

# Senior Living's Critical Dining Challenges and Implications for the Future

By LeadingAge Silver Partner



Today, senior living communities face a variety of challenges meeting their residents' needs while preparing for the larger, more diverse senior population of the future. Older Americans are one of the fastest-growing demographics in the U.S., with needs and desires that differ greatly from prior senior generations. With increasing expectations of flexibility, variety, and entertainment, senior service offerings must evolve to attract prospective residents and actively engage with their existing residents.

By 2020, there will be more than 77 million Americans over the age of 60<sup>1</sup>. This new era of senior living is exciting, but also potentially overwhelming. What does it specifically mean for the future of food and dining in senior living communities? For senior living communities who want to excel in this competitive marketplace, it can be difficult to know where to focus their efforts.

This white paper presents three major dining challenges and their implications that senior living residences need to address right now to stay competitive and attract the next generation of senior residents.

## Key Findings:

While many senior living executives prioritize dining and view it as integral to their goals, challenges still exist. To assess the common food service challenges faced within the senior living industry, Unidine conducted an original research survey. Responses were received from 119 decision-makers working in companies offering in the senior living marketplace. The top common challenges identified include:

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Keeping menus exciting and interesting                                  | 59% |
| Providing food that appeals to a range of ages, tastes, and preferences | 56% |
| Providing high-quality food experiences that diners will enjoy          | 52% |

## Challenges, Implications, and Solutions

### **Challenge and Implications: Keeping menus exciting and interesting**

Food plays a central role in day-to-day life for residents, with onsite dining likely being their primary or sole option for meals. It is widely acknowledged that food and dining are key aspects of residents' satisfaction and influence the decision-making of prospective residents. For some, familiarity may be comforting but for many, the routine creates boredom and dread. When communities work with uninspired foodservice vendors who implement institutional, one-size-fits-all dining programs, their residents experience menu fatigue and express dissatisfaction.

The rising senior generation is independent yet has high expectations for their communities. Baby Boomers and Gen Xers are worldlier and educated, value individualism, and actively express their concerns. They are accustomed to choice and flexibility, eating what and when they want. Compared to prior generations, these rising seniors are more consumer-oriented and influenced by the multitude of food options available today.

### **Solution with High ROI:**

Rotation is key to fighting menu fatigue. Shorten menu rotation so that new offerings are available on a minimum of a monthly basis. Revitalize dining offerings by incorporating exciting seasonal or local items onto the menu. Seasonal menus provide year-round opportunities to test new offerings and break menu monotony. Introduce rotating pop-up stations inspired by the area's restaurants and the latest food trends to appeal to consumer-minded residents. The pop-ups must provide flexibility for residents to customize the food to their preference, still enabling them to partake in the experience.

Promote new items as limited time offers to residents, and gather feedback via comment cards and chef-led meal rounds in the dining area. Encouraging residents to become an active part of the menu development helps foster engagement in the dining program and increase satisfaction. Depending on its popularity, consider establishing it as a permanent fixture.

### **Challenge and Implications: Providing food that appeals to a range of ages, tastes, and preferences**

Providing dining options for a diverse range of seniors presents a challenge, especially when there are generational gaps, special diets, food sensitivities, and various palates to accommodate within one dining program.

The senior population is not only growing, but also becoming more diverse. According to the AARP, in the 2030s, the number of older white Americans will level off while other racial and ethnic groups continue to increase. By 2060, less than 6 out of 10 older people (57 percent) in the U.S. will be white<sup>2</sup>. Within this group exists a multitude of races, ethnicities, and religions, each with a distinctive food culture.

### **Solutions with High ROI:**

Engaging with the resident community is crucial to understanding their customs and diets and properly planning to accommodate their needs.

Food and dining management companies create scalable solutions catering to a vast assortment of dietary requirements and preferences while containing costs. By thoughtfully leveraging ingredients and products

during the menu development process, food offerings can be easily customized to appeal to any resident's palate.

