizable decor and intuitive layouts can reduce confusion and help residents navigate with confidence.

Something as simple as a faux café entrance or a large-print, illustrated menu can anchor residents in time and place.⁵ Design for cognitive support is a key domain of environmental planning.⁷ In dining spaces, this might include clocks, calendars and meal cues like table settings or food displays that subtly reinforce routine.

4. Designing for social engagement and solitude

Dining is a prime opportunity for social connection—but not everyone wants the same experience every day. Setups with varied seating options—roundtables for groups, quiet corners for two, even counter seating for solo diners—allow residents to choose their level of interaction. Research shows that physical layout influences social dynamics. After improving layout and acoustics, staff were more successful in engaging residents socially.^{4,5}

Critically, wellness design recognizes that personal preferences differ, not just between individuals, but from day to day. For example, an introvert and an extrovert experience stress in different circumstances. An extrovert may gravitate toward a lively, bustling space, while an introvert may prefer a quiet, secluded corner. According to Sternberg, both will experience measurable stress when in environments that don't suit their needs. A responsive dining environment offers options to meet those needs, promoting both connection and calm.⁸

5. Preserving privacy, dignity and control

The freedom to make small choices—where to sit, how close to others, whether to dine alone—contributes to dignity and well-being. Person-centered design empowers residents with subtle forms of autonomy. Movable furnishings (e.g., movable chairs instead of fixed benches), adequate spacing between tables and optional visual barriers like screens allow residents to shape their own experience. When residents can personalize their space or environment, their mood and satisfaction improved.⁵ Even modest design features—adjustable blinds, varied lighting levels, music volume control—offer residents a sense of control over their environment. In this way, design supports not just function, but identity.

6. Enhancing staff support and workflow

Well-designed dining spaces don't just serve residents—they support staff in delivering better care. Improvements in lighting, acoustics and layout reduce staff stress and enable person-centered service.⁵ Better acoustics allow staff to communicate without shouting. Efficient layouts minimize walking time. Well-located wait stations keep food hot and service attentive. Design should ensure clear sightlines, wide enough paths for assisting residents with mobility aids and easy access to service areas. When staff can move freely and interact smoothly, the entire dining experience improves—for everyone.

The business case for better design

Upgrading front-of-house dining isn't just aesthetic—it is a strategic decision with clear returns. Communities investing in design-forward dining report stronger occupancy, longer stays, higher resident satisfaction and improved team engagement. Well-executed spaces also support pricing power, brand positioning and operational efficiency.

Best-in-class dining venues differentiate communities in competitive markets, turning food service into a lifestyle amenity rather than a cost center. Design helps convert tours, retain residents, and attract culinary and hospitality talent. For practical strategies to measure impact, see “The ROI of better design” on page 51.

Transforming dining, transforming lives

Dining design today is a powerful catalyst for transformation—delivering a triple win across 50-and-over-organizations: improved public health, elevated client experiences and stronger business results. But design without vision is simply lipstick on a dated model. Real impact demands intentional, values-driven

innovation. Whether through phased upgrades or full-scale reinvention, success starts with clear priorities—and a bold commitment to align every design decision with purpose.

“The connection between food, wellness and quality of life is undeniable,” says Colin Milner, founder and CEO of ICAA. To accelerate innovation, the association has introduced the ICAA Culinary, Nutrition and Hospitality Network, a new platform uniting standards, innovation and recognition for excellence [Ed. See related story about our network initiatives on pages 54–60].

For those shaping the future of senior living, the next course is clear: Don't wait for change. Lead it—one plate, one space and one resident at a time.🍴

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Introducing

the ICAA Culinary, Nutrition and Hospitality Network

A new initiative will empower communities to pursue wellness through delicious food, meaningful nutrition, culture and care

by Sandy Todd Webster, MSFS

Across active aging, food does more than nourish—it creates belonging, evokes memory, supports healing, and sparks joy. Yet, the full potential of dining experiences to advance wellness has often gone untapped.

That's a gap ICAA aims to close.

In a bold evolution of its wellness mission, the International Council on Active Aging® (ICAA) is launching a new division poised to study and transform food, nutrition, dining, and hospitality in ICAA member organizations. This initiative recognizes these elements as catalysts of wellness and opportunities to further foster a culture of wellness.

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ICAA

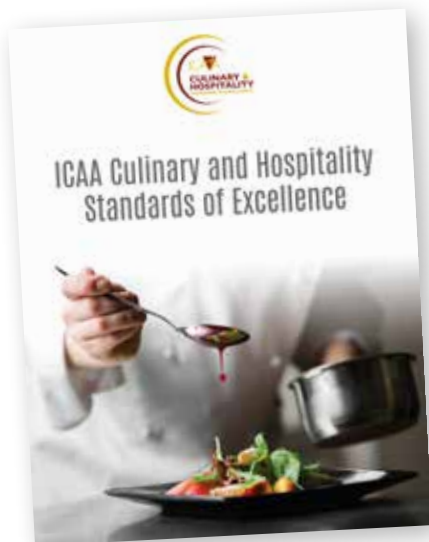


Introducing the ICAA Culinary, Nutrition and Hospitality Network *Continued from page 54*

The **ICAA Culinary, Nutrition and Hospitality Network** empowers senior dining operators, chefs and their teams, culinary directors, hospitality professionals, and wellness leaders to align every plate of food, menu and mealtime with purpose and possibility.

“Food touches every dimension of wellness, yet it’s often underleveraged in aging services,” says Colin Milner, founder and CEO of ICAA. “With this new Network, we’re equipping organizations to transform their culinary and hospitality practices into powerful drivers of connection, vitality and purpose. ICAA invites all members and leaders across the aging-services spectrum to join us in this movement. Together, we can nourish the future of active aging—one community at a time.”

This article offers a first look at the network’s key levers. Each component is intentionally layered to help communities elevate dining into a driver of wellness.



Setting the standard: The ICAA Culinary and Hospitality Standards of Excellence

How do we define excellence in food and hospitality for adults aged 50+? Until now, the industry lacked a shared bench-

mark that connected culinary operations with the broader goals of wellness.

The ICAA Culinary and Hospitality Standards of Excellence provide that benchmark. Developed in partnership with Restaura Hospitality and CrossCheck QA, the Standards of Excellence offer a first-of-its-kind framework that connects dining experiences directly to individual wellness. These practical, evidence-informed principles are grounded in the seven dimensions of wellness: emotional, vocational, physical, spiritual, intellectual, social and environmental. Their purpose is simple but transformative: To help organizations evaluate how every aspect of their food and hospitality services—from sourcing ingredients to training staff—can better reflect the values and aspirations of the people they serve.

The standards are organized into five focus areas, each a key pillar of the dining and hospitality experience:

- 1. Leadership and culture:** Champions an organization-wide commitment to aligning food and hospitality with wellness, including staff training, cross-departmental collaboration and wellness-integrated decision-making.
- 2. Menu, nutrition and choice:** Encourages diverse, inclusive and customizable menu design that reflects health-supportive nutrition, cultural relevance and eater autonomy.
- 3. Sourcing and sustainability:** Promotes transparency, local and seasonal food systems, and environmentally responsible operations that align with resident values and long-term planetary health.
- 4. Hospitality and service:** Sets expectations for meaningful interactions, attention to ambiance and dignity-driven service practices.
- 5. Mealtime experience:** Emphasizes the social, sensory and emotional aspects of eating—recognizing mealtime as a vital contributor to quality of life and community connection.

This transcends food as simple fuel. It’s about transforming food into a delicious, healing and preventive wellness modality. The Standards create a shared language and vision to guide internal teams, align leadership and inspire ongoing improvement.



A roadmap for growth: The ICAA Culinary and Hospitality Self-Assessment

If the Standards of Excellence provide the foundation, the ICAA Culinary and Hospitality Self-Assessment is the roadmap that helps member organizations chart their journey toward the destination of sustainable wellness.

As part of our collaboration with Restaura and CrossCheck, ICAA developed the Self-Assessment as a companion to the Standards of Excellence. This guided self-evaluation tool empowers senior dining operators to take an objective look at their current food and hospitality practices. It’s meant to help teams identify opportunities for meaningful, mission-aligned growth. Designed with usability in mind, the Self-Assessment is both comprehensive and adaptable, making it equally valuable to small operators and large-scale systems.

Structured around the same five focus areas as the Standards, the tool

prompts organizations to reflect on their strengths and challenges. It helps teams engage in cross-departmental conversations that often don't happen organically, connecting wellness directors, culinary and hospitality teams, and executive leadership around a shared vision.

The Self-Assessment is designed to catalyze action and inspire innovation at each team's pace and comfort level. It encourages providers to use their findings to set goals, prioritize initiatives and measure progress over time. For communities aiming to deepen their wellness culture, the tool becomes a bridge linking everyday operational decisions to resident outcomes and organizational values.

"The self-assessment tool is more than a checklist, it's a catalyst," says Chef Matthew Thompson, chief culinary officer of Restaura. "It invites teams to step back, reflect deeply and reimagine what's possible when culinary and wellness unite around a shared vision. It helps transform good intentions into bold, coordinated action."

