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Healthy is the new indulgence

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Two weeks ago, I attended a conference in which I overheard a speaker on a panel say something that I couldn't agree with. The point the speaker made was that even though college students talk about healthy eating, they still consume a lot of burgers and fries.

I beg to differ. Our students expect UMass Dining to provide great-tasting food that also happens to be healthy. Sharon Olson, founder of Olson communications and editor of Y-Pulse, a popular resource on trends among teens and millennials, reported recently that students and consumers are reimagining indulgence in terms of foods that provide delicious, clean fuel for their bodies. According to Olson, “Natural, clean ingredients and vegetables are the new culinary chic for gourmet foods.”

For years I've been saying that our customers want food that not only tastes good but also is good for them. As foodservice operators, we should focus more on simple food and healthy eating. Healthy food is here to stay. Our latest survey told us that 85% of our customers want more healthy choices.

At UMass Dining, we are into health in a big way. We highlight fresh and local ingredients, serve made-to-order dishes, and rely on less-processed foods as much as possible. These changes can be subtle ones. We switched to roasted vegetables instead of steamed ones to draw out the vegetables' natural flavors. Our deli meats are all-natural and low in sodium. And we pay attention to our staples, from freshly ground peanut butter and freshly squeezed orange juice to low-sodium soya sauce. We also have been promoting lean protein for several weeks.

That doesn't mean ignoring the occasional indulgence. We all like comfort food—it's familiar, which makes it comforting. The other night when we had our New England Harvest dinner, we served up local free-range turkey, butternut squash, local carrots and peas, and all the trimmings. Our students just loved it. I would say it was an example of simple, clean, and delicious food that we can indulge in and feel good about.

Starting this past January, by partnering with SPE—Sourcing, Preparing, Enhancing—Certified, a company that certifies that certain menu items are healthy, we have a designated healthy, tasty, and sustainable plate available for lunch and dinner every day. Every SPE Certified dish is packed with nutrients and low in saturated fats.

I hope you enjoy these dishes often. Whenever I dine at the DC, I always look forward to seeing what the next SPE Certified meal will be.

Next, we will start to have healthier choices available for late-night dining. We want to serve more fruits and vegetables, Greek yogurt, and ancient grains such as bulgur, farro, millet and quinoa. This week, I tasted some of them as a side dish, and they were very flavorful.

We will continue to roll out our healthy and tasty dishes. Thank you for keeping UMass Dining at the top.

