Cooking from scratch for thousands

New FNS Executive Chef a Fan of Fresh

“We made all the food from scratch in a central area,” Stinar said. “It was lots of preparation and packaging. One day we made nearly 10,000 burritos. I thought I had arthritis at the end of the day.”

The district got some resistance to the change, not only from people used to precooked food, but also from some who worried about the safety of preparing raw food. “We had safety measures in place,” Stinar said, “and could guarantee that no one was at risk.”

More than balancing those objections, he added, was the case of an obese student who dropped a significant amount of weight after eating regular, balanced meals she got at school.

Scratch that. Stinar has already begun the transition to scratch cooking in the big kitchens in the basement of the Anschutz Inpatient Pavilion. He’s debuted fresh soups — all the soups in the two cafeterias will be made from scratch as of Sept. 19 — including minestrone, vegetable beef, garden vegetable, cream of asparagus, cream of broccoli and clam chowder. He’s begun buying fresh salmon.

As he looks over the roster of cafeteria meals, he’s also seeking opportunities to re-invent them with ingredients that are not only fresh, but “clean”: that is, free of hormones, additives and preservatives. All-natural, preservative-free turkey has already made an appearance in the Courtyard Café.

“Some of the recipes we have are good,” Stinar said. “Before we gut [the menu], we want to look at the raw materials we’re using.”

Eight years as executive chef at three Cheesecake Factory locations taught him an important lesson, he said. “We were always looking...”
at how we can make a plate great. We want to take the food here from good to better to great. The question is, can we be true leaders in the hospital industry, serving great food?"

The new approach to food preparation won’t stop in the retail cafeterias. Along with Food and Nutrition Services managers Doris Johnson and David Snapp, Stinar is also reviewing the inpatient room service menus with an eye toward incorporating more fresh, from-scratch ingredients. He hopes to have the new menus up and running in January.

**Steady diets.** Learning to cook for patients on varieties of restricted diets has been an education for a guy who gained most of his cooking experience in the corporate realm. He runs his recipe ideas past Clinical Nutrition Manager Robin Saucier, RD, CNSD, to see if they have to be modified to meet patients’ needs. Leaving potassium-rich skins on potatoes, for example, can be a problem for patients with renal conditions.

“She’s been teaching me,” Stinar said.

Sorting through the differences between diabetic, cardiac and renal diets hasn’t been his only challenge. Change hasn’t always been easy, he acknowledged, for a staff that has been without an executive chef for about a year. That void was widened when FNS Director Mark Raymond left the hospital in July.

“There has been a lack of focus and leadership,” Stinar said. He’s paired up with consultants brought in by the hospital to address some sanitary and safety issues primarily created, he said, by clutter.

“We’ve cleaned out a lot of miscellaneous stuff. There was never a potential of harming a patient or guest, but we’re doing a better job of cleaning as we go,” he said.

A kitchen that does scratch cooking can also require staff to learn a new set of skills. He plans culinary tests to assess their ability to clean fish, peel melons and so on.

“It’s our job to identify staff who need additional direction and coaching,” he said. “We’ll give them goals to work on.”

**Hot issues.** Stinar is also sensitive to the need to deliver hot food to patients on time. It’s an area where FNS has sometimes drawn criticism from patients and inpatient staff.

“We have plenty of guys on the line who are from the restaurant side of the business who understand the urgency of making good food in a timely manner,” Stinar said. “We’re working on how we can [do a better job of] getting food to the floor hot.”

He does mean “we.” Everybody in FNS, he said, joins in to run carts when the situation demands it. “Our goal is to cut down the time. Our focus has to be on feeding the patients.”

He’s not handling the challenges alone, he emphasized. He meets with Snapp and Johnson daily to keep the operation running smoothly. “They’ve been a huge support for me,” he said. “We have a great management team.”

But he’s clearly most comfortable in the kitchen, away from his tiny basement office.

“Out of a ten-hour day, I spend about 15 minutes in this office,” he said. “You have to get out there and touch it, live it and breathe it all day long.”