Celebrating excellence: The ICAA Plate of Distinction

Once communities begin measuring their efforts and making strategic improvements through the Self-Assessment, the next step is celebration and recognition via the ICAA Plate of Distinction.

This "Michelin-inspired" recognition system highlights and celebrates

top-performing communities that have traversed a clear, step-by-step path demonstrating exceptional alignment between their dining programs and the ICAA Culinary and Hospitality Standards of Excellence.

To be considered, communities must complete the Self-Assessment, showing evidence of intention, innovation and integration across the five core categories. The journey includes benchmarks, practical resources and third-party validation to support continuous improvement.

CrossCheck, a quality assurance and compliance company, has translated the Standards of Excellence into 100 equally weighted and measured test areas that are observed during an on-site evaluation. Each test area is validated with either a pass or fail score. Qualifying communities may earn Bronze, Gold or Platinum status. The Plate of Distinction is more than a marker of achievement; it's a beacon for residents, employees and industry peers that illuminates what's possible when food and hospitality are treated as essential components of wellness strategy.

"The Plate of Distinction fills a long-standing void in the senior living marketplace by celebrating the best of the best and inspiring all communities to raise the bar," says Gary Gunderson,

Continued on page 58



Continued connection: A new digital newsletter

The ICAA Culinary, Nutrition and Hospitality Network isn't just about setting standards or raising the bar—it's about building momentum and creating community. To keep the conversation lively, ICAA is launching a new digital culinary-, nutrition- and hospitality-focused newsletter exclusively for members. It will offer timely, actionable insights to keep the dialogue going for everyone working to transform food and dining in 50-and-over environments.

Each issue will be researched and written to reflect the most pressing and promising topics at the intersection of food, aging and wellness, including:

- case studies from standout communities putting the Standards of Excellence into practice
- policy updates and food tech developments reshaping the dining landscape
- research-driven best practices for culinary, nutrition and hospitality leaders
- clear interpretations of complex nutrition science, tailored to aging populations
- sustainable strategies that support planetary and community health—from responsible sourcing to reducing food waste
- pain points and problem-solving, featuring on-the-ground insights from food service, wellness and operations teams

As a new member benefit, the newsletter aims to spark inspiration, foster dialogue, and surface emerging trends that matter most to operators and changemakers across the sector.

Introducing the ICAA Culinary, Nutrition and Hospitality Network *Continued from page 57*

president of CrossCheck. “We’re thrilled to bring our extensive experience in food and dining assessments to such an important initiative and provide top performers with a mark of excellence to attract residents and stand out in the market.”



Think Tanks: Shaping the future of wellness-forward dining

The inaugural ICAA Culinary, Nutrition and Hospitality Think Tank will take place on October 11, as of press time, to set precedent for a new movement—one that reimagines food, dining and hospitality as foundational strategies for wellness, dignity and innovation in older-adult living.

The Think Tank will bring together executive leaders, culinary directors, wellness experts, operations professionals, and key industry suppliers for a day of focused dialogue and future-facing collaboration. This is not just a conversation—it is the beginning of a blueprint. Participants will leave with a strong peer network, shared language and values, and a unified commitment to drive change across the industry.

An executive report, compiled from facilitated discussions, breakout sessions

and group ideation, will serve as a foundational guide for the ICAA Culinary, Nutrition and Hospitality Network. It will outline a shared vision, identify systemic industry challenges, and present concrete strategies that leaders and teams can begin implementing now.

“What will come out of this first Think Tank is more than ideas—it’s a framework for action,” says Milner. “We’re building a coalition of leaders who are ready to move beyond short-term fixes and shape a new future where food and hospitality fuel wellness, community and connection.”

To be held twice a year, the Think Tanks are designed to move beyond trends to address the structural changes needed to advance wellness-forward dining in aging services. At their core, these meetings are about igniting a strategic evolution—one where food is no longer seen as a cost center or amenity, but as a cornerstone of wellness and community vitality.



Continuing the conversation: Journal on Active Aging content

As the ICAA Culinary, Nutrition and Hospitality Network grows, so too does its commitment to equipping industry

professionals with the knowledge, strategies and evidence-based practices that drive transformation. One way this initiative will reach its audience is through contributions to the *Journal on Active Aging*®.

“Real transformation happens when everyone—from executives to servers to suppliers—shares a common purpose,” Milner says. “Through *JAA*, our aim is to help ICAA member organizations connect the dots between food, wellness and leadership, and translate those connections into actionable change.”

From evidence-based nutrition science and in-depth community profiles to roundtable discussions with chefs and care professionals, this content will broaden *JAA*’s efforts to educate and inspire readers. Whether you’re rethinking your sourcing strategy, building a cross-disciplinary dining committee, or supporting residents living with chronic disease, this content will meet you where you are—and help you move forward.

JAA will also highlight research and emerging science relevant to food, aging and wellness. By weaving together real-world practice, evidence-based recommendations and person-centered insight, authors will make material immediately applicable across different organization types and care models. This educational layer will connect the Network—reinforcing the Standards, spotlighting Plate of Distinction communities and creating an evolving knowledge base to help the field move forward, together.

“Information alone doesn’t drive change—insights and action do,” says Milner. “That’s why our *JAA* content is designed to go beyond the *what* and into the *how*. It’s about showing organizations what’s possible when food becomes central to the wellness journey—and giving them the tools to make it happen.



White papers, webinars, special reports and industry surveys

Beyond a new Network newsletter (see sidebar on page 57), ICAA will offer a range of in-depth content designed to spark thought and fuel meaningful change. Upcoming white papers and special reports will delve into the current state of food in senior dining—exploring resident expectations, operational challenges and shifting definitions of “healthy.” Other reports will unpack the connections between nutrient density, wellness outcomes and soil health, showing how regenerative sourcing can directly impact vitality in aging populations.

Interactive webinars will complement these resources by offering real-time opportunities for learning, collaboration and problem-solving. These live sessions will bring together experts from across the culinary, wellness and operations spectrum to unpack timely topics, share behind-the-scenes insights and answer questions from the field.

For participants, webinars offer the chance to engage directly with thought leaders, learn from peer experiences, and explore strategies that can be adapted to a variety of community settings. Whether it’s diving into case studies, analyzing emerging research or workshopping real-world challenges, each webinar will be designed to spark practical takeaways and foster a sense of community among professionals.

Whether through a quick-read brief, a deep-dive white paper or an hourlong webinar engaging with experts and peers, you will find resources designed to be credible, clear and immediately useful.

From the dining room to the culture of wellness

The ICAA Culinary, Nutrition and Hospitality Network is more than a new initiative—it’s a transformative vision to integrate wellness into every plate,

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Resources

Explore the tools and vehicles that power the ICAA Culinary, Nutrition and Hospitality Network.

Internet

ICAA Culinary and Hospitality Standards of Excellence

Guidebook: https://www.icaa.cc/pdf/culinary_standards.pdf
#form-head

Overview: https://www.icaa.cc/wellness_audit/pdf/culinary_standards.pdf

ICAA Culinary and Hospitality Self-Assessment

Webinar: https://www.icaa.cc/wellness_audit/culinary/webinar_recording.php

User Guide: https://www.icaa.cc/wellness_audit/culinary/tools.php

Prerequisites: https://www.icaa.cc/wellness_audit/pdf/prerequisites.pdf

How to enroll: https://www.icaa.cc/wellness_audit/culinary/how_to_enroll.php

FAQs: https://www.icaa.cc/wellness_audit/culinary/faqs.php

ICAA Culinary and Hospitality Plate of Distinction

Summary and FAQs: https://www.icaa.cc/wellness_audit/culinary/plate_distinction.php

Journal on Active Aging

Journal archives: <https://www.icaa.cc/journal.php>

Introducing the ICAA Culinary, Nutrition and Hospitality Network *Continued from page 59*



program and personal interaction within ICAA member organizations. By encouraging a wellness mindset across culinary operations, hospitality services and nutrition programming, the Network helps communities turn mealtime into a conduit for connection, care and vitality.

What does success in this new paradigm look like? We hope it's reflected in residents who feel truly seen and valued—nourished not only by wholesome, thoughtfully sourced meals but also by meaningful social engagement and personalized choices that honor their diverse needs and cultures. It means staff who are equipped with the right tools, training and collaborative spirit to serve with purpose and pride, fostering a workplace culture that attracts and retains talent.

“This vision is perfectly aligned with the evolving expectations of today’s and tomorrow’s older adults—generations that demand authenticity, transparency, sustainability, and wellness at every turn,” says Milner. “As longevity expands, so too does the imperative for communities to support not just longer lives, but better ones, where food and dining are cornerstones of health, joy and dignity. Culinary, nutrition and hospitality add additional strategic paths to fulfilling our mission of *Changing the Way We Age*®.”

We invite ICAA members and leaders across the aging-services spectrum to join the movement. By adopting the ICAA’s Standards of Excellence; leveraging the Self-Assessment Tool and Plate of Distinction; engaging in education; and collaborating in events like the Think Tank, you can help propel a cultural shift. 🍴

For 22 years, Sandy Todd Webster, MSFS, was the Editor in Chief of IDEA Health & Fitness Association’s content—including the award-winning IDEA Fitness Journal and IDEA Food & Nutrition Tips—the fitness industry’s leading resources for fitness, wellness and nutrition professionals worldwide. She now writes the Journal on Active Aging’s “Nutrition” column.

