

RETAIL DESIGN:

A River Runs Through It

Calming and energizing, fresh and full of choice, Potomac Hospital's Garden Café delivers it all to customers and employees alike.

Designed with Oldenburg's "Third Place" concept in mind (the first is home, the second is the workplace), the Garden Café provides a flexible space to cater to those needing privacy and those looking to socialize.

By Karen Weisberg

The Garden Café on the first floor of the new Patient Tower at 183-bed Potomac Hospital, Woodbridge, Va., elicits a "WOW" reaction from first entry to final seating – and the food's outstanding, too. In fact, hospital vice president D.M. Picard – "Frankie" to one and all – finds that not only do the daily customers enjoy the space, which opened in March, 2006, but the 46-member foodservice staff (up from 33 in the prior location) loves it as well. "This café's actually become a recruiting tool for nurses and other staff," she adds. "When visitors to our Health and Education Center – which adjoins the café – are finished with their meetings, we just about force them to eat here because it's such a contrast to what most people think of as a hospital cafeteria."

Indeed, the 30-year-old facility's former dining area, located in the basement as many hospital cafeterias are, offered little to entice staff and visitors to come on down and nour-

ish the soul as well as the body. But, when plans were being drawn for the Patient Tower, Picard envisioned a new foodservice operation that would marry the elements of inviting ambiance and excellent fare.

With that objective in mind, Picard hired the Charlotte, N.C.-based architectural firm of McCulloch/England Associates Architects to work in tandem with SDI (Systems Design International, Inc.), Greenwood Village, Colo., and interior designer Huelat Purimucha Ltd., Alexandria, Va. Playing off each others' strengths and areas of expertise, Bill England (principal), Eli Osatinski (SDI president) and principal Barbara Huelat worked together to bring the inspiration of Potomac River imagery to the table.

"It was definitely a team effort with all of us after the same end – great food in a great space," says England. "We wanted to develop something on the edge – a dining experience. We [i.e., McCulloch/England] laid out

POTOMAC HOSPITAL

Woodbridge, Va.

No. of Beds: 183, will be 250

Opened: March, 2006

Hours of Operation: 7 a.m.- 7 p.m., seven days a week

Avg. Check: \$3.50

Station Sampler: Mongolian Grill grilled-to-order beef, chicken or shrimp; Innovation Station, which runs a few times each week and rotates seafood, desserts, pasta, ethnic and other specials; Entrée classic and comfort food; Pizza, Deli; Salad Bar; Beverages

Projected Annual Sales: \$600,000

Cost of Project: \$2 million

Hospital Vice President:
D.M. (Frankie) Picard

Director of Food and Nutrition Services:
During renovation: Kelly Fitzpatrick, RD/Sodexo Healthcare Services
Current director: Janet LaFin, RD/Sodexo Healthcare Services

Facility Design Consultant: SDI (Systems Design International, Inc.), Greenwood Village, Colo.

Architect: McCulloch/England Associates Architects, Charlotte, N.C.

Engineer: KTA Group, Herndon, Va.

Interior Design: Huelat Parimucha Ltd., Alexandria, Va.

the schematic design of the exterior walls. We supplied the dining area with a large expanse of windows on three orientations plus access to an outdoor dining area. Working with a landscape architect, we designed the garden area to include a 6'-high brick wall to provide a sense of privacy while dining, and a fountain in the center carries the sound and feel of water."

Out Of The Box

England established the space's unique framework by incorporating aesthetically pleasing curved walls to avoid a boxy, geometric look. The ceiling, too, was constructed with curves and swoops (formed of sheetrock), bulkheads and acoustical tile at varied heights. SDI then came in and continued the curved lines in equipment installations for the serving and beverage lines. The combination of a great expanse of natural light with the architectural swoops – even echoed to some degree in the pattern of the easy-to-maintain terrazzo floor – all serve to bring elements of the winding river indoors.

Market Approach

"Offering many choices was a big deal," England recalls. "You could have pasta, themed food, salad and other items displayed as they would be in an upscale deli versus a cafeteria approach. That's where Eli's background in creating dining experiences came into play; he chose the equipment and wrote the specs." There's a very

functional kitchen behind the servery, he adds, with its own set of elevators to the patient floors, but it's very calm and serene out front.

