Cuban ropa vieja, vegetarian Chinese egg pancakes, customized stir fry and kosher stuffed peppers? College food has graduated from mystery meat.

STORY BY KARA SPAK | PAGES 16-17
COLLEGE DIVERSITY:

Campus food served with more class and variety than ever, and Wheaton leads the way

BY KARA SPAK
Staff Reporter
kspak@sun-times.com

Forget the casinos and cruise ships.
If you are searching for a sumptuous all-you-can-eat extravaganza, head to a college dining hall, a tribute to world cuisine and emerging food trends.

Cuban ropa vieja and vegetarian Chinese egg pancakes. Chia seeds and eggs laid by chickens who have never lived in a cage. Kosher or halal. Gluten-free or foods for the lactose-intolerant. Humanely raised meats and local produce.

Today's students are bringing their more sophisticated palates and health-related concerns to campuses and schools are stepping up to accommodate them, hiring restaurant chefs, dieticians and nutritionists to oversee the dining hall operations and customizing each meal to each student's preference.

The days of eating low-cost mystery meat — of whatever else was served — are long gone.

"It's not just spaghetti for Italian and tacos for Mexican," said Rachel Warner, marketing director for the National Association of College and University Food Services. "I think that the shift in dining is really driven by the consumers. They come in with higher expectations and are increasingly savvy about the world around them and the different kinds of food."

Some see the campuses as home to innovative food trends, like at Loyola University Chicago where students drink hormone-free milk and can take a class where they convert used dining hall vegetable oil into renewable fuel. At DePaul University, students voted in a referendum on whether a particular brand of hummus was suitable at their school.

At Northwestern University, students recently enjoyed a "cruise night" complete with the flavors of the tropics and a theater student playing the role of the cruise ship's captain, greeting diners with leis.

"Sushi is no longer considered exotic," Warner said, noting that a Texas university offers an exclusively vegan dining hall and a Colorado school has a station dedicated to Persian cuisine. "Students are coming in and they do want to have a little bit more say and more options."

Others see the impact of the restaurant-style dining halls as just another perk driving up the cost of higher education.

"Kids are buying more than education these days," said Richard Vedder, director of the Center for College Affordability and Productivity. "Not only are they buying food and housing but they are buying luxury. It's more than just the bare bones. It's part and parcel of the country clubization of the university."

Students are getting what they want, when they want it. Dining halls have started extending hours and in some cases are open all night to accommodate students.

One of the fastest-growing areas of campus dining are convenience stores, where students can use their meal plans to "grab and go" as their schedules dictate, Warner said.

'EVER MORE ELABORATE'

In a 2011 survey by food industry consultant Technomic, 44 percent of college students said that the dining hall scene factored into their decision on where to attend college. The Technomic report also noted that the 16 million university and college students in the United States wielded more than $300 billion in spending power, calling university dining a "promising foodservice revenue channel."

Vedder noted that the costs of food, including restaurant food, have not risen as fast as the costs of campus dining.

He wonders if schools are using housing and dining costs as a type of hidden revenue increase, "trying to make money instead of cover costs," or if the dining halls are just inefficiently run.

"The third possibility — the one I think is the most important — is to say the food operations are becoming ever more elaborate," he said. "The quality of food is growing, the choices are growing, the time of day [the facilities are open] is growing."

Vedder graduated from Northwestern in 1983 and called campus dining then "prison style."

"It was wholesome food and there was nothing wrong with the quality, but there were almost no choices," he said. "There were all sorts of constraints that don't exist today."

Warner from the food services industry group, which represents about 600 institutions, denied that upgrades in dining factor into rising higher education costs.

"I've never once heard a dining hall manager say they were interested in making students pay more," she said. She noted that some of today's enhancements — like letting students customize a stir-fry or pasta dish from ingredients they select, or new campus dining halls with environmentally sustainable features — could be...
Anderson Commons at Wheaton College serves about 1,800 students each meal period.

a money saver.

"Some of the things that are high-end or feel better to the consumer aren't costing more," she said.

"Integrating sustainability practices reduces energy costs and water costs. Switching to [customized]
display cooking can actually save on food waste and having to throw out whatever is left at the end of the day."

Patrick Cassata, executive chef at Wheaton College, said he always is operating within a budget set by the general manager. He manages to splurge on yogurt toppings like golden flax by saving money by making fresh yogurt daily.

for instance.

In 2011, Wheaton College was ranked by the Princeton Review as having the best campus food in America. The dining services are run by Bon Appetit management company.

"When you look at this, the farthest thing from your mind is a cafeteria," said Raul Delgado, general manager of Wheaton College's dining services. "This is a restaurant."

Like a restaurant, it's open to anyone.

"I like the salad bar," said Esther Howerzyl, 68, who stopped at the Wheaton cafeteria after biking from St. Charles with a group of 15 friends. "It's very organic health food and I like all the seeds, the variety of seeds."

HEALTHIER, LESS WASTED

Within the dining halls, those working and eating there say the food is healthier, students waste less and the campuses are increasingly leading the way on more sustainable food practices in a larger-scale setting.

"I have not come across one student who has not heard of Food, Incorporated," the documentary that takes a hard look at America's corporate farms, said Theresa Laurenz, Northwestern's dietitian.

"It's all part of the whole political and environmental change. They want to make an impact yesterday."

Northwestern students run a "Wild Roots" garden, growing crops for use in the dining halls. Steve Mangan, district manager for Sodexo, which runs Northwestern's nuCuisine dining services, said Sodexo is working toward using only 100 percent sustainable seafood by 2015.

"It's interesting to see the university segment is driving this trend as well as small restaurants," he said.

"The market segment we serve is totally interested in this. University dining is really reflecting the change in food in America."

For students with dietary restrictions or, in some cases life-threatening allergies, the ability of the campus to accommodate them helps them be part of the university culture that is built, in part, through sharing communal meals.

Rabbi Dov Hillel Klein, director of Northwestern's Tannenbaum Chabad House, pushed Northwestern to include a certified kosher food area in its dining service after seeing students who kept kosher limited to eating crackers and cereal in their dorm rooms.

"I think in the Jewish community having a kosher program at the university is a strong barometer for Jewish life on campus," he said.

For traditional Jewish students, the kosher kitchen allows them to eat with their friends, whether or not they keep kosher. Mangan said a recent lunchtime kosher station of stuffed peppers, both beef and vegetarian, garlic bread, salad and chicken noodle soup was designed to attract all students, regardless of their dietary preferences.

"When I was applying to college I wanted to go to a school with a kosher meal plan," said Brian Lasman, 19, a Northwestern freshman from the Boston area.

"Quality wasn't such a high priority — I'm not a picky eater — but I think it's tasty."