



Dinner Is Served—



Catering to the diverse tastes of OU students is easy as pie for the culinary masters at the new Couch Restaurants.

BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP
PHOTOS BY ROBERT TAYLOR

Don't use the word "cafeteria" in front of Frank Henry. Not when he's standing in the middle of 11,000 square feet of sparkling, newly renovated dining options—now known as the University of Oklahoma's Couch Restaurants.

"It *isn't* a cafeteria," OU's director of board operations insists proudly, looking around at 14 individual restaurant concepts featuring cuisines from around the globe that elicit jaw-dropping responses from students and visitors alike. "It sure isn't your mom and dad's cafeteria."

That much is obvious. Thanks to a year-long, \$10 million renovation, what was once a cavernous, cold space that some likened to an airport has emerged as one of OU's best selling points. Echoing terrazzo floors, dusty drapes and dimly lighted chandeliers are gone. Today's students eat in a beautifully lit, stylish atmosphere that essentially is a series of small restaurants flowing continuously around a curved space. Banquettes and bistro-style chairs are arranged to bring each area into focus, and swirling patterns of warm-toned laminate wood are underfoot. Technology is everywhere, from free Wi-Fi throughout the build-

Your Way

ing to a monster-sized, 139-inch big screen for special events and individual TV screens at countertop seating.

“The difference between the way it looks now and how it was before is night and day,” says Henry, whose opinion is backed up by 28 years of experience working at Couch. Henry began his career as an OU undergraduate in 1981. Then, the cafeteria offered only two entrées per meal and was divided into self-imposed residence hall territories whose occupants rarely ventured past the conveyor belt that trundled their pink and green melamine dishes away.

That time must be unimaginable now to students who move effortlessly through an entire world of food choices. At one end of the curve is the Athens Café, where the Mediterranean menu changes daily and includes Muhammad sweet rice, Croque Monsieur salad and baklava; at the other, the Sooner Smokehouse offers tender sliced brisket and ribs that are smoked on site and rotisserie chicken revolving over flames. In between the two are 12 other dining options, ranging from all-you-can-eat Chick-fil-A to Shanghai Stir Fry, where patrons can custom design noodle bowls and watch as they are tossed with one of 15 different sauces in state-of-the-art induction woks.

Choice is king. At La Roma’s Italian restaurant, students can customize pastas and pizzas cooked in a brick oven and wait tableside to be summoned by a handheld buzzer. Casa del Sol offers fresh tortillas, homemade red-and-white corn chips and make-your-own burritos with eight varieties of meats and beans. In the morning hours, the space morphs into The Breakfast Club, with made-to-order omelets, pancakes and Belgian waffles. A self-serve area nearby hosts 18 different cereals and a grab-and-go convenience case.

Positioned in the center of Couch Restaurants are several buffet-style stations that include Salad Sensations, a 100-item salad bar; the Vegetarian Station, featuring vegetarian, vegan and health-specific choices; Main Street, with American fare and comfort food; and Dot’s Deli, offering nearly a dozen breads from marble rye to ciabatta, a panini press and even a sandwich toaster like those trumpeted by restaurant chains.

Finer dining also is available. Chef’s Choice spotlights items prepared by Couch Restaurants’ executive chef staff, including Asian-Marinated Pork Loin and Firecracker Alaskan Salmon—entrées that any restaurant would be proud to feature on its menu. Want to treat someone to a special dinner? With an additional swipe of a meal card, students can choose such upscale items as T-bone or salmon steaks, rib eye or swordfish from Sooner Smokehouse’s separate cold case.

“If you can’t find something to eat *here*, well . . .” Henry says, sweeping his arm to encompass the spectrum of food options at students’ fingertips.

And then there is dessert.

In what might seem like the cruelest twist of all to alumni from the two-entrée days, OU students now have daily access to choco-

late mousse cake and luscious fruit tarts bright with strawberries and kiwi from local French bakery La Baguette, pecan and chocolate cream pies from Oklahoma City’s own Pioneer Pies, pastries from Norman’s Donut King and ice cream from nearby Hiland Dairy. The Sooner Sweet Shoppe also features Starbucks coffees and teas. Cozy bistro seating makes the perfect place for students to retreat with their indulgences.

But it isn’t indulgence that has driven the long evolution of Couch Cafeteria into Couch Restaurants—it is the reality of consumer expectations, says Director of OU Housing and Food Services David Annis.

“This generation of students has grown up with a multitude of dining options,” he explains. “Jump in the car, and you can get pretty much anything you want at any time of day. We take great pride in our service and don’t want a student to have to go find something ‘new’ or ‘different’ to eat; we want to have it all for them on campus.