In the café servery, Osatinski opted for a "fresh market" feel instead of the older location's cafeteria line. He likens it to a Whole Foods concept on a smaller scale. "Because customers, especially the employees, don't have time to go out, the objective is to give them the opportunity to enjoy food at the hospital – and not the same food each day," he notes. "I like to say there's a 'free flow' in the servery. For example, in the salad area (a huge, custom-fabricated, boat shape in the center of the area) there are three options: grab-n-go, make your own, or somebody will make a salad for you. There are many choices of greens, chicken, fish, etc. We designed this about four years ago and there are, of course new concepts coming along everyday. However, with a hospital, you have three to four years between when you're engaged until the opening, so you'd need a crystal ball to know what's going to be 'new' by that time. But you do know you must provide some comfort food – and pizza, of course – for visitors and families. Plus, in today's market, we do Mongolian grills that complement the traditional stuff."

Although the plans were developed before the LEED push was really "on," the designers talked to manufacturers and pushed them in the conservation direction. If there were two manufacturers making ice machines, for example, they'd likely specify the Energy Star-rated one.

Built To Last

Meanwhile, Picard's stance is that equipment should be chosen on the basis of durability since she wants it "to last forever." "My con-

Colors such as eggplant, cream and copper from the tiles behind the cooking areas to the chair and banquette fabrics, all convey the feel of a welcoming restaurant, not a sterile institutional foodservice.





The Garden Cafe features floor-to-ceiling windows along three orientations. Outside is an enclosed patio, designed by a landscape architect. It's a soothing spot to dine and collect thoughts and includes a water feature. Note above: The terrazzo floor is expected to last 75 years.

cern is about continuity of operations, not just energy savings," she contends. "We took into consideration the need to be generator-powered in case of an emergency, so my focus was making sure the infrastructure that was needed for now and the future was in place. Our big new walk-ins – Hussmann's Protocol Refrigeration System – are computerized, so we have a lot of technology embedded in this kitchen, as well."

Promoting continuity of hospital foodservice operations also is central to the interior design work of Barbara Huelat. She's all about providing good vibes in order to re-energize customers – staff and visitors alike – while giving them an upbeat, in-house meal option. "My goal was to make Potomac's foodservice a destination to vie with outside restaurants, so we designed it with a hospitality focus," says Huelat. "This garden level of the Patient Tower is designed for 'way finding' with a focus on boats of the Potomac River." In fact, each floor of the Tower was designed with a different aspect of the river in mind. Huelat's take on the river theme led her to incorporate numerous fluid lines in her interior design, including a ceiling-hung mobile of brushed aluminum.

Understanding The Clientele

Overall, Huelat draws attention – with curvy lines of one material or another – to the

pathways that lead directly from the servery, through the check out – underscoring speed of service, a previous problem solved – and on out to the seating area. Curved banquettes, designed and specified by Huelat, with 5½'-tall walls behind them, and each topped by seasonal greenery in planters, create private nooks without blocking the light in any way. "When you have a concave curve, there's a sense of protection," Huelat asserts. "When people are dealing with issues of life and death, they don't want to socialize, so this is a successful way of cocooning. You can cry in your soup yet not be on display – and still be close to the outdoors and the public."

Individual tables and chairs – in all there's seating for 274 versus 100 in the old facility – are covered with super-durable Crypton fabric that can be cleaned with a bleach solution – and can successfully withstand potential punctures by car keys in back pockets. "Crypton has the feel of a textile," she says. "The one used here feels like heavy linen and is in a pattern incorporating eggplant, copper and sage hues; individual chairs are covered in solid copper or eggplant."

