

Food that makes a difference, in aged care.



“One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well.”

Virginia Woolf

When it comes to ageing well, there is no doubt that maintaining a healthy diet is crucial. An apple a day... well, you know how it goes.

For elderly people living in residential care, the day-to-day dining experience has a big impact not just on physical health, but on emotional wellbeing too.

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Part of the reason for this is that food is not just about calories and nutrients; sharing a meal is a deeply social and cultural experience. What and how we eat reinforces our sense of identity, reflecting our individual cultural beliefs and values.

At BaptistCare, the role – and the challenge – for our aged care home kitchen teams is to cater to each resident’s unique preferences, while serving up delicious food that keeps them healthy and strong for as long as possible.

But what does this mean in practice? Let’s dig in and find out.

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Menu design that puts residents first



Care home residents are considered subject matter experts when it comes to meal planning and are consulted on their preferences as the first and most crucial step in the process.

It's hard to imagine the care and consideration that goes into a BaptistCare residential care home menu. Prepared on a seasonal basis to ensure the freshest of ingredients, the menus go through a rigorous design process that involves many experts in the field.

This includes, most importantly, the aged care home residents themselves. As the primary consumers, they are rightly considered subject matter experts and are consulted on their personal and cultural preferences as the first and most crucial step in the process.

Menus are often international, incorporating dishes from around the world, and which are culturally meaningful for many in the care home community.

Input is then sought from dietitians and nutritionists to ensure that meals are satisfying, tasty, varied, and meet the nutritional needs of older people.

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Once the menu has taken a clear shape, senior chefs and residential aged care home management recirculate the draft to residents for final review. It is then ready to be implemented across BaptistCare’s aged care homes.

Once the menu is launched, residents can still request customised dishes based on their personal and cultural preferences.

But what’s on a typical menu? And how do chefs, residents, and experts decide what to include?

You are what you eat: foods that boost wellbeing



Ensuring that meals are fortified with nutrients for a healthy, balanced diet, is important for everyone - but particularly so for seniors.

A healthy diet can significantly boost immunity and prevent unintentional weight loss, both important factors to consider when meal planning in aged care.

Chefs will also think about the impact of good nutrition on residents’ mental health, an aspect of menu design that is often overlooked.

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[According to Beyond Blue](#), people living in residential aged care are at a far higher risk of experiencing depression than other groups in society, making feel-good foods even more crucial in this setting.

For example, BaptistCare chefs always incorporate foods like fish and vegetables into the residential aged care home menu, which are high in omega-3 fats. These are thought to impact the functioning of serotonin in the brain, a neurotransmitter that is important in the regulation of mood.

Foods on the care home menu are also naturally fortified with ingredients like butter, full-cream milk, lentils, and chickpeas.

But it's not all salads and seeds - residents like to indulge occasionally too, and you really can't beat a delicious slice of cake with a cuppa.

Residential aged care home staff will never deny residents anything they'd like to eat (within the parameters of dietary compliance) – it's their home, after all. But if the frequency starts to impact wellbeing, that's when staff will work with the resident to find a happy, healthy medium.

What ingredients make up a positive dining experience?



Have you ever taken time to analyse the ‘must-haves’ for a great dining experience? Although quality, delicious food is crucial, there are other aspects to consider.

Surroundings

Nobody can relax and enjoy a meal if they aren’t first comfortable in their surroundings. This is why servery and kitchen teams will focus on creating a homely and relaxed dining room environment.

“It’s about making the residents feel completely at home,” says Stuart Walton, Manager of Hotel Services across 23 BaptistCare residential aged care homes. Stuart is passionate about delivering a holistic dining experience that’s consistently great across all our sites.

“It’s not about replicating a fine dining environment– the dining room needs to feel like an extension of the residents’ home. Which it is.”

Engaging all the senses

As residents get settled in the dining room, they will be met by the appetising aromas of food wafting over from the kitchen. They may hear the sounds of kitchen staff in the servery, and they will see the trays being organised and tables laid.

Engaging all the senses like this tends to work wonders on even the smallest of appetites, and contributes to a fulfilling dining experience.

Stuart explains, “This is where the menu really comes to life. An item stops becoming something that’s just imagined and starts to fulfil expectations of taste and smell.”

“It’s the degree of synchrony between expectation and taste that decides how much someone enjoys their food.”

Marrying taste with expectation

Stuart tells us this is something that we all do without thinking, every time we eat.

Next time you’re about to take your first bite of that perfectly cooked ribeye, think about the myriad expectations you have. You’re prepared for a certain kind of texture; a salty, meaty flavour with a slight hint of iron. There might be the added flavours and textures of gravy.

If some or all of these expectations don’t match up to what you experience – or even worse, you don’t know what it is you’re eating – this can hugely disrupt the brain’s interpretation of flavours.

At BaptistCare, our chefs understand this psychology and work hard to meet residents’ expectations throughout the dining experience.

For example, residents are given visual menus to understand what the dish will look like, and staff also describe the food to them as it is served.

For those residents who require feeding assistance, food is always within view so that they can clearly see what it is they are eating. If they are visually impaired, care staff will explain what each mouthful looks like.

“It’s this kind of detailed, person-focused care that can make all the difference for residents,” says Stuart.

Food safety



Food safety is paramount when it comes to aged care catering.

At BaptistCare, we take this very seriously, and our teams engage in mandatory annual training to ensure that we continue to work within the strict parameters of our food safety program. This is **in line** with the NSW Food Authority, and the Health Protection Service in the ACT.

As of April 2023, all BaptistCare residential aged care homes have been awarded “A” ratings for food and hygiene safety, a testament to our team’s commitment and hard work in the space.

“A big part of this is about temperature control,” says Stuart. “Cooking food to 75 degrees kills off any pathogens, which is especially important when working with people who are immuno-compromised.

“Good hygiene is at the centre of all we do in the BaptistCare kitchen – our meals are delicious, but always ensure the safety of our residents, too.”

Innovating for continuous improvement



Our approach to the presentation of texture-modified meals is all about giving dignity and respect to residents on a pureed diet.

BaptistCare teams are always striving towards continuous improvement, and we are proud to be progressive in our approach to the care home dining experience.

Stuart and his team of senior chefs have collaborated with renowned innovators in the sector, such as Maggie Beer, to refine our work with texture-modified foods, and with those residents who are on a pureed diet.

Chefs use piping bags to present pureed meals in a way that is just as appetising and pleasing to the eye as every other dish.

“Taking the time to serve pureed foods in this way has a big impact on quality of life,” says Stuart. “Our innovation in this space is a real point of difference for us at BaptistCare.”

See the kitchen team in action! Find your nearest care home



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If you'd like to see our kitchen teams in action, or would like to know more about life in residential aged care, why not have a chat with one of our friendly staff? We'd be happy to talk with you about your individual care needs and show you around your nearest BaptistCare home.

Use our simple online search tool to explore [BaptistCare Aged Care Home locations across New South Wales and the ACT](#).

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