Webster is a Rouxbe-certified professional plant-based cook and a Precision Nutrition Level 1 Coach who recently completed a master’s degree in Sustainable Food Systems through The Culinary Institute of America. She combines these passions with evidence-based, practical journalism to continue inspiring others to make the world a more just, healthy and regenerative place. Visit www.sandytoddwebster.com for more information.

Help Older Adults Stay Active with Move Your Way!



Physical activity is important for healthy aging. The Move Your Way campaign can teach older adults about the benefits of staying active — and help them find activities that work for them.

If you work with older adults, use these materials to help them get active:

health.gov/MoveYourWay/MaterialsForOlderAdults



Dining's future is personal, purposeful and plated

Boomers and Gen Xers are reshaping food culture—and forward-thinking operators are shifting dining from a service into a signal

by Joy Keller

At a recent burger tasting, a hungry group sampled eight options of the American classic. All were cooked the same way, but each had specific differences, including textbook beef, grass-fed blends, high-fat content, and a handful of other options from Restaura Hospitality's Chief Culinary Officer Matthew Thompson, a chef known for his creativity.

"I was sure everyone would choose the high-fat burger," recalls Joseph Cuticelli,

cofounder and CEO of RestauraSM and chair of Generations United[®] (see the sidebar on page 68). "I've eaten burgers my whole life, and I thought, this is it. But every single person chose the same one, and it wasn't the one I expected."

The favorite? A blended burger made with 20% roasted mushrooms. "I'm not even a mushroom eater," Cuticelli admits. "But because of the way it was prepared, you couldn't even taste [them]. And then our chef explained all the reasons why it was better for you—lower saturated fat, healthier ingredients, etc. It actually tasted better than the rest."

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For today's Boomers, wellness and joy go hand in hand—and sometimes that means a perfect slice of pizza. In senior dining, indulgence isn't off the table; it's part of the experience, blending comfort, quality and hospitality that makes residents feel understood and valued





Culinary, wellness and hospitality teams that treat dining as a cultural cornerstone and not just as a cost center are seeing the benefits

That small moment reveals a bigger shift. Boomers and Gen Xers aren't resisting culinary change—they're leading it. Across the United States and beyond, International Council on Active Aging® member organizations are seeing food evolve from a service into something more. Today, food is a wellness tool, a cultural touchpoint and a personal expression of values. For this new generation of residents, dining isn't just about sustenance. It's about choice, identity and agency.

Food as quality, wellness and identity

For today's older adults, food transcends fuel. It's a litmus test for whether they feel seen, heard and understood by those who provide it.

A 2024 Great Expectations survey conducted by Age of Majority for Restaurants found that 68% of adults aged 55–96 want meals tailored to their personal tastes, yet only 17% believe senior living communities deliver that variety. Flexibility matters even more. Sixty-five percent said being able to cook at

home, dine out or order in was more important than having multiple on-site dining venues.¹

"There's a perception problem," says Cuticelli. "But beyond that, there's a lifestyle gap. People want independence, not meal plans. They want options, not restrictions."

These preferences echo a generational refusal to compromise. Boomers and Gen Xers, shaped by scratch cooking, restaurant culture and a growing wellness movement, now expect food that reflects their values: quality, choice, clarity. What they don't want are gimmicks or generic "healthy" labels. "It's a 'show me' generation," says Cuticelli. "They want to know who the suppliers are, what the ingredients are, and what kind of impact that food has on their health and the world."

Generation X: Eating for health and longevity

Gen Xers often take an evidence-based, proactive approach to wellness. A 2019 US survey from the International Food

Information Council and American Institute for Cancer Research found that 48% of Gen Xers consider cancer risk when making food choices, and 59% believe diet, exercise and weight directly affect long-term health.^{2,3}

These habits show up on the plate. Twenty percent say they limit sugar, 16% reduce carbs and 14% boost produce intake. Transparency and customization matter. Gen Xers want meals that support goals like disease prevention, weight management and sustained energy.³ This generation is also more likely to trust doctors, researchers and registered dietitians over influencers or peers. For operators, the takeaway is clear: Menus must be flexible, scientifically grounded and rooted in trust. Labeling, sourcing and ingredient clarity matter, especially for a generation that sees food as a long-term investment in their health.

Boomers: Comfort meets conscious eating

Boomers crave comfort, pleasure and simplicity in their dining choices. One survey showed they eat out approximately 193 times a year, slightly less

than four times a week. Data from the same source indicates that about 62% of Boomers are open to trying new dishes when dining out, though only when those dishes feature familiar flavors.⁴ They still seek experiences that feel indulgent and familiar—not flashy; just satisfyingly delicious.

Scratch-cooked comfort food with a gentle modern twist hits the sweet spot. Soulful, flavor-rich classics made from real ingredients, served in familiar yet refreshingly inviting ways, resonate most.

For Boomers, dining isn't just about nutrition, it's about joy, routine and consistency. Operators that deliver dependable quality and memorable hospitality that makes members and residents feel valued will earn their loyalty.

Reimagining dining: Tradition, innovation and choice

For the Silent Generation (born 1928–1945), food was often simple, home-cooked and seasonal. Typical meals included fruits, vegetables, eggs, fish and locally sourced meats, and there were only a few convenience foods like Jell-O® and cake mix.⁵ Some of those preferences carried over to older Boomers, but the next wave of aging adults brings a more adventurous palate to the table.

Today's eaters want familiar foods with a modern spin: Think sweet potatoes instead of plain baked, shredded beef tacos over meatloaf, or global spices layered onto comfort classics. It's not about abandoning tradition; it's about elevating it. Forward-thinking culinary teams are designing dining programs that reflect both the values and the practical realities of Boomers and Gen Xers, who are reshaping what aging well looks like.⁶ These are not just menu upgrades. They are business strategies.

"I think it needs to be completely reengineered," says Cuticelli. "The way things are happening today, this take-it-or-



Residents now evaluate communities through the lens of prevention, energy and longevity. They want flexible, nutrient-forward options and meals that support personal goals, not just dietary guidelines

leave-it model isn't going to work anymore. The new consumer is a customer. They have needs, wants and desires, and they're making value-based decisions."

Sharon Habanec, senior vice president of Culinary Services at Willow Valley Communities, has seen those shifts. "We started to see a change in resident lifestyle and preferences several years ago," she says. "First and foremost, we focused on increasing flexibility with meal plans and creating new and different dining options. Extending the breakfast meal period, offering take-out meals at all locations, and creating menus unique to each dining venue have helped create the variety to meet differing needs."

Residents now evaluate communities through the lens of prevention, energy and longevity. They want flexible, nutrient-forward options and meals that support personal goals, not just dietary guidelines. But how does that play out on the ground, where autonomy, clinical safety and generational preferences often collide? Mary Kate Schaible, RD, Senior Living Communities, LLC, Greenville,

South Carolina, has witnessed this tension firsthand.

Where wellness meets reality

"There's literature that restricting diets past a certain age is not beneficial," says Schaible. "I'm a firm believer in liberalized diets." In long-term care, quality of life often outweighs strict dietary control. "If a diabetic resident doesn't eat much but will enjoy some ice cream, I'm all about that," she adds.

Short-term rehab patients may benefit more from therapeutic diets, but only with their consent. "We always make sure the resident agrees with the plan," Schaible says.

The tension is often most pronounced with medically altered diets, where upgrading is outside a dietitian's scope and must be cleared by physicians or speech therapists. Family concerns can add another layer. "When I liberalize a diabetic diet, families sometimes worry. I have to explain how it leads to

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Gen Xers expect meals that support disease prevention, weight management and sustained energy, with menus that are flexible, trustworthy and transparent

better intake, weight gain and overall well-being.” Generational differences are increasingly shaping expectations. “In independent living, the younger residents are definitely focused on wellness,” she observes. “There’s a move away from meat-and-potatoes toward grilled proteins, fresh vegetables—even vegan or vegetarian diets in skilled nursing.”

Wellness doesn’t replace comfort, however. Schaible’s team treats menus like restaurant offerings, blending familiar favorites with opportunities to educate. “Residents in the South still want true comfort food,” she says. “But we do presentations on diabetes, Parkinson’s or even Blue Zones, and we’ll pair that with a themed meal. It keeps things relevant without feeling faddish.”

Resident feedback plays a formal role, too. “In assisted living and skilled nursing, we hold monthly food committee

meetings with dining leadership,” says Schaible. But those small committees have limits, and they may not represent the entire population. One data point she’d love to have? “Meal-specific food waste. It would show us what’s actually being eaten, and not just requested.” [Ed. To learn more about the impact of food waste tracking and emerging technology, see the article on pages 70–77.]

Ultimately, Schaible says, the goal is simple: “Food is often the last thing a person has control over. We try to make it special.”

Voices of change

Personalized, wellness-driven dining requires more than a talented chef or an expanded, more varied menu. Organizations are rethinking operations, integrating culinary teams with wellness directors and clinical staff to match food choices with evolving health markers.

This demands cross-functional collaboration, flexible systems, and a new understanding of food as both experience and intervention. Some teams review menus in advance; embed nutrition into lifestyle planning; or use intake forms to understand diner preferences, allergies and goals from day one.