Authentic recipes ensure that the meal's flavors, textures, and presentation stay true to its origin. Gather feedback from residents to determine if recipes are aligned with their expectations. Whenever possible, provide menus in the residents' preferred languages.

Based on your residents' diverse backgrounds, establish a calendar of special days and celebrations that involve food. As much as possible, create menu offerings or culinary experiences to coincide with these events and meet residents' needs. Invite family, friends, and other community members to partake in the celebrations.

### **Challenge and Implications: Providing high-quality food experiences that diners will enjoy**

Currently, Baby Boomers account for \$40 of every \$100 spent in foodservice.<sup>3</sup> Due to their tremendous buying power, the restaurant industry stays current to this generation's attitudes and behaviors, and as a result, mainstream dining experiences will likely influence their perceptions and interactions with the dining programs at senior living communities.

When it comes to mainstream dining, unwavering and special service make a difference to the rising senior generation. Particularly for Baby Boomers, a sense of welcome and connection to their restaurant dining experience is crucial to achieving satisfaction.<sup>4</sup>

To attract prospective residents and retain current residents, senior living communities must overcome the misperceptions that their food is not as high quality as mainstream restaurants and that residents sacrifice their lifestyles.

### **Solutions with High ROI:**

Implementing simple restaurant-like elements elevate the dining program and counter the stereotype of traditional, institutional foodservice models of the past. Offering a variety of dining formats, such as bistros, grab-and-go, and pubs, contributes to seniors' needs for leisure and convenience. Expanding service hours and welcoming the people outside of the immediate community to partake in dining services creates a socially dynamic environment and encourages residents to invite guests, leading to increased revenue, engagement, and satisfaction.

Collaborate with your food and dining management firm to create experiential dining events that provide entertainment and social activity for residents. A kitchen tour for new residents helps to integrate them into their new community with greater ease and connects them to the culinary staff. Tableside cooking demonstrations and temporary chef exhibitions act as culinary theater, providing residents with freshly made-to-order meals and an up close, personal look at dining services in action. Where appropriate, involve residents in hands-on, chef-led preparation and presentation.

### **Conclusion:**

The challenges presented here can also be viewed as opportunities to enhance your community's brand and cultivate a more engaged resident community. Partnering with an experienced, insightful food and

dining management firm helps senior living communities address today's challenges while investing in the best solutions to serve the next generation of residents and ensure long-lasting success.

#### **About Unidine:**

Founded in 2001, Unidine delivers custom culinary programs centered on fresh from scratch dining, health & wellness, and unwavering service excellence. We embrace culinary integrity and innovation to craft invigorating, nourishing, and memorable meals with high quality local, seasonal, and responsibly sourced ingredients and products. As a boutique food and dining management service, we specialize in tailored, creative solutions to serve discerning clients and their clientele nationwide. Unidine's network of nutritionists and culinarians leverage the latest research to support cultural enrichment and wellness strategies for senior living residences, hospitals and behavioral health facilities, and corporations.

#### **References:**

1. **ACL Administration for Community Living. Projected Future Growth of Older Population.**  
<https://www.acl.gov/aging-and-disability-in-america/data-and-research/projected-future-growth-older-population>
2. **Fox-Grage, Wendy. "The Growing Racial and Ethnic Diversity of Older Adults."**  
<http://blog.aarp.org/2016/04/18/the-growing-racial-and-ethnic-diversity-of-older-adults/>
3. **George, Richard J. "Mature Millennials v Mature Baby Boomers: Foodservice Attitudes and Behaviors - Similarities, Differences, Opportunities."**  
<https://sites.sju.edu/afm/files/2017/06/Foodservice-Behaviors-Millennials-v-Baby-Boomers.pdf>
4. **Nelkin, Mindy. "How Can Restaurants Attract Baby Boomers?"**  
<https://foodandnutrition.org/january-february-2014/can-restaurants-attract-baby-boomers/>