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Bringing magic to the menu is a daily challenge for Illinois Wesleyan's Food Service.

By Nancy Steele Brokaw '71

Photos by Marc Featherly

First there was the sprint from the Shakespeare class to the Shirk Center. Now, there's exactly 40 minutes to grab a bite to eat before rehearsal at McPherson. Breathless, the Illinois Wesleyan student rushes into Bertholf Commons. With practiced eyes, choices are quickly narrowed. What will it be for dinner tonight?

Fresh spinach and red onion salad, tossed with raspberry vinaigrette, topped with grilled-while-you-wait tofu and crab?

How about a peppered BLT wrap, a cup of pasta fagioli soup, and a cherry tart in a chocolate shell?

Or maybe a made-to-order omelet with fresh mushrooms, asparagus, green onions, ham, tomatoes, and feta cheese?

Any of those choices could hold a starving student over—for a couple of hours, anyway. There's always time in the evening to zip back to the Memorial Center for a chili bread bowl, apple/cinnamon soft pretzel, or a Milky Way latte.

This is dorm food?

If your memories of college dining include an institutional single-line cafeteria—where the best you could hope for was creamed mystery meat over toast, pale-green canned peas, a scoop of paprika-topped cottage cheese, and red Jell-O cubes—welcome to Titan dining 2003. Gone are the slow-moving lines, the tray slide, and the one-choice steam table. That's all been replaced with colorful islands and stations, manned with professionals who are ready to mix or grill or sauté the dinner of your dreams, right before your eyes.

Although enrollment in a meal plan is mandatory for all students residing in University residence halls, many students living off-campus sign back up for meal plans when the typical “apartment cooking” diet of Ramen noodles and microwaved pot pies starts to lose its charm. Many more students stick with their plans through graduation and most seem happy to do so.

Michelle Megan, a sophomore from Metamora, Ill., says, “Our food is a lot better than at my friends’ schools. It’s gourmet. Except when you eat it everyday, it’s not gourmet anymore.”

Ryan Foster, a sophomore from Oak Park, Ill., concurs that IWU food is absolutely great for lunch and dinner. He hasn’t made it to breakfast yet.



Fresh-baked goodies, courtesy of the Titan kitchens.

Foster is missing out. Bleary-eyed, pajama-clad students who wander in before their eight-o'clocks are greeted with sweet rolls, doughnuts, and muffins that are baked fresh in the Titan kitchens, which open daily at 3:30 a.m. An omelet bar is available, along with a make-your-own-waffle station, complete with soft butter, hot syrup, and warm strawberries. There are bagels of every kind, pancakes, eggs, hash browns, breakfast meats, oatmeal, and hard-boiled eggs. And, of course, no college breakfast would be complete without bins and bins of cold cereal, several of them containing the kind that is both fruity and loopy.

Mike Welsh, general manager of Sodexho Food Service, says, "There's simply no comparison between what we offer now and what we had when I came [in 1979]." Much of that change is reflective of students' increasingly sophisticated palates. "Many IWU students hail from Chicago and other cosmopolitan areas, and they are used to eating out—not just fast food but sushi, tapas, and dim sum."

Managing this culinary maze for Illinois Wesleyan is Sodexho. Billing itself as the leading food and facilities management services company in North America, Sodexho employs 130,000 people nationwide. There are 54 Sodexho associates on Illinois Wesleyan's food-service staff, plus 60 students on payroll or in a work-study program. Sodexho is but the latest moniker for a company that has gone through several owners and a variety of names, including "SAGA" and "Marriott." For some reason, Illinois Wesleyan students have stubbornly refused to learn the new names. Despite Sodexho communications posted everywhere, students, almost without exception, refer to their food service as "SAGA."

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Bertholf Commons in the Memorial Center is still the home for student dining at Illinois Wesleyan. However, this Commons has little in common with the place most alumni remember. The enormous, arched windows still look out over the quad, but inside the place feels more restaurant than cafeteria. Students are greeted at the entrance by a display case showing plates of the food being offered at that particular meal. Chances are they have already checked this out on their dorm-room computers. A live webcam, positioned above the display, is part of the extensive Food Service web site located at www.iwu.edu/~iwufood.

Inside the door, ID cards are quickly swiped as students are greeted by name, and then they are free to wander among the many stand-alone islands, each offering different types of food. This is divide-and-conquer at its best. By diffusing the students to so many different areas at once, hundreds can be fed simultaneously and with little congestion, says Food Service manager Steve Racki.

The trend in modern college food service is to provide food that's prepared, put together, and garnished right in front of the student. One such destination for IWU students is the Etc., Etc., Etc. station. There, up to six sauté pans are often going at once, with the students directing the addition of their favorite ingredients.

Another option for students is to grab a plate full of greens or a bowl of fresh-cooked pasta and head for the Flash in the Pan station. There, a chef will grill tofu, crab, beef, turkey, or chicken to top off the salad or pasta.

