

## Seared Sea Bass and Kobe Beef Burgers: Retirement Community Food Goes High-End

Luxury senior communities are turning up the heat on their meal offerings, with farm-to-table selections and restaurant-style settings

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Alma by Stephan Pyles, a new restaurant at the Hacienda at Georgetown. Ilana Panich-Linsman for The Wall Street Journal

Retirement communities aren't generally known for their fine dining. But since Elaine Davenport, 76, moved into the Hacienda at Georgetown senior-living community earlier this year, she has grown accustomed to sampling fresh seafood, wine lists and perfectly executed steaks with her girlfriends at the facility's three residents-only restaurants.

"I've gained about 10 pounds since I've been here," says Ms. Davenport, a retired business owner who pays about \$6,000 a month for a two-bedroom unit in the Texas community. "There's such a variety."

The Hacienda at Georgetown is one of a new crop of luxury senior communities focused on offering top-notch food served in restaurant-style settings. These upscale senior-living setups still offer traditional components such as assisted living and memory-care services, but many also put additional resources into offering retirees something they've had access to for decades: white-tablecloth restaurants with seasonal menus and on-site chefs. Many are based in urban locales, catering to adventurous palates.

“The experience is going to rank up there with any five-star restaurant,” says Denise Falco of Sunrise Senior Living, which has a luxury building in New York and will open a second city location later this year. For many seniors, “it’s very important to the lifestyle they’ve been used to.”

Over the past three years, more senior communities have started focusing on farm-to-table food offerings, according to Diane Trunecek, a senior care consultant with CarePatrol. In the past, such communities “always had food choices, but the ingredients weren’t focused on freshness and quality,” she says. By offering updated dining choices with high-caliber chefs, communities hope to draw in residents interested in a luxury lifestyle in addition to those who have a medical need to live in senior housing, she says.

Ms. Falco oversees Sunrise at East 56th, a 17-story building in Manhattan where residents’ rent of \$15,000 to \$35,000 a month includes meals at the second-floor restaurant, where menus change daily and all food is prepared on site. The building, which also has a wine bar, regularly brings in local offerings such as pastrami from nearby Carnegie Deli or pastries from Balthazar. Residents can walk in or call for reservations. Many prefer the tables near the floor-to-ceiling windows. “There’s a quiet elegance in here,” says Dolores Wharton, 95, a retired corporate director who enjoys perusing the menus printed each day.

At Sunrise at East 56th, a partnership of Sunrise Senior Living, Hines and Welltower, residents can attend a monthly meeting to go through the menus and share their preferences. Recently, that meant nixing the duck rillettes and beef stroganoff because of their fat content, while adding more salads with lean-protein options, says executive chef Jim Santana, who organizes the meetings. “We sit down with the residents and talk about any changes,” he adds.

At the Hacienda at Georgetown, a 13-acre community north of Austin, restaurants include the poolside Poppy’s Cantina, the upscale bistro the Mark, and Seasons, a casual-dining destination with a changing daily menu. The newest addition is Alma by Stephan Pyles, a Texas Hill Country-themed restaurant. The menu, designed by James Beard-winning chef Stephan Pyles, offers seared sea bass (\$29), bone-in rib-eye (\$58) and rotisserie chicken (\$24). Unlike the other restaurants on the property, members of the public will be able to book reservations at Alma starting in May; residents still get priority.

“We are catering to a generation that knows really good food,” says executive director Annika DiNovi. She says she expects Alma will also generate revenue for the community.

The 231-unit Hacienda is part of Watermark Retirement Communities’ Elan Collection, which offers what the company calls elevated retirement offerings in New York City, Houston, California’s Napa Valley, and West Palm Beach, Fla. Hacienda residents pay from \$3,600 for a one-bedroom to \$7,500 for a two-bedroom. All units have kitchens, but each resident has a \$500 monthly dining credit, enough for roughly one restaurant meal a day, says Ms. DiNovi.

For chefs, the hours and slower pace of senior-living facilities help draw them away from more demanding work at high-end restaurants and hotels. Dining hours generally wrap up by 7:30 p.m. and the less stressful work schedule “affords me balance in my life,” says Mr. Santana, who previously worked in upscale restaurants.

At Coterie Hudson Yards, a 126-unit facility that opened in Manhattan this year, residents don’t grab food from a buffet-style setup, says Chad Welch, executive chef and the director of food and beverage operations at Coterie Senior Living, a joint venture between Atria Senior Living and Related Companies. Instead, it’s all made-to-order with restaurant-quality ingredients, including fresh seafood, steak and local greens. “We buy from the same places that the restaurants around us do,” Mr. Welch says.

The Brass Room restaurant has staff trained by a master sommelier, a 13th-floor dining terrace and a chef's counter overlooking the open kitchen. Residents also have access to Lena's Lounge, a piano bar with skyline views and a juice bar. Other amenities include a fitness studio, beauty salon and club room.

Coterie residents pay from \$11,100 to \$27,000 a month to rent a studio, one- or two-bedroom unit, with three meals a day included in the monthly rent. In addition to a Manhattan location, the brand last year opened Coterie Cathedral Hill in San Francisco, where monthly rent ranges from \$9,400 to \$15,100. A Santa Clara, Calif., location is in the works.

Lynn Henderson, 83, a lifelong New Yorker, moved into an 8th-floor unit at Coterie Hudson Yards earlier this year. The unit has luxury touches, including heated bathroom floors, automated lighting and oak floors with inset rugs to prevent falls. She has views of the Empire State Building and the McGraw Hill Building, where the retired advertising executive worked earlier in her career.

Ms. Henderson often invites friends to the Brass Room for lunch. The food and beverage staff has already learned her preferences, she says, and often sits down to chat between meals. "People always love to come here because the staff are not in a hurry."

Ms. Henderson says she is a fan of the signature \$26 Brass Room burger, with Kobe beef, blue cheese and bacon-tomato jam on brioche. But so far, she's resisted the restaurant's maple bourbon panna cotta, crème brûlée and almond-croissant bread pudding, she says. "I have to confess—I've never ordered dessert."

Carlota Hartmann, 79, says she and her son dined at the Monarch Room, one of two restaurants at Coterie Cathedral Hill, before making the decision to move in. The retired translator said the restaurant's fresh ingredients and classy décor, with muted colors and flowers on each table, convinced her to take the leap from living on her own. "The food was impressive to me, especially the wide variety of beautiful salads," she says.

Months later, her airy studio is starting to feel like home, she says. She enjoys mingling with other residents at dinner, where she often orders the \$38 pan-seared branzino. "It feels like a permanent cross between a cruise and a five-star hotel," she says.