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**LOOKING UP**

**A CULINARY BAG OF TRICKS**



Walter J. Schruntek/Editor

**T**oast gets cold...so don't serve it, says chef Don Miller, fsd at Tri-City Medical Center in Oceanside, CA. "Program your menu to win," he tells operators today, and that means in place of toast serve fresh home-made muffins. They win hot or cold.

The real trick is to develop a common sense restaurant mentality for hospital foodservice—or any non-commercial food operation for that matter—he says. And above all, to keep in touch

with your customers.

**Pay attention:** Too many operators today get bogged down in back-of-the-house details, paperwork, staff problems. They're not paying attention to the food and the customer, Miller believes.

"That's why I make it a point to spend 30% of my time bonding with my employees and my customers. We all can be more visible and mingle with our customers," he says.

It's just as important to create a ritual, according to Miller. "Make sure you walk out on the floor before the cafeteria opens every day at the *same time*. Do it every day—not once-in-a-while. Use the time to critique the food and presentation right there on the spot. Taste the food, modify it. Pay attention to the details of food. That's the missing link."

**Watch the competition:** The competition is the local restaurant. "And what do restaurants do that we don't—they cook to order," he points out.

So Miller cooks-to-order at

Tri-City—a trick, he says, any operator can learn to master, with some acceptable sleight-of-hand.

"We can't really cook everything to order but we can simulate and create an acceptable in-between," he suggests. Doing 30-35 stir-fry orders in 15-min. time-slots might mean changing some of the cook's duties and preparation activities. "We don't slice vegetables anymore—they're all pre-cut. That saves time and frees up hands for cook-to-order duties."

**Attention to details:** Another common-sense trick that helps make Tri-City stand out is attention to small details—like spraying fresh vegetables with ice and fresh water regularly. "Do the same to salads for your patient tray service." A few more tricks he recommends:

- You can't do good fried eggs on patient trays, so don't put them on the menu.
- Use a caterer's eye in food presentation: Put sauces and gravies on the bottom of the plate for

center-of-plate specials, for example. Use garnishes to give the meal a restaurant look.

• Use your menu to change the customer's perception of your food. At Tri-City, a plain printed patient menu formerly cost 6¢. Today, Miller offers a 4/color menu with restaurant-style presentation that costs 30¢ each.

• Streamline your cafeteria. Take napkins off the table. Hydrate your lettuce as soon as it comes out of the bag.

**The bottom line:** Miller is one of the growing cadre of hospital foodservice operators who believe the key to survival and success in the future is restaurant-style food and service.

"We've eliminated the art part of foodservice by heading to convenience foods as the ultimate solution. You can use convenience foods, but you have to build a skilled craftsmen approach—by creating a team of people who care about the food and customer. That's the real trick to being successful in our business today."