

Hospital kitchens tap into local growers

Menus offer fresh produce, fruits and meats and 'scratch cooking'

Lee Farren

For the Capital Press

Friday, September 21, 2007

HERMISTON, Ore. - Imagine yourself in the hospital, recovering from surgery. When you ask about dinner, an orderly hands you a menu that looks like it comes from a fine restaurant and offers a choice of 16 entrees.

You order natural roast beef with chef's vegetables, which is cooked to order in the hospital kitchen and served with fresh cherries. The beef, vegetables and cherries all come from farms within a day's drive of the hospital.

That scenario is becoming a reality at more and more hospitals across the United States. Ask Nancy Gummer, director of nutritional services at Good Shepherd Medical Center in Hermiston, about the food served daily to patients, staff and visitors, and she will tell you that more and more of it comes from local producers.

"About three years ago we decided to start doing some natural meats and scratch cooking," Gummer said. "I teach diabetes education. I advise people not to eat processed food, so we need to serve food that's not processed."

She prefers to buy locally to reduce the distance food travels and because she can visit producers to assure herself that the food is handled safely. In 2007 Good Shepherd was buying food from three local producers and looking for more. Other hospitals throughout Oregon are also climbing on the farm-to-hospital wagon.

In 2003, Dr. Preston Maring started a farmers' market at the Kaiser Permanente Oakland (Calif.) Medical Center. Since then a number of hospitals across the country have organized farmers' markets. Oregon Health Sciences University in Portland and the St. Charles Medical Center campuses in Bend and Redmond have recently opened farmers' markets in an effort to bring more fresh food to their patients, staff and visitors.

"The intent was to make it more convenient for people to eat healthfully," said Eecole Copen, Sustainable Food Program coordinator at OHSU. "As a result, we've also been able to do some direct purchasing for patient meals cooked in the hospital kitchen and for retail cafes on the hospital campus."

This summer OHSU chefs have purchased carrots, cherries and tomatoes from vendors at the farmers' market. The hospital has bought lamb and squash directly from local producers and has arranged to have one farm grow crops specifically for OHSU.

"It's a growing trend," Copen said. "More hospitals are getting in touch with the idea of local fresh foods."

At this point, though, Copen said she is struggling to find vendors. She meets regularly with other food program managers from Portland hospitals to discuss ways to purchase more local foods, including direct purchases and encouraging current distributors to carry more local products.

Neha Patel, until recently program manager for the Portland-based Oregon Center for Environmental Health,



Good Shepherd Medical Center chef Dan Rytting sautés vegetables for cashew stir-fry. Each dish on the Hermiston, Ore., hospital menu is individually prepared to order.

identified the need for large-scale purchasing as a current roadblock to more farm-to-hospital connections. Last February the Center hosted a roundtable that brought in some of the group-purchasing organizations and distributors hospitals contract with for a multitude of different products, including food.

"We need a bigger approach," Patel said. "The hospitals said that one barrier for them is the difficulty of having multiple contracts. We need some way to figure out a food system where it's more a one-stop shop, but offers food from local producers. That's the ideal, and that's what hospitals are looking for."

The center is working with Oregon Tilth and the Portland-based Food Alliance as links to producers.

Both Nancy Gummer at Good Shepherd and Benji Brown, food service supervisor at the St. Charles Redmond Medical Center, have some flexibility in their contracts with group-purchasing organizations.

"We are part of a GPO, but they don't require me to buy every single thing through that," Brown said. "We purchase grass-fed bison from a ranch in Bend, and natural lamb and beef from a ranch in Maupin. The bulk of our food supply comes from a large vendor, but I can source out some produce and proteins locally."

Denison Farms in Corvallis, Ore., has been selling at the OHSU farmers' market this summer. Tom Denison noted a move by some businesses to retain employees by making it easier for them to purchase fresh local food. He has done well with strawberries, raspberries and tomatoes at the market this year.

When it comes to selling directly to OHSU, though, Denison has problems. His operation is strongly focused on direct marketing a variety of crops, and his 30-acre farm cannot produce the quantities needed for a cafeteria system that serves up to 10,000 people a day.

"They've been real supportive of us, though," Denison said. "The chef has come by the market and bought raspberries and carrots, mostly as a feature on the menu."

Freelance writer Lee Farren is based in Ukiah, Ore. E-mail: leewfarren@centurytel.net.