Residents and members aren’t asking for special menus; they expect dining programs that meet them where they are culturally, emotionally and nutritionally. As Restaura’s Cuticelli puts it, “Food is the most frequent, most powerful form of communication in a community. It says: We see you; we value you; and we’re listening.”

Wellness remains key, but so does sourcing, sustainability and transparency. Many eaters want to know where their

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Chef James Bain, regional director of dining services for Watermark Retirement Communities

With more than three decades in hospitality, James Bain, regional director of dining services for Watermark Retirement Communities, has led menu development, leadership training and dining innovation across 32 communities. In this interview with author Joy Keller, Bain shares how his team is responding to rising expectations from Boomers and Gen Xers; the programs that preserve dignity and independence; and the mindset shifts transforming senior dining.

JK: *How have resident expectations changed with Boomers and Gen Xers entering communities?*

JB: Expectations have increased significantly, from the design of the dining room to the menu and food choices. It is no longer common to have a single dining room that suits everyone. Boomers and Gen Xers now seek multiple dining options that match their lifestyles. They want variety, flexibility and restaurant-quality dining experiences. Gen Xers' children are helping their parents find vibrant communities and encouraging meaningful social interactions, often during mealtimes.

The next generation also emphasizes health and wellness, covering both

physical and mental health. Food nourishes the soul; that's why at Watermark, dining is part of the Health and Wellness Team, and our dining vision statement is called "Dining for the Soul." We focus on building a strong foundation for excellence and pay attention to small details daily by creating menus that highlight fresh foods, herbs and vegetables. We cook in batches and finish to order, using recipes from our residents, chefs and our Healing Kitchens recipe collection.

In our Élan communities, we have moved away from the traditional meal structure of the program. Watermark offers a flex spend plan, which applies to our independent residents. Flex spend provides residents with a monthly allowance that they can use as they wish within the community. Our menu prices are based on comparable local market retail prices for breakfast, lunch and dinner, with a 20% discount applied. This excludes gratuity.

JK: *What have you learned about creating culinary experiences that support dignity and independence without sacrificing quality?*

JB: There are no shortcuts. When you cook, you must have passion and cook from the heart. This helps make everything you're preparing as special as it can be, whether it's a simple hamburger or beef Wellington. Gourmet Bites and Chef on Site are different [programs] and cater to different residents and members. Gourmet Bites Cuisine is specialized for memory care residents. It has been adopted across all our memory care and assisted living communities nationwide.

Gourmet Bites Cuisine turns the daily menu into tasty, handheld creations that bring back joy and independence during mealtimes. It restores accessibility by transforming familiar meals into manageable, flavorful portions that can be enjoyed without the need for utensils

or assistance. This allows residents to enjoy their meals at their own pace, especially when sharing moments with family and friends. It encourages independence, dignity and accessibility in dining.

The Chef on Site initiative was a collaboration with New Opportunities in Connecticut, where we provided meals to three local senior centers. I prepared the food on-site instead of having it made in a commissary and delivered. The program was highly successful, and the members eagerly anticipated the meals.

JK: *What mindset shifts are most important for culinary and hospitality teams today?*

JB: The dining experience should feel like a high-end restaurant. That means the service team needs to build relationships with residents, anticipate their needs and know their preferences. We need a team that works together; there is no "front of the house" or "back of the house"—we are all on the same team, dining together. Dining directors should be the ones leading the change and improving the department's culture. I believed no job was too small for me. I bused tables, served, cooked on the line and did dishes. As a result, my team followed suit. We shared a purpose and vision to deliver exceptional dining experiences. The staff was empowered and made new suggestions for improving service or food. Their satisfaction matters to us, and it shows in the resident experience.

Resource

Watermark Retirement Communities. (n.d.). Dining for the Soul. Available online at <https://www.watermarkcommunities.com/why-watermark/signature-programs/dining-for-the-soul/>



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Food as a bridge across generations

Joseph Cuticelli isn't just thinking about what's on the plate. As chair of the board at national nonprofit Generations United®, he's long advocated for initiatives that bring older and younger people together in meaningful ways.

"Dining can be one of the richest shared experiences we have," Cuticelli says. "It's where stories get passed down, where cultural memory is preserved, and where connection happens—often without a word."

From multigenerational community gardens to shared culinary events, Cuticelli sees food as a natural way to foster belonging and build relationships across age groups. "When we design dining programs with intention, we're not just nourishing bodies," he says. "We're shaping culture for everyone."

food comes from, how it's prepared and whether their choices correlate with broader values. "You've got people coming in who've been making values-based decisions their whole lives," says Cuticelli. "The industry has to pivot. You can't say, 'This is the menu, take it or leave it.'"

Food is also a form of self-expression for Boomers and Gen Xers. Whether they're customizing dishes for wellness goals, attending themed dinners or chatting with chefs at live demos, they enjoy dining as a personal, interactive experience. "It's about the emotional connection to food," Cuticelli adds. "It's part of their identity. What I eat, where I eat, how I eat—it's all tied into how people see themselves."

For operators, that means meeting not just dietary needs, but emotional, cultural and identity-based ones. This evolution emphasizes that senior dining is no longer just a service. In the most progressive locations, it has become a central expression of how organizations see, support and celebrate the people they serve.

Dining as a cultural cornerstone

Meals that are thoughtful, flexible and socially engaging tell Boomers and Gen Xers that operators understand who they are and how they want to live. Culinary, wellness and hospitality that treat dining as a cultural cornerstone and not just as a cost center are already seeing the benefits. These include stronger engagement, richer daily rhythms and deeper congruency between health goals and lifestyle. Some even report improved retention and word-of-mouth referrals tied directly to the dining experience.

"When dining becomes part of the culture, not just the schedule, everything changes," says Cuticelli. "We've seen communities use food to drive engagement, rebuild trust and create rituals that make people feel seen."

As expectations continue to shift, the challenge for operators is not to chase trends, but to lead with intention. That means investing in people, systems and cross-functional processes that keep food personal, relevant and deeply hu-



Shaped by restaurant culture and the wellness movement, Gen Xers expect food that reflects their values—quality, choice and gimmick-free clarity that shows them who made it, what's in it, and the impact it has on their health and the world

man. When done right, a meal becomes more than nourishment. It becomes a moment of recognition, a tool for healing and a reason to stay.

At Charlestown, an Erickson Senior Living community, resident Stephanie Leddy captures this beautifully. Four nights a week, she joins friends at her favorite table at the Chesapeake Bar & Restaurant, mixing and matching small plates—like firecracker shrimp, stuffed shells or lamb meatballs.

“I always find something I like,” she says.⁷ For Leddy, dinner isn’t just a meal. It’s a ritual that feeds both body and spirit. 🍷

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High-level dining in active-adult communities

Today’s 50- to 70-somethings grew up with diverse restaurant culture, gourmet cooking on television and rising nutrition awareness.¹ They expect flexible, upscale dining that feels like a favorite restaurant—not a cafeteria. In response, communities are elevating culinary programs with chef-driven menus; rooftop bars; and interactive events that blend wellness, community and sophisticated flavor.

Benchmark Senior Living: Alexandria, Virginia

Features a demo kitchen for chef-resident interaction, a sidewalk café, rooftop grill, bistro with bar, and resident-tended hydroponic farms supplying seasonal dishes.¹

The Bristol: Mount Sinai, New York
The “Adventurous Eaters Club” serves authentic global menus—from Spain to Japan—paired with resident travel stories, offering worldly flavors close to home.²

Spring Hills: Livingston, New Jersey

Partnered with Morrison, an upscale provider of chef-focused cuisine, operating restaurants in several states, for chef-forward cuisine, 24-hour room service, rooftop tapas bar, cooking classes, tastings, and garden-to-table programming with horticulture therapy.³

Mosaic: Lancaster City, Pennsylvania

Includes a locally sourced restaurant, wine cellar and the Inkwell Rooftop Bar & Terrace with skyline views. It’s also open to the public to foster intergenerational connections.⁴

Cordia: Grand Traverse Commons, Michigan

Offers a formal dining room, all-day pub, patio and private dining carrels, as well as flexible hours, made-to-order meals and room service for residents who are unwell.⁵

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Smart food waste tracking tools—from AI-enabled recognition to connected scales and reporting—are helping kitchens of all sizes cut waste and costs. Image courtesy of Leanpath

Technology and tools to cut food waste

From AI-powered systems to simple spreadsheets, use food tech to reduce kitchen waste and increase resource efficiency

by Rachel L. Garcia, MPS

The steam table is spotless, and the plates have been cleared from a successful service. But in the dish room, a server quietly slides a nearly full pan of lasagna into the garbage. Unfortunately, not many diners ordered it tonight.



Multiply that scene by hundreds of meals a week, and the scale of food waste across the spectrum of senior dining comes into sharper focus.

Globally, up to 40% of all food produced goes uneaten—enough to cover a landmass the size of China.¹ The United Nations Environment Programme estimates this costs the global economy approximately \$1 trillion each year.² In the United States, wasted food silently drains 4–10% of restaurant food costs,

and when evaluating associated labor, kitchens can spend the equivalent of a full month's work each year on food that never gets eaten.³

For kitchens across International Council on Active Aging® member organizations, the impact may be even greater. Every untouched entrée and over-ordered case of lettuce isn't just spoiled food—it's lost revenue, squandered staff time and a missed opportunity to nourish people.

