

Students say yum, yum

Food service evaluated

Texas A&M University's food service has been paid the ultimate compliment: Students say they like institutional food.

Texas A&M's food budget exceeds \$3 million a year, said Col. Fred Dollar, director of food services. The department serves more than 33,000 meals each day in its three dining halls and seven snack bars, more meals than any other university in the South or Southwest.

Dollar and his staff actively seek student advice in menu planning. "You can't develop any of the programs we've developed, or make any of the changes we've made, unless you have good relations with the students," Dollar said. "We feel very fortunate to have a good relationship with them."

One way Texas A&M food service personnel maintain good student relations is through a menu selection board. The board, composed of students eating in the three dining halls, actually decides what items are added or deleted from the menus.

"We've had menu boards since 1965, but it took us almost three years to convince the students that we were willing to change the menus at their suggestion," Dollar said. The main reason it took so long to convince them was because they had never had input before, and didn't know quite what to think about it."

The menu selection board concept was initiated by Dollar shortly after his arrival at Texas A&M in August of 1965. It's composed of 18 students representing 7,300 paying board members. They meet in regular weekly sessions at 6:30 a.m., with food service managers and chefs.

"We meet early because of the diverse schedules of everyone involved," Dollar commented. "Be it early or not, these early morning sessions have close to 100 percent attendance."

Some ideas initiated by the menu board in recent years include a fast food line that cooks a pizza in three minutes and the selection of the tile in the dining hall floors.

"We made 260 menu changes last year and will probably make at least that many this year," he reported. "I don't think food tastes have changed that much, but food preferences definitely have."

The trend in our dining halls now is toward more chicken. Rice was a big mover for a while and is starting to make a comeback, but the most popular of all is our grilled steak," he observed.

The three dining halls currently serve steak once a week, and it requires two tons of beef for that meal. "Our pear cobbler-cake is really popular. It's one of those dishes a person looks at and says to himself: Now who would eat that? We came up with the idea back when cherries were expensive and pears were cheap," Dollar explained. "Now we serve it almost every meal."

Milk is not served with every meal. The students found it was too expensive and voted to take it off the lunch menu.

However, 700 gallons of milk are consumed each day with breakfast and supper.

Innovations are common to food services. Texas A&M was one of the first universities to give students access to microwave ovens and the first to let students cook their own toast.



Green beans as far as the eye can see. Col. Fred Dollar, left, and Joe G. Marek, food stores manager, inventory a mountain of green beans needed for one dining hall meal. Texas A&M University has the largest institutional food service operation in the Southwest.

"That may not sound like a big deal," Dollar said. "But, it is to students. If we made the toast before they get here in the mornings it would be cold when they eat it. Now the toast is hot and fresh. They like it a lot better and there's less waste."

"At one major university in the Southwest, and I'm not naming names, the students had to be stopped from cooking their own toast. It seem they buttered it before they toasted it. Really made a mess," he said, grinning. "We don't have that problem."

Dollar said Texas A&M students eat in the dining halls because they want to, not because they have already paid for the meals and feel obligated.

"We're proud of the fact our students eat here because they want

to," Dollar said. "In conjunction with the menu boards, we survey them about likes and dislikes three times a year, just to see if we're on the right track. Tastes do change. We want to change with them."

Students, however, aren't the only ones that like the dining hall food and the service concepts. The department has been recognized many times by industry, including two national awards this year.

In February, Texas A&M won the National Silver Plate Award given by the International Food Service Manufacturers Association, and will receive the Ivey Award in May presented by Institution Magazine.

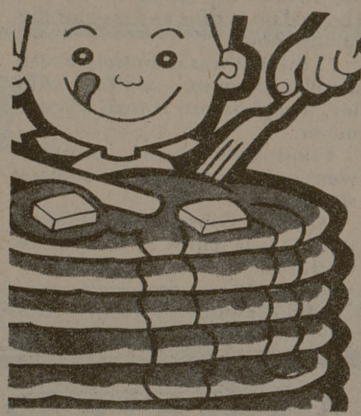
"Our main objective isn't to win awards, it's to take the money we have available, stretch it as far as it will go and satisfy the greatest number of students," Dollar said.



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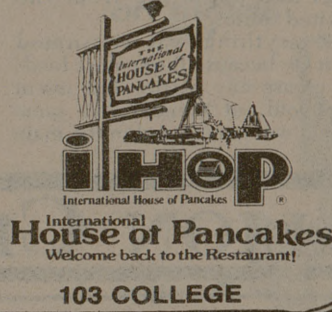
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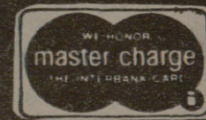
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