

BRAIN FOOD

How one ACF chef helps memory care residents dine with dignity and get the nutrients they need // By Amelia Levin, NCR Editor

Our brains are hungry organs. So hungry that studies have shown our brains will go to all extremes to keep powering on — grabbing nutrients from organs, muscles and bones, if need be, to get the nutrients they need. That’s why individuals suffering from neurodegenerative brain diseases like dementia and Alzheimer’s often struggle with unintentional weight loss and nutrition deficiencies.

ACF Chef John Cramutola, MCFP, CDM, CFPP, knows this. He works in the senior living segment as corporate culinary director for Cura Hospitality, overseeing about 200 senior living facilities, many of which have a memory care unit. As part of his job, Chef Cramutola also oversees Cura’s signature Connections Memory Support Dining Program, which “provides memory-care team members with progressive tools that engage residents, chef-inspired culinary innovations and in person training so that memory-impaired residents can enjoy a meal with dignity,” as described in statements released by Cura. It’s a much-needed program; as of 2023, a whopping 6.7 million people aged 65 and older are living with Alzheimer’s, according to research from the National Institutes of Health, and those numbers are projected to increase as long as no cure is found.

“The Connections program is designed for individuals with some form of dementia and includes holistic elements designed to improve the health of our memory care residents that go beyond just the food,” Chef Cramutola says. “We incorporate aromatherapy, visual stimulation through photos and art and sound and music therapy to evoke familiarity and make residents feel more at ease.”

When it comes to the food, though, developing highly nutritious recipes and meals remains key. Chef Cramutola and his team must also adjust texture to make the food easier to ingest and digest for residents in later stages of disease, but also still visually and tastefully appealing.

“It’s a challenge to make sure that individuals [with neurodegenerative diseases] are given the nutrition they need beyond just plopping lumps of pureed food on a plate and serving it to them,” Chef Cramutola says. “That’s unappealing for everyone and certainly someone suffering from dementia when food is one of the last pleasures they can still enjoy. There’s so much focus on food and hospitality in independent living and even in assisted living facilities, but that ‘wow’ factor exponentially falls to the wayside when you get to skilled nursing and memory care.”

As swallowing difficulties are common symptoms of Alzheimer’s and other neurodegenerative diseases, when developing new recipes or adapting existing ones, Chef Cramutola and his team must closely follow International Dysphagia Diet Standardisation Initiative (IDDSI) guidelines for texture modification. “IDDSI has a comprehensive guidebook from beginning stages of dementia and related diseases to advanced stages and that includes international dysphasia guidelines,” he says. “That means even certain garnishes and ingredients can’t be used in our recipes and we must follow strict protocol when it comes to preparing, storing and serving purees and other foods.”

To adhere to these guidelines, but also bring more excitement to the food, Chef Cramutola and his team focus on recreating dishes that are familiar but in some pureed and soft



ACF Chef John Cramutola, MCFP, CDM, CFPP

texture form that still looks and tastes appealing, chiefly by using molds and other tools.

For spaghetti and meatballs, for example, they'll create a tasty pasta puree with butter and egg, but then pipe it into spaghetti-like strands and bake those gently for a little extra texture. They'll layer that with an extra smooth, creamy tomato sauce and for the meatballs, they'll season, cook and puree ground beef, turkey, pork or a combination and scoop the mixture into spherical molds to resemble the traditional version. For garnish, since chopped parsley can't be used due to choking hazards outlined in IDDSI guidelines, Chef Cramutola and his team will instead dust plates with powdered parsley or basil and create herb-infused oils "as a great way to incorporate some color and taste." Instead of grated parmesan, they'll dehydrate and "powderize" the cheese for safe sprinkling on top.

Plateware choices for the dishes are important, due to vision changes in dementia patients. "We use bright yellow plates in the memory care units to help the residents see where their food is on the table," Chef Cramutola says.

Handcrafted Delights is Cura's enriched snack program with nutrient-rich treats meant to keep residents nourished without the use of chemically enhanced supplements. Examples of such snacks include house-made, soft-baked cranberry-ricotta-oat bars, peanut butter chocolate mousse cups, yogurt-iced cupcakes, brownies and energy bites. These taste like traditional sweets so they're appealing, but they are also more calorically dense, fortified with vitamins and protein, and have less sugar or use natural sweeteners. These treats are paired with house-made, nutrient-dense shakes and smoothies for an extra boost.

"We'll incorporate smell therapy by baking the treats out in the open as a way to get everyone excited about the food and bring about a sense of comfort," Chef Cramutola says. Sometimes, the residents will get involved with making the energy bites, which don't require any sharp objects or actual cooking.

"At the end of the day, our goal is to avoid weight loss and help our residents get the calories and nutrients they need to maintain their health," Chef Cramutola says, noting that Cura's medical reports show that many residents have experienced significant improvement in their nutritional status since the



ACF Chef John Cramutola, MCFP, CDM, CFPP, follows International Dysphagia Diet Standardisation Initiative (IDDSI) guidelines for texture modification to feed seniors with dementia, but uses molds and other techniques to make dishes appealing (above); A selection of nutrient-dense, low-sugar desserts prepared by Chef Cramutola and his team (below).

dining program was launched. "Often, when seniors switch to purees, their nutrition takes a turn for the worse, but we've worked really hard to ensure that taste and presentation are still top notch."