Food waste is difficult to control in senior dining, especially considering complex menu cycles, unique dietary needs and preferences, staffing limitations, budget constraints, and procurement hurdles. Although research on food waste in these settings is limited, a 2002 study measuring food waste in a retirement community in Tulsa, Oklahoma, found roughly 20% of all food served was left uneaten.⁴ Similarly, a 2024

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Winnow Vision uses AI and image recognition to track kitchen waste automatically—identifying items, assigning costs, and highlighting patterns that drive smarter purchasing and operations. The system captures everything from spoilage to uneaten meals, giving operators clear data to cut waste, save money and scale sustainability. Image courtesy of Winnow

Canadian study in Ontario reported 28% of all food and beverage items served were wasted, with lunch having the highest rate of waste at 31%.⁴

While the Canadian cohort wasted food at widely varying levels, findings show approximately 15% of residents discarded more than half of their food. A more recent Belgian investigation across five residential care organizations estimated food waste ranging 25–40%, depending on various factors, such as size of operation, food service setting and food processing methods.⁴

If you track such data, you may find similar statistics in your kitchen and dining room.

‘Operating for one’ mindset

With so many considerations at play, the challenge of eliminating food waste persists as a daunting and elusive goal. Even

the most efficient kitchens encounter moments of surplus, unexpected spoilage and sudden changes in demand that disrupt norms. Helene York, MBA, a faculty professor at the Food Business School of the Culinary Institute of America and the University of California, Berkeley, says that many food waste reduction experts acknowledge this, affirming that achieving absolute zero waste is unrealistic in food service environments. Instead, she says kitchen operators should aim for a stabilized waste level where just 1–2% of total food handled is discarded.

This can be described as an “operating for one [percent]” approach. Rather than your chasing an all-or-nothing—and frankly impossible—standard, this approach reframes food waste as a dynamic, progress-driven strategy aimed at making waste rare, brief and effectively managed. It recognizes that

waste reduction is less about perfection and more about conscious, continuous improvement.

By adopting this mindset, kitchens can build an ongoing culture where culinary and hospitality teams are empowered to find the root causes of waste; adapt to changing conditions; and strengthen their operations through updated systems, refined procedures, and use of effective tools and technology. Ultimately, operating for one is not a fixed goal; it is an everyday commitment to efficiency, accountability and sustainability.

In practice, moving from a typical waste level of 8% down to a targeted 1% may sound ambitious, but it becomes achievable through practical steps. For example, adjusting par levels to better match actual consumption can prevent overordering, while standardizing portion sizes helps ensure consistency and reduces plate waste. Par levels (periodic automatic replacement) represent the minimum quantity of an item that should be on hand at any given time to avoid stockouts (running out of stock). Cross-utilizing ingredients across multiple menu items also minimizes spoilage by keeping inventory moving efficiently. These straightforward strategies—combined with ongoing waste tracking—help kitchens make steady, measurable progress toward operating for one.

Prevention meets technology

To take prevention efforts from insightful planning to precise action, many kitchens are turning to advanced technologies that automate waste tracking and provide data-driven insights, making it easier than ever to identify waste patterns and optimize operations.

The EPA’s Wasted Food Scale (Figure 1) suggests kitchens prioritize waste prevention and source reduction. Food waste reduction experts, including York,

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US EPA Wasted Food Scale and ‘operating for one’

The “operating for one” mindset encourages kitchens to accept that zero waste is unrealistic but that aiming for a small, manageable level—around 1%—is both practical and impactful. The US Environmental Protection Agency’s Wasted Food Scale⁵ provides a clear framework for achieving this by ranking food waste reduction actions from most

to least preferred, based on environmental and economic benefits.

The scale places waste prevention and donation at the top left of the horseshoe. These strategies deliver the greatest benefits by stopping waste before it happens or redirecting surplus food to those in need. Next are feeding animals and composting, which help repurpose unavoidable scraps. Lower on the scale

are options such as incineration and anaerobic digestion, which generally carry higher environmental costs.

Though some actions on the scale don’t apply directly to kitchen operations, focusing on prevention, donation, animal feed and composting creates practical, achievable steps for community kitchens committed to the operating for one approach.



Figure 1. Wasted Food Scale. Source: United States Environmental Protection Agency, October 2023



Food recovery apps like MealConnect, Careit and Food Rescue US make it simple for businesses to donate surplus food directly to local nonprofits. These platforms streamline scheduling, pickups and safe handling—connecting extra meals with communities in need

recommend that these efforts account for at least 50% of kitchens' overall food-waste reduction strategy. These approaches typically involve implementing smarter purchase forecasting, menu planning and procurement practices as informed by baseline food waste audit results. Winnow and Leanpath are two examples of food tech companies using AI-powered smart scales and smart inventory management systems to support these efforts.

Endorsed by Chef Vojtech Végh, a global leader in food waste reduction, Winnow's patented technology, Winnow Vision, uses AI-powered software and image recognition to help kitchens track food waste automatically, effectively removing the need for manual data entry. A camera mounted above a smart scale captures images of food as it is discarded, and Winnow Vision's AI

model names the items and categorizes them based on waste type. This includes spoiled surplus inventory, inedible scraps and trimmings, cooking errors, and unserved/uneaten prepared food.

Once named and categorized, the computer software assigns a cost to each item, giving users clear, itemized data to guide procurement adjustments and operational improvements. This paid, three-year service and its associated technology are scalable for small, medium and large kitchens, with installation, setup, training, and ongoing support and maintenance included.⁶

Winnow reports most of its clients recoup their initial investment shortly after the second month of use. Additionally, clients saw a 3–8% reduction in food purchasing costs⁶ and cut their food waste by 50–65%.⁷

A functionally similar, yet distinct, product is Leanpath's Tracker. Designed for kitchens of all sizes, Leanpath's custom-fit technology helps operators achieve both financial and sustainability goals. The company provides users with a suite of tailored food-waste tracking tools, including AI-enabled food recognition cameras, smart scales, tablets, and enterprise-level reporting that record and categorize food waste outputs.

Leanpath's proprietary software analyzes waste patterns and generates targeted recommendations to prevent recurring waste. In addition to practical operational strategies, Leanpath offers guidance to strengthen staff engagement, improve waste tracking workflows and encourage lasting behavioral change—a reflection of the company's commitment to driving social change alongside technological solutions. All system versions

come with comprehensive training options—from self-paced virtual courses to on-site, chef-led sessions—and ongoing coaching to support continued food waste reduction efforts.⁸

Leanpath reports that many of its clients reduce their food waste by upward of 50%. They typically see a 2–6% reduction in food purchasing costs, along with a return of two to seven times the initial investment.³

High-tech food waste tracking systems like Winnow and Leanpath show strong promise, offering measurable reductions in waste and cost savings that often justify an investment. While these solutions are increasingly accessible to medium and large kitchens, affordability and complexity can still pose challenges for smaller operations. Fortunately, a growing marketplace of options means kitchens can find technologies tailored to their size and needs. But technology alone isn't enough—redirecting surplus food to feed people remains a critical, complementary strategy.

Feed people, not landfills

While preventing food waste should be the top priority, teams can also significantly reduce food waste output by redirecting surplus food—which would otherwise end up in landfills—to feed the local community. This action is ranked just below prevention on the EPA's Wasted Food Scale.

In the United States, popular food recovery apps include Careit, MealConnect® (developed by Feeding America®), and Food Rescue US®. These mobile apps and desktop platforms allow businesses and institutions to donate surplus food directly to approved local nonprofits, food pantries and charities through user-friendly scheduling and matchmaking software. Donors can easily share details about their food donations and coordinated pickups and deliveries using the apps' trained staff or volunteers, ensuring proper food handling throughout

the process. Be sure to check which food recovery apps are available in your area, as options vary by region.

Familiarize your team with municipal food donation guidelines to understand which foods and conditions are considered safe—or unsafe—for redistribution.

Still have scraps?

Even with careful planning and skilled prep, byproducts such as fruit and vegetables, cores, and other trimmings unfit for human consumption still pile up in most kitchens. According to the EPA's scale, the next-best use is to turn those scraps into animal feed—still a valuable source of nutrition in agriculture. Several food recovery apps and item-sharing platforms can also match foodservice operations with local farmers and ranchers who will gladly repurpose surplus food for livestock. Users post what's available and when and how it can be picked up (often handled by a driver, volunteer or farm staff).

When food is unfit for humans and animals, composting—breaking down organic waste into nutrient-rich soil—becomes the next preferred action on the EPA scale. An app-facilitated approach can connect operators with food recovery partners so nothing valuable ends up in the trash. Beyond city-run compost services, apps like Peels and MakeSoil connect kitchens with community gardeners and independent composting services. These platforms let users list what is available, coordinate drop-offs or pickups, and in MakeSoil's case, get step-by-step guidance, troubleshooting tips and composting education.

