



GOING TO THE HOSPITAL

turning the traditional institutional food model on its head

BY KRIS KING
PHOTO BY LARRY STANLEY

Hospital food has long been synonymous with bad food—bland, limp, and blanched of flavor and nutrients. No one expects farmers' market produce, local grass-fed lamb, and seasonal meals cooked from scratch, but that's just what Livingston HealthCare now offers as the only hospital in Montana with a farm to table program. Like most institutions, they'd been serving mass-produced, processed frozen and canned food trucked in from far away. Then the locavore revolution arrived in mid-2007 with new Dietary Manager, Jessica Wilcox, a registered dietician with a Master's in Nutrition Science from MSU.

"I have a huge affection for food and believe in its nutritional value," Wilcox says. "We're serving people who are ill; why wouldn't we be serving them the highest quality food possible? They're the population who needs it the most."

"Livingston HealthCare's mission is to build a healthy community," adds Marketing and Foundation Coordinator Lea Chatham, "so anything we do that improves the health of patients and staff—we employ 350 people—makes a substantial impact."

When she first arrived to the job, Wilcox says she felt as if they weren't really cooking anything, just opening cans. She contacted the Western Sustainability Exchange (formerly the Corporation for the Northern Rockies), and they helped her network with local providers. That's when her revolution began.

While higher quality food was the goal, a side effect has been local job creation. With approval from the CEO, Wilcox doubled the kitchen staff. Although cooking from scratch and preparing whole foods is more labor intensive, eliminating the ready-prepared meals' high cost has offset the expanded wages. The new menu's popularity has also improved revenues as more staff and locals fill the cafeteria, which is open to the public daily. "We have regulars who come in and eat three meals a day here," says Wilcox.

Another side effect of procuring as much regional food as possible is that Livingston HealthCare, the largest employer in Livingston, is spending more of their budget in the community while strengthening the income for area farmers and ranchers, helping them rely on volume purchases instead of on loans or speculation.

"They are one of our largest clients, and having large regular orders allows us to plan ahead and helps sustain us through slower seasons," says Betsy Indreland of Indreland Ranch Angus Beef. "Plus, we've gotten beef orders from people who first tried it at the hospital. We're happy to be included there."

Wilcox took a chance turning the traditional institutional food delivery model on its head by focusing on local seasonal foods, but management gave her autonomy, the long-standing kitchen staff and chefs warmed to the changes, and response to improved food quality has been tangible and positive. She took an even larger risk by simultaneously introducing biodegradable, compostable, and reusable food containers and utensils; their benefits are less tangible.

At first, Sysco, their primary vendor, said they couldn't provide these products, which they considered cost-prohibitive. But when the University of Montana demanded them, bamboo, corn, post-consumer, and compostable products were soon available and affordable. Wilcox has also worked to educate others; staff members bring their own cups to be washed and picked up the next day and discounts are given to patrons who bring their own cup.

On a recent lunchtime visit, while relishing their rich Indreland Ranch beef stew and fixings from the salad bar, including mixed greens, artichoke hearts, yellow and red peppers, olives, feta cheese, and light dressing, I noticed I had chosen a disposable salad bowl and soda cup. To my shock, I was the only person in the packed cafeteria using these containers. When given a choice, it seems that people are increasingly choosing both sustainable products and healthier, sustainable local food.

These sweeping changes have not been unconditional. There was a revolt when homemade gravy was served instead of the canned, day-glo nacho cheese, doughnuts are non-negotiable to staff, and meat and potatoes continue to trump the daily vegetarian options.

But the locavore movement is catching on in Livingston. Wilcox recently received a call from the Livingston School Superintendent who suggested a centralized system to distribute local and sustainable products to institutions countywide, from schools to senior care facilities. And statewide, Governor Schweitzer started the Montana Foods for Montanans initiative and Wilcox is on The Montana Food Systems Council whose task is to redesign Montana's food system. The future looks bright, and tasty.

"Green is definitely a movement that is happening locally," Wilcox says. "I would like to be a resource for the county on implementing local sustainable foods into their food system."

I'll be going to the hospital again soon, not because I'm unwell, but because their local food makes me feel well.

To learn more and access Livingston HealthCare's menu, visit www.livingstonhealthcare.org. eB

JUANITA'S BEEF STEW*

10 lbs. stew meat
(LHC uses local beef from Indreland Ranch in Big Timber)

1 lb. onions
(LHC uses onions from Ready Cash Creek Farms in Livingston)

Brown meat with the onions. Then add:

4 lbs. carrots, peeled and sliced

5 lbs. potatoes, peeled and diced
(LHC uses potatoes from Bausch Farms in Whitehall)

2 lbs. celery, chopped

Add 1 gallon low sodium beef broth. Cover and cook 1-1 1/2 hours in a 350-degree oven. Serves 75.

* Named after Juanita Randall, who has worked in the LHC dietary department for 31 years.

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