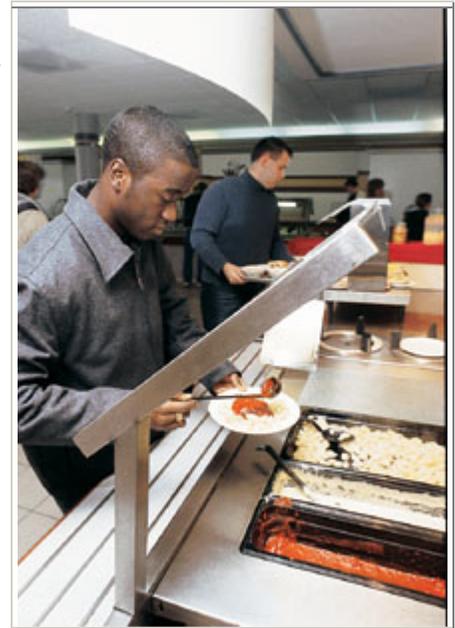
There's a station called the Deli Case, filled with breads, 12 deli meats and cheeses, plus toppings. A panini grill is close by in case students prefer oozy cheese and wavy bread.

And of course, what's college dining without burgers and fries? Those are available, along with veggie burgers and cheese sauce for the fries, at the Hot Off the Grill station.

Traditionalists can still find a station that offers three-square meals such as roast pork loin, baby carrots, and baked potatoes with all the fixings.

Pizzas, with any combination of toppings, are baked at the Pizza & Pasta station. Close by are such Italian favorites as pasta primavera and cheese ravioli.

Food Service Manager David Nicholson says that creative people can always come up with something new and different to try for dinner. For example, a student might get a honey-grain bagel from the On the Rise Bake Shop station, spread on some marinara sauce from the pasta station, top it with some freshly sautéed chicken from the Flash in the Pan station, grab some veggies from the salad bar, and take the whole thing over to the pizza station to be broiled with pizza cheese.



Helping himself at the Pizza & Pasta station is Kwabena Appenteng '04.

If all this isn't enough for variety, the meal program now allows students to transfer their meal tickets to two other campus eateries: Tommy's in the Hansen Student Center and the Memorial Center's ever-popular Dugout.

Nicholson says that students returning from break sometimes tell him they're glad to be eating "SAGA" food again. "Mom doesn't cater to us like you do," they'll say. "Plus, at home we have to do our own dishes." He adds that when parents do visit campus, they often can't believe the quality of the food that's provided.

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The trick to keeping today's students happy is to stay one step ahead of the curve. Sodexo has defined the following trends in college food service:

- **Presentation Cooking:** "We take the food as far as we can in the kitchen," Welsh said, "but the magic happens in front of the student."
- **Wraps:** Current favorites among the wrap-ers are chorizo-with-rice and chicken Parmesan.
- **Asian Foods:** A shrimp, chicken, and crab combination dubbed "3-Happiness" is especially popular with young Titans.
- **Coffee Shoppe:** Students love their fluffy coffee, especially if it's Starbucks brand. Everything from a café mocha to mint hot cocoa is available at this hot spot near the Dugout. Also growing in popularity is Hattie's at the Hansen Student Center, which serves politically correct organic coffees and many specialty drinks, including smoothies.
- **Subs:** This generation of students grew up with grab-and-go sub shops. The Dugout's Sub Connection allows students to direct the step-by-step construction of their trusty favorites.
- **Comfort Foods:** This is a food group that never goes out of style. Burgers, fries, and grilled cheese are still the most popular items on the menu. IWU students consume 160 burgers and 140 grilled cheese sandwiches daily.

Just in case they've failed to spot a trend-in-the-making, the Food Services staff works hard at communicating with students. Nicholson runs point guard on this effort, chatting it up and joking around with students as he prepares their food. He estimates that he knows at least 500 students by name.

Watching half-eaten meals come back into the dish room is a sure way to tell if a new idea has succeeded or fallen flatter than day-old soda pop. Recently scrapped items have included turkey cutlets and beef-potato pie.

Surveys and comment cards are available to students. Suggested items have to be tempered with cost effectiveness, Nicholson says, adding, "If we can make it happen, we'll make it happen."

That flexibility embraces a student body with many individual needs, tastes, appetites, and schedules. Every station has at least one vegetarian entrée. Beyond that, the staff will work with any student's special food needs, whether those requirements spring from allergies or other medical conditions, religious restrictions, or ethnic preferences.

Finding appetizing ways to meet these many needs is the job of Executive Chef Craig Chojnacki. Chef Craig, as he's known on campus, seems to be able to pull any culinary trick out of his white chef's hat, thanks to his encyclopedic knowledge, his passion for food, and his spirit of adventure.

There are currently five West African students enrolled at Illinois Wesleyan. They grew homesick for a taste of Africa so Chef Craig came up with a recipe for Nigerian chicken, which he serves with Joloff rice and capsicum sauce. Nigerian chicken turned out to be a hit and has become a regular item on the three-week menu rotation; only, according to Nicholson, the West African students now prefer burgers. It's everyone else who's eating the Nigerian chicken.