Some kitchens prefer to keep composting close to home—especially if there is a garden on-site. In these cases, a variety of accelerated food decomposers can slowly grind, dry and heat food waste, converting it into a condensed, soil-like

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Smart questions, better investments

Whether it's a sleek new machine or a cloud-based tracking app, today's food waste tools can cut costs and boost efficiency. Still, tight storage space, lean staffing or budget limits can make adopting them feel daunting.

No single technology fits every operation—and that's okay. Decision-makers have every reason to directly engage software and equipment sales reps about whether their tool works for a specific kitchen, service environment and goals.

When testing software, ask:

- What is the meal volume sweet spot for cost-effectiveness?
- How much training and support will my staff get?
- Can this tech flex with menu, volume or staffing changes?
- Is there a demo or trial period before we commit?

When evaluating equipment, ask:

- What is required to install it?
- What is the life expectancy?
- What kind of maintenance does it need?
- What is covered by the warranty and support plan?
- Is there a demo or trial before purchase?

If the answers don't match your operation's needs, it's not a dead end. It's an opportunity to explore creative, right-sized solutions.



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amendment in hours. Popular options include the Mill food recycler, Food-Cycler®, and composter models from Creeks and Oklin, all sized for different kitchen footprints.

Low-tech, high-impact tools

Not every smart solution requires a big-tech budget. A shared Microsoft Excel file or Google Sheet is an excellent starting point for tracking food waste, purchases and inventory with low to no barrier of entry. Staff can log waste using photos and notes including type of food, quantity (estimated or weighed)

and reason for disposal (e.g., overproduction, spoilage, plate waste). This data shows where waste is happening and opens team discussion for how to prevent it.

The same tools can connect regional kitchens in powerful ways. A real-time Google Sheet can help neighboring resources pool orders, split cases or coordinate surplus donations with food rescue groups. These sheets can be formatted with columns for product name, contracted food service company, unit cost, case size, available quantity to split and participating kitchens to organize and track joint purchases.

Google Sheets can also be shared among local food rescue organizations, community groups, churches or youth programs interested in receiving surplus ingredients or prepared food. Kitchen operators in the United States can find participating organizations using free databases such as the EPA Excess Food Opportunities Map, Food Rescue Locator by Sustainable America, or general search engines like Google and Ecosia. Once connected, kitchens can use shared sheets to log item descriptions, quantities, preparation or receipt dates, best-by dates, storage requirements, and pickup availability.

Thinking outside the kitchen, live data sheets also can be shared among farmers and ranchers, community gardeners and landscapers to facilitate redistribution of foods better suited for animal feed or composting. Operators can also swap tips and storage hacks and even share staff or equipment, building a network of mutual support and an informal resource library.

To collect resident and member feedback, free survey platforms like Google Forms, SurveyMonkey®, or Typeform can capture preferences and guide informed menu planning. While these tools aren't automated apps, they make


communication more intentional—strengthening team and community relationships through real-time updates and feedback, tailored notes, and customized arrangements.

Building a waste-conscious kitchen culture

Even the best tools only work when your team is well informed and on board. Lasting change in food waste reduction comes from a shared mindset, not just a new system. That means setting clear expectations, involving staff early in decisions, and connecting every role to the bigger “why” behind the effort. When teams understand the purpose, see the impact and get hands-on training tailored to their work, waste reduction becomes part of daily habits rather than an occasional campaign.

Progress over perfection

Reducing food waste should not be about chasing an elusive zero. The goal should be continuous progress over time, not perfection. “Operating for one” is less a finish line and more a mindset that encourages learning, experimenting and finding small ways to make food waste the exception, not the norm.

Whether you're tracking waste with a spreadsheet, piloting new technology or fostering a waste-conscious kitchen culture, every step adds up. Over time, these shifts can help kitchens run more efficiently, stretch budgets further and deepen relationships with your staff and surrounding community. 

Acknowledgement

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When kitchen scraps can't be served, they can still nourish. EPA ranks animal feed as the next-best use for food byproducts. Apps now connect foodservice teams with local farmers to repurpose trimmings into livestock feed

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Resources

Internet

Food waste prevention software

Winnow Solutions: <https://www.winnowsolutions.com>
Leanpath: <https://www.leanpath.com>

Food redistribution apps

Careit: <https://careit.com/>
MealConnect® by Feeding America®: <https://mealconnect.org/>
Food Rescue US®: <https://foodrescue.us/>
Peels: <https://peels.app>
MakeSoil: <https://makesoil.org>

Accelerated food decomposers

Mill food recycler: <https://mill.com>
FoodCycler®: <https://foodcycler.com>

Creeks: <https://ecocompostmachine.com>
Oklin: <https://oklininternational.com>

Low-tech software

Microsoft Excel: <https://microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365/excel>
Google Sheets: <https://google.com/sheets/about>

Survey tools

Google Forms: <https://google.com/forms/about>
SurveyMonkey: <https://surveymonkey.com>
Typeform: <https://typeform.com>

Food redistribution databases

EPA Excess Food Opportunities Map: <https://epa.gov/sustainable->

[management-food/excess-food-opportunities-map](https://www.epa.gov/sustainable-management-food/excess-food-opportunities-map)
Food Rescue Locator by Sustainable America: <https://foodrescuelocator.com>

Free search engines

Google: <https://google.com>
Ecosia: <https://ecosia.com>

Print

Webster, S. T. (2024). Reducing food waste makes sense for people, places and budgets. *Journal on Active Aging*, 23(5), 32–42. Available to ICAA members in the “Articles” archives [search keyword *food waste*] at <https://www.icaa.cc>

News from ICAA Corporate Partners



SportsArt offers cardio, strength and rehabilitation equipment for the fitness, medical and residential markets. One example is the SportsArt ECO-POWR™ Elite G660 Treadmill. Image courtesy of SportsArt

SportsArt renews its commitment to ICAA mission

SportsArt has renewed its longstanding partnership with the International Council on Active Aging® (ICAA), reinforcing a shared commitment to making fitness accessible for the aging population across all levels of ability. SportsArt plays an active role in key ICAA initiatives, including the ICAA Wellness Think Tank, a strategic forum that brings together thought leaders to address the evolving needs of older adults and active-aging communities. The most recent meeting took place in spring 2025 in Washington, DC, and focused on blending wellness with healthcare.

“One of the highlights of our partnership with ICAA is participating in the Think Tank,” says Ruben Mejia, executive vice president, SportsArt Americas. “It’s an honor to bring our unique perspective to these conversations and help shape actionable strategies with colleagues.”

Headquartered in Everett, Washington, SportsArt is a leading fitness equipment

manufacturer known for its innovative, sustainable solutions. For example, energy-producing ECO-POWR technology converts user energy into usable electricity to help offset power usage. The company offers a full range of cardio, strength and rehabilitation equipment for the fitness, medical and residential markets. Visit <https://www.gosportsart.com> to learn more about how SportsArt supports active-aging communities.

NIFS expands senior fitness reach with The Fairfax partnership

The National Institute for Fitness and Sport (NIFS) has partnered with The Fairfax, a Sunrise Senior Living community in Fort Belvoir, Virginia, to further elevate resident wellness through tailored fitness programs. Ashleigh Banks, a certified fitness professional, now leads the on-site wellness program, bringing additional expertise to personalized exercise plans, engaging group classes, and community-wide events. The partnership brings NIFS’ expertise in senior fitness to The Fairfax through evi-

dence-based initiatives like fall prevention, Parkinson’s-focused exercises, and wellness events. NIFS also supports operations in the community’s fitness center and pool, working closely with dining, therapy, and wellness staff. This collaboration reflects a shared commitment to active aging and comprehensive wellness, NIFS says. Check out <https://www.nifs.org> for additional information about NIFS services.

New Perspective increases length of stay with comprehensive use of LifeLoop

New research quantifies the impact of resident experience technology on resident length of stay (LOS), to deliver “a first-time benchmark” for an essential measure of organizational success, state Minnesota-based New Perspective, a leading senior living provider, and Colorado-based LifeLoop, a leading resident and staff experience solution for the senior living industry. The two organizations released the findings of their study in early August 2025.

Led by LifeLoop Principal Researcher Lydia Nguyen, PhD, and New Perspective Senior Vice President of Innovation and Optimization Brandon Tabbert, the 15-month joint study reveals a 172-day increase in median LOS at communities that deeply embedded LifeLoop’s comprehensive technology platform into daily operations. The research analyzed a pre-defined LOS dataset and LifeLoop usage data across 28 New Perspective communities in eight states. It also surveyed staff satisfaction of 76 team members in the organization. While the study revealed all communities using LifeLoop experienced meaningful LOS gains, high-usage communities delivered a 139-day longer LOS ($p < .001$).

When considering the study’s organizational value to New Perspective, Tabbert commented, “This research is the missing link between what we believe matters and what we can measure.” Refer to <https://lifeloop.com> to discover more about the LifeLoop solution and to download the study report.

Parkshore enhances resident wellness with Dividat Senso

Parkshore Senior Living, a member of the Transforming Age network in Seattle, Washington, recently integrated the Dividat Senso platform into its fitness center to support resident wellness. This scientifically validated system combines physical and cognitive training through interactive, game-based exercises that engage both mind and body. Used under supervision, the Senso has become a valued part of residents' fitness routines—often described by individuals as the “icing on the cake” of their workouts, according to Dividat. Further, “this addition aligns with Parkshore’s mission to promote purposeful aging by offering evidence-based tools that enhance balance, coordination, cognitive function, and overall quality of life.” Read the full story at <https://dividat.com/en/news> to learn more about how Senso is making a difference at Parkshore.

