

Luxury hotel chain caters to guests with special diets

Fairmont's new menus include regular gluten-free, vegan and other dishes

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By Jane L. Levere



Photo: Kevin Hewitt
Baked tofu with bean noodles is one of the new gluten-free items on the menu at the Sonoma Mission Inn and Spa. It's part of Fairmont Hotels and Resorts new menu offerings for guests with specific dietary conditions.

Eating out when he's home or traveling is not a simple matter for Michael De Cicco, a public relations executive in New York.

That's because De Cicco, who spends almost one-third of his time on the road, has celiac disease — which means he cannot eat foods with gluten in them — and is also allergic to shellfish. He is so passionate about gluten-free dining that he maintains a blog about it, glutenfreemike.com.

De Cicco said he always has “to speak to the server or restaurant manager” when he dines out, to make sure he's not served dishes with either gluten or shellfish. Identifying appropriate dishes “is just about asking the right questions and making the right choices,” he explained.

To cater to guests like De Cicco, as well as aging baby boomers, Toronto-based Fairmont Hotels and Resorts last week introduced a new series of menus chain-wide with different dishes specially created for guests not only with celiac disease but also diabetes and heart disease, as well as for guests on macrobiotic, raw and vegan diets.

Dubbed Lifestyle Cuisine Plus, the menus have been developed locally, using local ingredients, by chefs at each of Fairmont's 64 hotels worldwide. Created under the guidance of Katya Baxter, a San Francisco-based nutrition consultant, the menus are designed using special “Nutritionist Pro” recipe analysis software from Axxya Systems, which lets the hotels' chefs customize dishes and menus according to guests' caloric and nutritional requirements.

Available not only in Fairmont hotels' restaurants but also on their room service and banquet menus, dishes range from Sonoma Mission Inn and Spa's gluten-free baked tofu with bean noodles to the Mount Kenya Safari Club's raw zucchini, carrot, portobello and cashew butter pave and Seattle's Olympic Hotel's heart-healthy free-range chicken with quinoa.

Dining while on the road

The menus — with at least one choice of dish for each of the six special diets — have been created by each hotel for breakfast, lunch and dinner, according to Mariano Stellner, corporate director of food and beverage in the Americas for Fairmont. At dinner, for example, there is a different appetizer, entrée and dessert for each of the six diets. Menus will be changed quarterly, according to the availability of seasonal ingredients. Fairmont also is encouraging guests with specific food allergies or sensitivities, or who are staying for an extended period of time, to speak directly to their hotel’s chef to plan food options during their stay. To expedite this process, the company has created a database of recipes that chefs — who have undergone special training to create and cook Lifestyle Cuisine Plus dishes — can copy or adapt.

Stellner said dishes will be neither more nor less expensive than dishes on hotels’ regular menus. “Price will be driven by the prices of ingredients and the complexity of preparation,” he added.

Stellner said he expects Lifestyle Cuisine Plus — which evolved from the chain’s Lifestyle Cuisine, introduced in 2005, with chefs indicating on menus which dishes can be considered healthy — to be well-received by travelers.

A recent survey of participants in Fairmont’s loyalty program found that 83 percent said they were focusing more today than in the past on eating “healthy and well-balanced meals,” while 91 percent said they practice some form of dietary lifestyle. And almost three-quarters said other hotel companies did not provide “meaningful solutions” to their dietary requirements.

According to hotel industry experts, Fairmont’s initiative is cutting edge: Bjorn Hanson, divisional dean of the Preston Robert Tisch Center for Hospitality, Tourism and Sports Management at New York University, said the company “seems to be more serious and dedicated in its efforts than anyone else at the national level.”

Other hotel companies do offer special diets and dishes. For example, Westin Hotels’ SuperFoods breakfast menu features dishes that are health-enhancing and rich in antioxidants and phytonutrients. Sheraton Hotels’ healthy dining options were created by Core Performance nutritionists. Marriott Hotels and Resorts’ “Fit for You” dishes are specially indicated on menus and geared for those who are carbohydrate, cholesterol and fat-conscious. Hyatt Hotels offers StayFit Cuisine, healthy dishes that the company does not identify on menus, though this is slated to change shortly. And Peninsula Hotels’ “Naturally Peninsula” dishes are nutritionally balanced options that are highlighted on menus.

But Fairmont’s Lifestyle Cuisine Plus seems to be the industry’s most far-reaching, in terms of the variety of diets it accommodates. Fairmont’s use of recipe analysis software also distinguishes the program from its competitors’ dining offers.

Service-oriented move

Granted, individual hotels that belong to luxury chains like Ritz Carlton and Four Seasons traditionally cater to guests’ individual food preferences and needs: For example,

the chef at the Four Seasons Hotel Atlanta has created a white bean and lobster chili with Southern-style cornbread, all completely gluten-free. But it is unusual for a hotel company to offer such dishes chain-wide on an ongoing basis.

Henry Harteveltdt, travel analyst for Forrester Research, called its introduction a “very smart move” by Fairmont.

“As boomers begin to turn 65, they’re much more aware of allergies and food items. Accommodating diners with specialized menus is a small but important way for a Fairmont hotel to show it’s service-oriented,” he said.

Karen Ansel, a registered dietitian from Syosset, N.Y. and a spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association, called Fairmont’s program “very innovative, giving a diet for a variety of conditions. When they go on vacation, a lot of people who have dietary restrictions will be able to find what they need there.”

Another advantage of the program, she said, is that “everybody can get what they want. You can choose one restaurant for everybody.”

Ansel said the Nutritionist Pro software Fairmont is using is “reputable,” but warned that “it is only as good as the person using it. Besides having a culinary background, they have to be knowledgeable, understand the dietary aspects of the software.”

For guests staying more than a few days, Ansel advises calling the hotel’s chef before arrival “about options, getting different foods every day.”

Frequent traveler De Cicco, for one, is looking forward to trying out Fairmont’s new menus. A regular guest at the chain’s properties in Montreux, Switzerland, and Hamilton, Bermuda, he called Lifestyle Cuisine Plus “great, because someone is taking the reins and going the extra step. It’s nice to know I can go into a hotel restaurant and not have to go through an added discussion. I can sit down like a normal person.”

“From my perspective, would I be more apt to stay in a hotel doing something like this? Yes. Traveling in general today is a headache. If I know I’m checking into a hotel where some of my concerns are going to be alleviated, it really weighs on where I’m going to stay,” he said.

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