“When I arrived here in 1986, we had Cate and Couch cafeterias and a small grill in Adams. Choice was pretty limited. I’ve spent my career here trying to bring more choice and options to students, and the new Couch Restaurants really sums up that journey,” he says. Student choices have grown exponentially; in addition to Couch Restaurants, students can use their meal plan points at more than 10 other locations spread across campus, including the National Weather Center, the Sam Noble Oklahoma



Deli delights represent just one of more than a dozen choices OU students enjoy daily at the new Couch Restaurants.



Pies, cakes and cookies of every persuasion can be found at the Sooner Sweet Shoppe. Mari Taylor Edmonds offers up a slice of cherry cheesecake with a smile.

Museum of Natural History and the Health Sciences Center in Oklahoma City. There even is a room-service option for students who live in residence halls.

Don't think for a moment that OU students haven't noticed how lucky they are. Glowing feedback through the weekly "Kitchen Comments" newsletter, edited by Food Services Director Chuck Weaver, and annual surveys tell part of the story. The headline, however, is that a full year before Couch was renovated, OU Food Services ranked number one in student satisfaction among 42 peer institutions and was ranked in the top 10 overall nationwide.

"Creating an open, inviting and comfortable environment for students is important to building community and for the success

of the University as a whole," Annis says.

Henry relates a passed-down anecdote in which a student was overheard saying he chose OU over another school purely based on his food choices. While that may leave some incredulous, it makes perfect sense to Henry. "Food is one of the basic needs," he says, trying to put words to the literally gut-level responses that food elicits: words like home, comfort, happiness. "Food gets people excited."

OU recruiters are well aware of that fact and regularly bring individuals and whole busloads of visitors to Couch Restaurants. Henry loves watching their reactions. "What gets me is when the freshmen come in and see everything for the first time," he says with a smile.

First impressions have lasted, says OU freshman Nick Stringer of Yukon. "I thought the cafeteria was going to be terrible, but I'm kind of blown away by this. There is so much food and variety."

"I still like my mom's cooking better, but this is a close second," adds Stringer's roommate and high school friend Austin Ederer. He recalls that during their high school lunch periods, he and Stringer ate fast food daily. He says they are eating much healthier now—with one small exception. "I get pie every day," Ederer beams.

Cognizant that too much of any good thing can lead to the infamous "freshman 15," Couch Restaurants offers plenty of healthy options and encourages portion control. Henry points out a vital change at Couch. Rather than handing students a tray to pile up with food that can either lead to overeating or waste, Couch

Restaurants' patrons are given an individual plate. Diners are welcome to go back for as much as they like, but the smaller size creates awareness of how much they are eating. Such small changes ultimately can make a difference in student health.

Behind the scenes, other details of Couch's renovation are making a difference in the health of the environment. The new design includes energy-saving lighting, recycled construction materials and high-efficiency dishwashers that use half the power and one-third of the water. Increasing the size of Couch's walk-in freezer means fewer food deliveries and less gas consumption. Bins for recyclables are prominent in the kitchen areas, and sustainable, local supplies are purchased whenever possible, from cage-free eggs to pizza crust ingredients bought from an



Strategically placed buffet-style serving stations curve gracefully throughout the building that is barely recognizable as the former Couch Cafeteria. Modern lighting, wood finishes and gleaming stainless steel create an atmosphere that is as inviting as any designer kitchen.

Oklahoma wheat farmers' co-op. Couch even offers an annual "Local Flavors" meal featuring gourmet dishes prepared with Oklahoma products and sponsors regular "Farm Market Days," bringing produce growers onto campus to sell their goods directly to students, faculty and staff.

Annis says these efforts are simply part of OU Food Services' credo of "over delivering," going above and beyond what is expected. That attitude has earned him OU's \$20,000 Otis Sullivant Award for Perceptivity and stood his team in good stead during a year of phased construction, when exactly one-third of Couch's normal dining space was closed off at any time. The first phase of construction also put Food Services' famed teamwork to the test when a January ice storm kept residence hall students trapped on campus and doubled the number of meals served.


"It was baptism by fire," Henry remembers. "Lots of people worked 12- to 14-hour days just to get those students fed."

"We listen to the students and give them what they want. And what they want is good food."



Working long days to feed students is nothing new and will never change. Couch Restaurants was finished only two days before the first wave of OU freshmen arrived in August, when 2,000 students were served at an inaugural meal. More than 1 million meals are expected to be served before the academic year is done—each of them offered in a jewel of a setting that is most definitely not their parents' cafeteria.

Yet all the numbers, all the polished floors and banquettes and brick ovens in the world don't change the focus of what OU Food Services and the new Couch Restaurants are really about.

"We listen to the students and give them what they want," Henry says. "And what they want is good food." 

Anne Barajas Harp is a freelance writer from Norman who remembers Couch Cafeteria when Friday's only options were spaghetti or hamburgers.