HUR USA debuts Smart Check-In for wellness programs

HUR USA has launched Smart Check-In, a digital attendance tracking system designed for senior living wellness programs. Residents use a key fob and touchscreen kiosk to sign in to fitness classes and wellness activities, eliminating the need for paper sign-in sheets. Piloted at Plymouth Place, a life plan community in Illinois, Smart Check-In reduced staff time spent on attendance tracking from one hour to five minutes. It also improved data accuracy and resident engagement. The tool allows wellness staff to monitor participation, generate reports, and identify program trends. Smart Check-In is available as a standalone tool or integrated with HUR SmartTouch strength equipment for a complete wellness data solution. View <https://www.hurusa.com> for more details.

Active Wellness expands Activate Wellness Studios nationwide

Active Wellness, a leading fitness center management and consulting company and ICAA Corporate Partner, recently announced three new Activate The Wellness Studio projects currently in development. These studio projects are outlined below:

- Sunnyvale, California: 11,000 sq. ft., independent living
- Cedar Park, Texas: 7,000 sq. ft., independent living
- Allen, Texas: 6,280 sq. ft., active adult

These ground-up developments are purpose-built to support vibrant aging with state-of-the-art design and programming.

Based in San Francisco, California, Active Wellness offers clients a range of development services, including concept-to-completion planning; space planning and interior design; project management; equipment procurement; and preopening staffing and operations. For further information about how the company seeks “to bring wellness to life,” go online to <https://activewellness.com/activate>

Restaura announces new executive, industry recognition for team member

Waltham, Massachusetts-based Restaura Hospitality Group has welcomed Ross Dickmann as senior vice president, client strategy and integration. In this role, Dickmann brings his more than 30 years of senior living and hospitality leadership to the culinary services company, including serving most recently as chief operating officer at Moorings Park

Institute in Naples, Florida. Highlighting the new executive’s experience in “managing complex corporate systems and specialized hospitality teams,” the announcement notes that Dickmann “will apply his deep knowledge rooted in innovation and differentiation to cultivate meaningful relationships with Restaura’s clients.”

Also, the company is celebrating an honor recently awarded to Chief Culinary Officer Matthew Thompson, who was the sole winner of the *Senior Housing News* DISHED Dining Innovation Award in the “Partner in Innovation” category. *Senior Housing News* is part of WHTH Healthcare, which launched the awards in 2025. More information about this award category and the inaugural DISHED awards appears in “Industry news” on page 14 of this *Journal on Active Aging*® issue. Visit <https://www.restaura.com> to learn more about Restaura’s services.🍷

The International Council on Active Aging® connects ICAA members with companies interested in doing business with them and in supporting the active-aging industry. Listings appear in the “ICAA Corporate Partners” department on the following pages of this Journal on Active Aging® issue.



(L to r), Ross Dickman, a senior living industry veteran, joined Waltham, Massachusetts-based Restaura, while Chief Culinary Officer Matthew Thompson won an award for dining innovation. Images courtesy of Restaura Hospitality Group

ICAA Corporate

International Council on Active Aging® (ICAA) members connect with companies interested in doing business with them, and in supporting the active-aging industry, through ICAA's Corporate Partner Program. The support of the following companies enables ICAA to provide members with programs and services. ICAA encourages members to support these partners in turn, and to take advantage of the additional savings they offer members on products and services.

Corporate Partners

GOLD



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Fax: 888-556-2128
www.humana.com
www.humana.com/help

Humana's successful history in care delivery and health plan administration is helping us create a new integrated care model with the power to improve health and well-being while lowering costs. Our efforts lead to better quality of life for people with Medicare and others.



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crystalj@keiser.com
www.keiser.com

Instead of starting and ending with the limits of the machine, Keiser starts with the potential of the human body and develops smarter technology. Our equipment helps everyone from elite athletes to active older adults add more life to their years.



Matrix Fitness

1600 Landmark Drive
Cottage Grove WI 53527
Toll-free: 866-693-4863
Tel: 608-839-8686
Fax: 608-839-8687
info@matrixfitness.com
<https://matrixfitness.com/active-aging>

Matrix Fitness Systems is the commercial division of Johnson Health Tech Co. Ltd., a leading fitness equipment manufacturer. Matrix delivers durable commercial fitness products, with low total cost of ownership.



National Institute for Fitness and Sport (NIFS)

250 University Boulevard
Indianapolis IN 46202
Tel: 317-274-3432
edavenport@nifs.org
<https://wellness.nifs.org>

NIFS provides comprehensive management of your fitness and wellness program. Our staff deliver customized best-practice programs and services that elevate resident engagement. We also specialize in design and equipment layout of community fitness spaces.



Restaura

260 Charles Street, Suite 301
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Toll-free: 833-573-7828
Tel: 781-764-0022
ccantwell@restaura.com
info@restaura.com
www.restaura.com

The Restaura solution combines a culture rooted in employee ownership with a data-driven operating model to deliver culinary experiences that meet the high expectations of today's aging population.

SILVER



Active Wellness

600 California Street, 11th Floor
San Francisco CA 94108
Tel: 415-741-3300
mark.siebert@activewellness.com
ourteam@activewellness.com
www.activewellness.com

Active creates safe, engaging programs that inspire older adults and improve their quality of life. Services include: fitness center consulting and management, design and development, sales and marketing, fitness programming and group classes, virtual programming and integrative technology solutions.

Partners



Advanced Healthstyles
861 Southpark Drive, Suite 100
Littleton CO 80120
Tel: 303-996-0048
lmarsik@advancedexercise.com
grow@advancedhealthstyles.com
www.advancedhealthstyles.com

From the flooring to fitness to fulfillment, Advanced Healthstyles serves as a single resource for designing, equipping and activating fitness and wellness environments for older adults. Indoors and outdoors, we help create healthier, safer, more engaged senior communities.



Aegis Therapies® and EnerG® by Aegis
2601 Network Boulevard, Suite 102
Frisco TX 75034
Toll-free: 866-552-3913
Tel: 972-372-6750
brian.boekhout@aegistherapies.com
https://aegistherapies.com

Designed to meet the needs of both facility patients and community residents, EnerG® by Aegis's suite of wellness services offers an individualized, results-driven approach to help increase patients' health, happiness and wellness outcomes.



Avive
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Brisbane CA 94005
Toll-free: 800-489-4428
sales@avive.life
www.avive.life

Avive's lifesaving technology is easy to use and manage. Built for accessibility, durability and portability, the Avive Connect AED is a small, light, US Food and Drug Administration-approved automated external defibrillator. The device also alerts 911.



Blue Goji
6301 East Stassney Lane
Austin TX 78744
Tel: 609-405-8778
megan@bluegoji.com
www.bluegoji.com

Blue Goji is a health technology company focused on Embodied Health, a holistic approach to physical activity that blends gaming and community. BlueGoji CyberCycles create a workout experience designed to slow cognitive decline in older adults.



British Swim School
2829 Guardian Lane, Suite 100
Virginia Beach VA 23452
Toll-free: 844-576-2796
james.aspatore@britishswimschool.com
https://britishswimschool.com
https://britishswimschoolfranchise.com/
pool-partnerships

British Swim School provides survival and stroke development swimming lessons, focusing on safety, fun and skill development. The organization partners with facilities to teach swim lessons in indoor heated pools, which can be an additional revenue source for underutilized pools.



Dividat USA
3550 Frontier Avenue, Suite A2, Office C
Boulder CO 80301
Tel: 720-383-3230
dallas@dividat.com
www.dividat.com/en

Dividat is a research-driven cognitive health solution company that helps the aging population improve their cognitive motor skills and physical mobility through exercise-based games. Dividat's research has proven the reduction of falls for older adults.



HUR USA
422 North Northwest Highway, Suite 220
Park Ridge IL 60068
Toll-free: 877-729-2636
Tel: 847-729-2636
Fax: 847-509-4500
sales@hurusa.com
www.hurusa.com

HUR is a leading supplier of pneumatic strength-training equipment, fall-reduction solutions, and HUR SmartTouch software for active aging, senior living, rehabilitation, and the inclusive wellness markets.



LifeLoop
5889 Greenwood Plaza Boulevard, Suite 210
Greenwood Village CO 80111
Tel: 303-806-0797
marcus.banks@lifeloop.com
lifeloop@lifeloop.com
https://lifeloop.com

LifeLoop's comprehensive software provides solutions that help communities flourish by delivering a more holistic approach to enriching the resident experience, not just through engaging content, but also through empowering the staff who support residents and facilitating connections with their families.

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MHI Brands Safe-er-Grip

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Wichita KS 67208
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Tel: 316-684-2229
Fax: 800-678-5644
emily@mhibrands.com
orders@mhibrands.com
www.mhibrands.com

For nearly 20 years, Safe-er-Grip has provided trusted, innovative suction cup grab bars, earning a strong reputation as an industry leader for safety, quality and reliability. The line includes various suction cup balance-assist bars, plus suction cup bath accessories.



