



M E N U M A S T E R S

# 2011 MenuMasters Award winners



UMASS DINING,  
page 78

**T**he 2011 MenuMasters Award winners represent a wide variety of current culinary trends in action, from bold flavors and authenticity to healthfulness and local sourcing. These forward thinkers have turned innovation to profit, effectively implementing ideas that keep customers engaged in the face of an economic climate that has been challenging, at best.

Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen is taking the award for Best Limited-Time Offer with its Wicked Chicken, which featured thin strips of boneless fried chicken marinated with authentic piquant Louisiana seasonings. Popeyes sold 900,000 pounds of the chicken in a one-month period.

Also true to its ethnic flavor heritage, the award for Best New Menu Item goes to Panda Express' Honey Walnut Shrimp, made with tempura shrimp tossed in a gourmet honey sauce and topped with glazed walnuts. The item was the most successful entrée launch in the chain's history.

Old Chicago Pizza & Pasta is receiving the Best Menu Revamp Award. In its largest overhaul since 2004, Old Chicago streamlined its offerings, trimming the menu to eliminate several low performers and high-calorie items without straying from its pizza-and-beer roots.

The Best Healthful Innovation Award will be presented to Subway

Restaurants, whose "Build Your Better Breakfast" campaign launched a sales-building line of healthful and customizable egg-based sandwiches.

Health also takes the focus at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, which earned the award for Best Menu Trendsetter. UMass Dining's "Be Smart. Eat Smart. Live Smart." initiative has resulted in a 98 percent meal plan retention rate.

Winning for Best Menu/Line Extension is Shari's Restaurants, whose "Fresh Blackberry Season" capitalized on the Pacific Northwest's much-anticipated blackberry harvest to offer a line of regionally sourced blackberry dessert items in July and August of last year.

In addition, celebrity chef and restaurateur Tom Colicchio is being inducted into the MenuMasters Hall of Fame, and Scott Davis, executive vice president and chief concept officer for Panera Bread, has won the Innovator Award.

The awards will be presented at the Nation's Restaurant News MenuMasters Awards Ceremony May 21st at the Drake Hotel in Chicago. The MenuMasters Awards are sponsored by Ventura Foods LLC. Winners are selected by the editorial board of Nation's Restaurant News.



# UMass Dining

Healthful initiative gets high marks from students in Amherst

BY JAMES SCARPA

Responding to the mounting interest in better eating on campus, the University of Massachusetts Amherst is offering dining hall customers an array of flavorful, varied and healthful foods through its healthy lifestyles initiative called Be Smart. Eat Smart. Live Smart.

The program consists of 11 steps that executive director of auxiliary enterprises Ken Toong, executive chef Willie Sng and senior dietitian Dianne Sutherland have implemented over the past few years.

Among the keys are replacing trans fats in meals with better-for-you fats, reducing sodium in recipes by 30 percent and serving smaller meat portions while offering more proteins from plant and fish sources. At the same time, whole grains, vegetables and fruits are offered in abundance, and customers are encouraged to exercise daily. Even the food truck the department is planning to launch next fall will cruise the campus with healthful items.

"We take food very seriously here," Toong said. "Good food is a core value for the campus."

The operation he heads, one of the largest college dining programs in the nation, with more than \$60 million in annual revenues, is considered a pacesetter not only in healthful dining, but also in culinary excellence, sustainability and sharing knowledge with its peers in the segment.

"We feel that we should take a leadership role," Toong said.

To that end, UMass Dining hosts an annual Chef Culinary Conference that attracts more than 100 college dining professionals to the university. The event features lectures, workshops and demonstrations by prominent chefs and culinary luminaries like Martin Yan, Joyce Goldstein and Mark

Miller. Similarly, the annual Visiting College Chef Series brings leading college dining chefs to campus



to demonstrate their specialties.

"They have been leading the way, along with some other large universities, in using their resources to benefit college foodservice," said Rachel Warner, marketing manager of the National Association of College and University Food Services, an organization that supports foodservice professionals in higher education. "They also invite other members to campus to share that information."

Raising dining hall meals above the ordinary are such dishes as pan-seared wild salmon with tri-color salsa and mango coulis, flank steak with bordelaise sauce, and Taste of Home recipes submitted by UMass families, such as All-American Cheeseburger Soup.

The kitchens use sustainable seafood and many organic, fair trade, hormone- and antibiotic-free foods. More than 25 percent of total food purchases are from local sources.

Toong explained that he caught the fever for more healthful dining several years ago by attending The Culinary Institute of America's Worlds of Healthy Flavors conference. He returned to Amherst with a mission to eliminate trans fats from campus menus.

"It had been proven unhealthy, so I said let's get rid of all the



trans fats and use only trans-fat-free oils," Toong said.

Although switching to alterna-

**UMass Dining executive chef Willie Sng, dietitian Dianne Sutherland and executive director Ken Toong, pictured from left, have retooled the campus dining program to include healthful items such as wild salmon, above, and tapioca pearl pudding with palmsugar, below.**



tive frying oils was relatively easy, finding acceptable trans-fat-free ingredients for the campus bakery took more doing.

"Our staff worked closely with suppliers to test oils that are flavorful as well as good for you," Toong said.

Limiting salt usage in cooking presented a different challenge — changing ingrained habits.

"You know how cooks are," said executive chef Willie Sng. "Before even tasting the food, they used to throw in a whole bunch of salt."

Sng's crew has learned to build flavor with more fresh herbs and produce, and to use a lighter hand, with reduced-sodium products like soy sauce.

"It took us one whole semester to change habits," Sng said. "We make sure that we don't go back to the old way."

Many of the nutritional improvements have been made in a "stealth health" fashion, pointed out dietitian Dianne Sutherland.

"We have changed oils to be healthier, adding olive oil and canola oil because of their mono-unsaturated fats, as compared to soybean oil, which is more polyunsaturated," Sutherland said. "Students are not even aware we are doing this, but we have done it to make them healthier."

Even desserts get a healthy spin, such as the chocolate cake, chocolate cream pie and zucchini bread, which are vegan but not advertised as such.

"A lot of students eat them not because they are vegan, but because they taste so good," Sutherland said.

Students and parents apparently appreciate the changes. The total number of meal plans sold now exceeds 15,000 — nearly double the amount a decade ago — and the retention rate is 98 percent. The satisfaction rating is 8.65 out of 10.

"Eating at the dining center has become kind of a cool thing to do because the food is good and healthy," Toong said. "It makes us feel that we are doing the right things." ■

## UMASS DINING

**NAME:** Be Smart. Eat Smart. Live Smart. initiative

**LOCATION:** University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Mass.

**ENROLLMENT:** 27,000 students

**DESCRIPTION:** Broad-based initiative with 11 steps that help customers embrace a healthy lifestyle

**DATE OF ROLLOUT:** 2010

**DEVELOPERS:** Ken Toong, executive director of auxiliary enterprises; Willie Sng, executive chef; Dianne Sutherland, senior dietitian