'Third Place' Concepts

Huelat's choice of colors for wall treatment, chairs, tables, etc., stems from her experience in designing healthcare facilities for more than three decades. Based on her observations, she's authored two books including *Healing Environments: Design for the Body, Mind and Spirit*, and most recently, *Healing Environments: What's the Proof?* (Medezyn, Nov., 2007). According to Huelat, her newest book details current research by others regarding environmental behavior, plus eco studies that provide proof of the value of healing environments. "One of the foodservice examples cites the research of Ray Oldenburg, PhD, professor emeritus (Dept. of Sociology) of the University of West Florida, Pensacola, who spent more than 30 years researching the 'Third Place' – a concept that was used to design Starbucks," says Huelat. "I designed Potomac Hospital before I knew of him and his research. But as he says, the location needs to be a place of escape, a place that's inclusive, that supports conversa-

tion, encourages playfulness, brings out feelings of home comfort, etc.”

Thus, through a combination of intuition and experience, Huelat has designed the image of the café and servery in Starbucks-like colors – though unintentional, she says – of eggplant, cream and copper tones; from the tiles behind the cooking area to the chair and banquette fabrics, all convey the feel of a welcoming restaurant versus a sterile hospital foodservice. “It’s not spa-serene,” she quickly points out. “It’s a very happy, upbeat place; a stimulating place to go to feel good about life. Of course, access to light was paramount – with floor-to-ceiling windows and a view of the courtyard and fountain. A lot of research has been done on ‘pleasure triggers’ including color choices, the use of a lot of plants and providing food and drink. It’s a real energy-generating place and part of that is color and movement.”

Fresh Food Environment

As Huelat notes, access to food and drink is unequivocally a pleasure trigger and Potomac Hospital’s 20-year partnership with Sodexo, the Gaithersburg, Md.-based foodservice management contractor, has been burnished in the new venue. “We used Sodexo and Eli (Osatinski) to bring us to the new environment for fresh food, plus Sodexo’s At Your Request room service program for patients,” explains Picard. (According to Potomac’s latest Jackson Survey, patient satisfaction scores are now in the 99th percentile versus the previous 88th percentile.) On the customer side, in-house surveys show satisfaction now stands at 85 to 92 percent versus the mid-70s previously scored.

The focal point – and most popular station – as you enter the servery is the Mongolian Grill with a culinary-trained chef ready and willing to provide made-for-you servings of Asian-inspired beef, chicken or shrimp dishes. The Mongolian Grill station, boasting one, round, gas-fired grill by Town Foodservice Equipment, also includes a refrigerated equipment base on which sits a countertop fryer and dump station from

Garland and Hatco, as well as a countertop griddle and charbroiler, both from Garland, and an exhaust hood by Avtec. In the same area, the pizza oven is from Wood Stone. This location, as well as the Innovation station, which boasts a rotation of dishes and meal parts, serves the tastes of the facility’s multi-cultural customer base. The Innovation display-cooking station only runs a few times each week and the focus may be seafood, desserts, pasta dishes, or ethnic specials. The Innovation station and the pasta area share three roll-through refrigerators by Traulsen, while the front line of the pasta area boasts five hot wells manufactured by Wells. A Lang panini grill provides another popular option at the station.

In between these two stations is the entrée station, simply named Entrée, where customers can find old favorites. “Recently, when we had meatloaf and deep fried chicken liver as the entrée choices, we served 404 customers for lunch,” reports Picard. “And, when we menued baked cod and meat lasagna, there were 422 lunchtime customers that day. That’s why we have to have that comfort food section, it’s nostalgic and safe; customers say, ‘Ah, that’s sounds good.’”

Since Picard’s strategy has been to build for the future, that is, when this soon-to-be 250-bed facility is closer to capacity – a few areas that have been constructed are not in use as yet. The huge “ovalish” salad bar (with Brass Smith food shields), placed center stage in the servery, is designed to accommodate a server, but none is needed as yet. Also, an ancillary mini-café, a circular space of about 350 to 400 sq. ft. intended to handle evening business when the Garden Café is closed, doesn’t yet have sufficient volume to warrant staffing.

Today, the new Garden Café is considered to be a “happy space” and the “preferred destination” that was intended and hoped for by all those involved in the planning and execution.

Meanwhile, the equipment, chosen primarily for durability and adaptability as well as functionality, should keep the location cooking for customers for many, many years to come.

A brushed aluminum mobile flows along the ceiling. “Some folks think it looks like water, birds, fish or boats. It’s a commissioned piece by an artist we selected from this area,” says Huelat.

