

Home for Retirees Introduces Finger Food Style of Dining for Impaired Residents

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Watermark turns a full turkey dinner into croquettes that can be dunked into gravy. (Watermark Retirement Communities)

The meal begins with a scoop of sorbet perched on a large-handled tasting spoon.

Sorbet has long been used as a palate cleanser between courses, but at the Legacy at Cranberry Landing in Irondequoit, it has a different function: to wake up elderly taste buds.

Even the peppermint- or lavender-scented moistened towels handed to diners before they begin has a function to help memory-impaired or physically disabled elders engage in the sensory experience they're about to have. And the moist towels are available for a quick wipe-up, too, if some food goes astray during the meal.

These tricks of the trade are part of a new style of preparing foods for those who have trouble feeding themselves with cutlery. For residents of a nursing home, cognitive issues may make it hard to remember what they liked about eating. For others, growing physical limitations have affected their dexterity.

Either way, a full meal with fork and knife can get to be too much for some elderly residents, resulting in weight loss that can affect their health.

The Cranberry Landing property introduced "Gourmet Bites," a new style of cuisine created by Watermark Retirement Community properties that grinds some foods, and turns them into bite-size hors d'oeuvres. A chicken cutlet, for instance may be ground and molded into a cupcake form, topped with an "icing" of mashed potatoes.

Pulled pork might be stuffed into small empanadas, resembling turnovers. And French toast is made into a casserole that's cut into finger-food sized wedges, with a cup of syrup for dipping the wedges. All this is an alternative to the unappetizing option of pureeing foods or continually serving less nutritious foods such as chicken nuggets.

“We’re trying to make foods more palatable,” said Cranberry Landing Chef Kenneth King II, “getting people to really enjoy their meals more.”

Cranberry Landing rolled out the program in April, after sending King and other staff off for training with this new menu. The chef learned techniques and recipes for grinding food and re-seasoning it in new easy-to-handle forms, but Watermark also encourages attractive plate presentations that double up on veggies and fruit by offering them finger-food style.



Watermark’s new Gourmet Bites takes the traditional French toast and puts it in a form that doesn’t require a fork and knife. (Watermark Retirement Communities)

Traditional French toast is changed to a form that doesn’t require a fork and knife.

A chef’s salad, for instance, omits the lettuce, which doesn’t have much nutritional value anyway, and grinds the hard-boiled egg, ham, turkey and cheese and herbs into a cold meatball. Alongside are some strips of vegetables, as well as watermelon cut into batons that diners can either stab with a fork or pick up with their fingers.

Residents still have a choice between the regular menu and Gourmet Bites.

Several residents gathered for a sampling of the new menu recently didn’t seem to recall having eaten the Gourmet Bites items before, but Jennifer LaFountain, executive director at Cranberry Landing, said the group probably didn’t remember because of memory issues. LaFountain said the rituals of warm towels and sorbet beforehand are designed in part to help residents become familiar with the new style of eating.

Whether they remembered it or not, the group seemed to enjoy it.

“I like it a lot,” said Mike Kubiak, a resident who has Parkinson’s disease and is recovering from knee surgery. “It tastes good and it’s much easier for me to manage.”

Another resident, who didn’t want to be identified by name, said he’s lost hand-eye coordination, resulting in the need to do more laundry as he spills food on himself. “If I can get it in my hands and get it to my mouth, I’m golden,” the man said.

Not everyone who might find Gourmet Bites easier to eat orders it.

“It’s really about dignity. If residents are able to use forks and spoons, we don’t want to push finger food,” said Diana Jones, director of dining services.

And King added, "Some don't have (eating) issues but just want to try it because it looks pretty."

LaFountain said some items on the menu are more popular than others.

"We have the most success with breakfast, honestly," she said. The eggy casseroles seem familiar to elderly residents. "Especially growing up, there were a lot of casseroles, cooked and presented in ways that were cost-effective for the family," LaFountain said.

Other favorites are the savory empanadas, and entrees in cupcake form, such as chicken French.

Cranberry Landing and two other Watermark Retirement Community locations will be offering free samplings of the Gourmet Bites cuisine Nov. 14 so family members, health care providers and the public can try the menu. All the tastings are from 12:30 to 1:30 p.m. Locations and the phone numbers for reserving a spot at each locations follow:

- Legacy at Cranberry Landing, 300 Cranberry Landing Drive, Irondequoit. Call (585) 441-6198.
- Legacy at Maiden Park, 749 Maiden Lane, Greece. Call (585) 797-2455.
- Legacy at Grande Vie, 2140 Five Mile Line Road, Penfield. Call (585) 441-6208.