A new program called "Mom's Recipes" allows parents to submit recipes. Sharon Hoffee, from Albion, Ill., sent in the recipe for her senior daughter Sara's favorite corn casserole dish. It was featured, along with information about Sara and her mom, in a menu that also included crispy codfish and fresh, steamed broccoli with garlic.

The efforts made by Illinois Wesleyan University's Food Service team produce more than a crop of well-fed students. A successful, attractive food service program can also be a good marketing tool for the University.

 <p data-bbox="321 1858 454 1885">Gary Schwartz</p> <p data-bbox="539 1831 665 1858">Illustration by</p>	<h3 data-bbox="690 1165 1153 1249">Not Your Mother's Grocery List</h3> <p data-bbox="706 1291 1136 1396"><i>During any given week, the Titan kitchens go through...</i></p> <p data-bbox="690 1438 1153 1501">Milk – 725 gallons (9,280 glasses of milk).</p> <ul data-bbox="706 1512 1136 1984" style="list-style-type: none">• Pasta – 350 to 400 pounds.• Salads – 500 pounds of greens, 360 cucumbers, 40 gallons of salad dressing• Vegetables – 600 pounds.• Potatoes – 300 pounds.• Soups – 100 gallons.• Ground beef – 200 pounds.• 1/4-pound burger patties – 1,400 pounds.• Boneless chicken breasts and thighs – 450 pounds.• French fries – 1,000 pounds.
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- Bread – 500 loaves.
- Bagels – 750.
- Cookies – 9,000.

“People always joke about food service,” says Bob Murray ’82, associate dean of admissions, “but here it’s always an advantage.” Is the quality of campus food a big factor in making a college decision? “Probably not,” says Murray, “but it goes on the side of the pluses.”

The quality of the food was important to Katie Maietta, a senior from LaGange Park, Ill., when she visited Illinois Wesleyan as a prospective student. Maietta explained that food was central to the culture of her Italian family. Maietta’s grandmother was particularly impressed with Illinois Wesleyan’s cuisine and told her, “You should come here; the food is great.”

After three and a half years of eating in the Commons, Maietta still describes the food as “pretty excellent.” Sunday brunch, she says, is the best meal of the week. And, after having eaten at many of her friends’ schools, she feels she can unequivocally state, “Our desserts are the best around.”

Such accolades don’t come easily. Cooking for thousands is both a colossal undertaking and an exacting art. In an average week, Sodexo will serve a total of 10,700 breakfasts, lunches, and dinners. Sunday brunch is typically dished up to 700 to 800 students. Chef Craig also oversees countless catering events on campus. During last semester’s “Family Day,” Chef Craig had an extra 1,400 mouths to feed. At this May’s graduation, he’ll feed 5,000.

The key to keeping this operation cooking, Chef Craig explains, is organization. He directs his staff to begin food preparation at least three days in advance of any meal. In his role as chef-as-businessman, he tries not to keep more money tied up in inventory than is necessary, but at any given time, Chef Craig estimates, there will be as much as \$35,000 worth of food in the IWU kitchens.

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Flowers, candlelight, and tableclothes helped make last Valentine’s Day special for students dining in the Commons.

The food staff likes to spice things up with frequent surprises. Some recent “pace changers” include milkshake bars, frost-your-own-cupcake night, chocolate-dessert night, and a chili-and-chip bar.

During holiday meals and once-a-month special event nights, tablecloths, candlelight, and flowers transform the dining room. On these nights, the cooks and chefs dish up more than tasty food; they provide memories. The staff, dressed in whites and bow ties, present such treats as bananas Foster, flamed and served tableside. In an event called the Cast Iron Zone, residence-hall managers hold a competitive cook-off. Premium Nights are held on Saturday, twice a month, and feature hand-cut steaks, Italian-baked chicken, and fried shrimp.

And because learning international cuisine should be a tasty part of any liberal arts education, students are invited to take part in regular Culinary Journeys. The motto for this program is “Going Global, Cooking Local.” On Culinary Journey nights, students can examine flags and brochures from a designated country. Chef Craig comes up with an appropriate menu. On the night that students gastronomically toured France, the menu included:

Poached Chicken Beurre Blanc with Mustard and Chives

Petit Legumes (tiny vegetables)

Salade Maxim's de Paris

Paris Brest (a classic crown-shaped pastry filled with praline butter cream, topped with almonds)

Anyway you slice it, that's an ocean away from mystery meat.

Nancy Steele Brokaw '71 is a freelance writer and longtime regular contributor to the Bloomington–Normal Pantagraph. In 1999, Clarion (Houghton Mifflin) published her award-winning children's novel Leaving Emma. Brokaw is third in a four-generation lineage of Titan graduates that includes her mother (Ruth Holbert Steele '41), and daughter (Katie '02).