

## **Burgers continue to top healthcare menus**

There is no denying the craving for burgers in both the healthcare segment as well as the wider foodservice world. In fact, burgers grew by 2.3 percent in healthcare in the first quarter of 2016 versus the same period a year prior, according to Technomic. And they grew nearly as fast in various other noncommercial segments—1.9 percent year over year.

For operators, this growth represents a juicy opportunity. But with burgers found on menus across segments, keeping up with the competition in the burger category is critical.

At 750-bed Baptist Hospital in Miami, Stan Hodes, executive chef and manager of dining services operations, strives to keep customers happy and counter the competition of outside eateries by serving a standout burger. “I think our burger experience is as good as any place in town,” says Hodes.

His burgers, which are high-quality, fully cooked beef patties, are presented with simple but classic toppings that his patrons can choose from. “If you let people customize their burgers, they will enjoy them every time,” Hodes says.

Options include kaiser, sesame and brioche buns, cheeses ranging from smoked cheddar to dill havarti and garnishes such as grilled and raw onions and guacamole. Nevertheless, “the Cadillac of burger toppings” is the classic combination of fresh lettuce, tomato and red onion, according to Hodes.

The fully cooked burgers eliminate the labor and potential food safety risks of forming raw beef into patties and possibly undercooking them. Hodes reports that the hospital crowd is very satisfied with the flavor, appearance and juiciness of the burgers, even after prolonged holding on the line.

Similarly, at Atlanta VA Medical Center in Decatur, Ga., a switch from making cook-chill burgers with raw beef to simply rethermalizing fully cooked beef patties has eased the burden on the kitchen and inspired ideas for creative burger variations.

“We don’t have to worry about the quality and consistency of the base of the burger,” says Almeda Williams, chief, nutrition and food services, for the 445-bed facility. “So now we are thinking of offering toppings like sliced avocados, different cheeses and ghost peppers.”

Patients give the fully cooked patties high marks for flavor and juiciness, Williams says. And kitchen staff have noted that they hold without shrinking, unlike the previous burgers.

For Golden Living, a Plano, Texas-based operator of 300 living centers for recovery care, implementing fully cooked burgers was part of a wide-ranging menu upgrade designed to transform “basic hospital food” into “a dining experience,” says Chef Darin Leonardson, director of hospitality and dining. In addition to better flavor, improving food safety and reducing food waste also figured into the decision to use a fully cooked burger.

With patients averaging 86 years of age, Golden Living’s menu is based more on chef-driven quality and simple comfort foods than on restaurant trends. Thus, simple burger garnishes like red onion, lettuce and tomato are favorites.

Golden Living at present doesn't offer signature burger toppings. But that could be something to try, Leonardson muses, especially to offer to visitors. "Maybe we could do a green chile burger in California or a burger for each season," says Leonardson. "But I don't think they would ever beat the 'just give me a burger' order."