Medical Fitness Solutions

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Fallbrook CA 92028
Toll-free: 800-831-7665
Tel: 760-451-3445
Fax: 760-451-8995
alex@medicalfitsolutions.com
info@medicalfitsolutions.com
www.medicalfitsolutions.com

Want more information?

ICAA Corporate Partners have online profiles featuring company blogs, videos, photos, company literature and more. Check them out at www.icaa.cc/preferredbusinesspartners/preferredbusinesspartners.php.

To learn about the benefits of becoming an ICAA Corporate Partner, call toll-free 866-335-9777.

Medical Fitness Solutions is focused on providing holistic, comprehensive, evidence-based programs, training and nutritional support to optimize results and provide ethical ROI for caregivers. We are a customer-driven company that provides exemplary products and service.



NuStep, LLC

47700 Halyard Drive
Plymouth MI 48170
Toll-free: 800-322-2209
Tel: 734-769-3939
Fax: 734-769-8180
info@nustep.com
cmtluczek@nustep.com
www.nustep.com

NuStep's family of products represents three decades of innovative product development. With shared attributes like a user-friendly, inclusive design and intuitive user interface, the T6 Recumbent Cross Trainer, UE8 Upper Body Ergometer and RB8 Recumbent Bike offer uniformity across each platform.



Spirit Fitness

3000 Nestle Road
Jonesboro AR 72401
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Toll-free service: 800-258-8511
Tel: 870-935-1107
Fax: 870-935-7611
corey.disler@spiritfitness.com
www.spiritfitness.com

Over 40 years ago Spirit began with the goal of giving our customers the highest-quality equipment to help them achieve their fitness goals. That simple purpose continues to drive us today.



SportsArt

5900 36th Avenue West, Suite C-100
Everett WA 98203
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info@gosportsart.com
rmejia@gosportsart.com
www.gosportsart.com

SportsArt has been innovating design and manufacturing the highest-quality fitness equipment for more than 40 years. All our strength and cardio products are designed to be eco-friendly and inspire performance for our shared world.



Therabody

6100 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 200
Los Angeles CA 90048
natalie.smith@therabody.com
www.therabody.com

Dedicated to empowering individuals to live longer, healthier lives, Therabody provides science-backed wellness devices and education. These lightweight medical-grade recovery devices alleviate everything from muscle stiffness to poor circulation and sleep issues. Therabody's solutions also support injury rehabilitation.



Total Brain Health

89 Commerce Road
Cedar Grove NJ 07009
Tel: 973-665-0422
info@totalbrainhealth.com
<https://totalbrainhealth.com>

TBH Toolkits are fun, social-based brain-training programs that allow professionals to teach brain fitness and memory strategies to all ages. Each toolkit includes scripted classes and engaging group activities around cognitive fitness.

Partners

ICAA Culinary, Nutrition and Hospitality Network

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NEXDINE Hospitality is a premier provider of holistic hospitality, dining, housekeeping, laundry, facilities management, and comprehensive wellness services dedicated to delivering exceptional experiences across healthcare, senior living, education, and corporate environments.



Sysco Corporation
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Houston TX 77077
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Sysco, a global leader in food distribution, offers customized supply chain solutions, bespoke specialty product offerings, and culinary support. Its portfolio includes fresh produce, premium proteins, specialty products, sustainably focused items, equipment and supplies, and innovative culinary solutions.

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ICAA Education (ICAA's
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ICAA directions

Catch up with the association for professionals that support wellness



ICAA think tanks to be held ahead of annual conference

Hundreds of International Council on Active Aging® members and allies are counting down the days until the ICAA Conference and Expo 2025 as this issue goes to press. The event will take place Monday through Wednesday, October 13–15, at the Anaheim Marriott in Anaheim, California. Preconference sessions will be held October 12. ICAA staff and volunteers are looking forward to providing an inspiring educational and networking experience for attendees, along with our signature wellness-focused expo. (For the full conference program, visit <https://icaaconference.icaa.cc>). Thank you to conference partners Aegis Therapies®/EnerG® by Aegis and Matrix Fitness and to all the sponsor organizations for making this year's event possible.

Two meetings ahead of the conference will also shape industry directions:

On Saturday, October 11, the ICAA Culinary, Nutrition and Hospitality Think Tank 2025 “will bring together executive leaders, culinary directors, wellness experts, operations professionals, and key industry suppliers for a day of focused dialogue and future-facing collaboration,” writes Sandy Todd Webster, MSFS, in her article on pages 54–60 of this *Journal on Active Aging*® issue. “Participants will leave with a strong peer network, shared language and values, and a unified commitment to drive change

across the industry.” Thank you to CCL Hospitality Group, NEXDINE Hospitality and Sysco Corporation for their support of the Think Tank, which is part of the new ICAA Culinary, Nutrition and Hospitality Network launching this fall. The article above provides detailed information.

Then on Sunday, October 12, the ICAA Wellness Think Tank Fall 2025 will gather industry professionals and experts to discuss the proposition, “Wellness meets the longevity movement: Can concepts from the longevity trend vitalize senior living?” Participants will explore challenges and opportunities, brainstorming solutions for the industry’s use. Speakers will include Richard Carmona, MD, MPH; Nathan Price, PhD; Meredith Boyle; Remy Gross; Jason Smith; and Colin Milner. Thank you to this meeting’s sponsors: Humana, Keiser, LifeLoop, Matrix, Restaura and SportsArt.

Watch for more information about outcomes to follow in coming *JAA* issues.

ICAA’s leader to share insights at Abu Dhabi forum

The Department of Community Development (DCD) in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, has invited ICAA CEO Colin Milner to take part in its second annual Social Care Forum, scheduled to take place September 24–25, 2025, at the Hilton Yas Abu Dhabi, as of press time. DCD is launching this year’s forum in collaboration with Deloitte Middle East. The theme is “Future-Ready Social Care: People, Practice and Policy.”

Billed as “the largest event of its kind in the Emirate,” the Social Care Forum “will bring together leading experts, decision-makers, and local and international specialists in the social sector to explore key trends and developments in this vital field, aligning with the objectives of the Year of the Community 2025,” the announcement says. The program will revolve around three main pillars: empowering individuals, advancing professional practice, and reshaping social policies to meet future needs, according to the press release.

On September 24, DCD and Deloitte will cohost an expert interview featuring Milner on the topic of “Redefining aging: Innovation, inclusion, and the future of longevity.” Then, on September 25, he will take part in a moderated discussion titled “Elderly care and assisted living.” Milner says he looks forward to sharing his insights on what’s needed to create a truly “future-ready community.” To learn more about the Social Care Forum, visit the DCD’s website at <https://addcd.gov.ae/>

ICAA National Team surpasses 2025 Longest Day fundraising goal

Congratulations to all the teams and participants that have taken part in The Alzheimer’s Association’s Longest Day® initiative as part of the 2025 ICAA National Team. The initiative raises funds and awareness for Alzheimer’s research and to support people living with Alzheimer’s disease and their family members. In 2025, 35 teams raised just over USD\$80,000, surpassing the ICAA National Team’s \$50,000 goal.

At ICAA, we are so proud of the dedication of the community teams that have participated as part of our National Team over the years. The Alzheimer’s Association recently recognized your efforts and impact by awarding the team a Lifetime Achievement honor for raising more than \$500,000. Kudos to you all!

Now, the Alzheimer’s Association has started a “new chapter” for their fundraising initiative, which will now have a new name—Do What You Love to End ALZ™—and a new website (<https://events.alz.org/event/dowhatyoulove/home>). ICAA looks forward to the difference our National Team will continue to make by raising funds in 2026. You can enroll your community or organization at <https://events.alz.org/fundraisers/internationalcouncilonactiveaging>. Thank you in advance to all the teams and individuals that participate. 🙌



Investing in the future

ICAA 100 members guide the active-aging industry through their contributions to strategic planning and research. Thank you to the organizations below for their support:

- Acts Retirement-Life Communities
- Americare Senior Living
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- Sunrise Senior Living
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- Touchmark
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- Watermark Retirement Communities
- Westminster Communities of Florida

ICAA 100 membership is open to organizations with 14 or more locations. To learn more, call toll-free 866-335-9777.

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The International Council on Active Aging® is a professional membership association that focuses exclusively on the health and wellness of adults 50 years and older. ICAA was founded in the belief that we can change the way society perceives aging and create a new vision of older adults who are active—to the fullest extent possible—within all areas of life: physical, spiritual, emotional, intellectual, vocational, environmental and social.

BUILD YOUR WELL



WELLNESS FOUNDATION

Wellness is key to creating a robust culture and thriving community—on campus, in centers and beyond. Now, the International Council on Active Aging[®] is investing in your success with a new member benefit.

As an ICAA member, you and your staff can enroll in **ICAA's Foundation for Wellness Certificate Course** at no additional cost. Participants develop a fundamental understanding of wellness. Curricula include scientific evidence and useful strategies for building your organization's wellness culture and programming. This new benefit is available to all members, including Individual, Organizational and ICAA 100 members.

Not a member? Join ICAA today! You'll access a range of member benefits plus make a bold statement that your organization believes in wellness, and supports a future of thriving for constituents and staff.

**To learn more, email info@icaa.cc
or call toll-free 866-335-9777.**



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