chef's corner

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THE CHEFS AT SAGE OAK

At Sage Oak, mealtime is the highlight of the day. The boutique assisted living and memory care center is a unique concept. On Sage Oak's property you'll find five separate homes, each with a 16-bed capacity. Chefs in each house cook all three meals in an open kitchen for the residents to enjoy. It's pan-to-plate style eating delivered straight from the chefs' hands into the residents'. And it means the chefs can hear — in real time — what the residents' feedback is.

Sage Oak's chefs are trained and encouraged to develop their own skills and creativity. It's not the assembly line dining you'll find at other similar facilities.

"Our CEO, Loe Hornbuckle, doesn't believe in sacrificing quality or service for the bottom line. Which is rare in this industry," says regional executive chef Larry Atwater.

In an industry that typically focuses on food cost per resident, per day (with a typical budget of between $7 to $10), Hornbuckle's Sage Oak is an outlier.

"Food is an important part of being human," he says. "Food is socialization, medicine, joy. We set out to radically change dining, and we did. We trusted that higher food costs would happily be absorbed by our clients."

And, his gamble paid off. One of the chief complaints residents from other facilities share when touring Sage Oak's facility is poor food quality. The residents at Sage Oak? They have nothing to complain about.

"Seniors can't benefit from therapy without proper nutrition. Wounds won't heal properly. Many of our residents come to us malnourished. They simply won't eat the food at other places. Not to mention, good food draws them out of their rooms. Our residents have three standing opportunities per day for socialization."

The chefs at Sage Oak aren't solely focused on providing meals; they're intent on creating meaningful experiences. "I

love our mornings. The coffee and the conversations are the best. And, I love seeing our residents' faces light up when they taste a familiar dish that brings back memories," says Stephinie Cross, assistant executive director of nutrition

Executive chef Atwater has formal training from Le Cordon Bleu as well as a degree in restaurant management. He first cut his teeth at the Omni Hotel, where he spent time as the executive chef. He later transitioned to senior living after learning the niche could offer him a sense of purpose beyond just cooking great food — he could truly make a difference.

Nutrition director Cross has both nutrition and culinary management training, but she says her most valuable education came from her mother and grandmother, who taught her that cooking is an act of love.

"My love of cooking began in my grandmother's kitchen. The aroma of homemade meals and laughter hung in the air always. There was nothing better than a plate of my grandmother's homemade fried chicken, collard greens, cornbread and sweet tea. It's a taste of home and a reminder of where I come from.

"One of my most cherished moments at Sage Oak was when I made my mother's homemade soup. The residents told me it tasted like home. It's moments like that, that remind me why I do what I do," she says.

The chefs at Sage Oak believe in cooking in order to nourish both the body and the soul. They believe in using wholesome, fresh ingredients and in preparing meals intentionally. "Every dish should be made with love, care and respect for those who will enjoy it," says Cross.

Sage Oak has raised garden beds outside each of the homes where residents tend and cultivate fresh herbs. Atawater has plans to rent a local plot in a community garden where he can grow his own vegetables for the residents.

"I love to take my residents on a tour around the world, introducing new flavors and opening their palates to different cultures and regions," he says.

With summer approaching, the chefs are working on introducing seasonal ingredients to their menus and taking advantage of fresh produce. They're also working on organizing some outdoor barbecues.

The residents at Sage Oak enjoy meals like slow-roasted herb chicken with garlic mashed potatoes and roasted seasonal vegetables. Peach cobbler,

continued

served warm with a scoop of vanilla ice cream, is another resident favorite.

"It's my job to ensure we meet dietary requirements, yes, but having the freedom to create menus that balance nutrition with flavor is something I'm blessed to do," says Cross.

Beyond focusing on dietary requirements and enjoyability, the chefs must remember to keep the dishes easy to chew, easy to digest and nutrient dense.

For Atwater, it's also important that his kitchen is run efficiently. Mise en place, or everything in its place, is a non-negotiable he lives by. The method allows each chef he oversees to focus on the quality of food being prepared and fosters a smoother workflow.

Recently, one of his residents asked him what the smell coming out of the kitchen was — it was bread pudding. "I remember my mom used to make the best bread pudding in Louisiana; I'll have to get you that recipe," she told him. Atwater says it means something to him when one of his dishes sparks a resident's memory. "Those are my favorite meals — the ones that make them feel at home."

When asked about his death row meal, "I was waiting for this question," Atwater replied. "Red wine braised bone-in short rib, wild mushroom gravy, roasted garlic Yukon whipped potatoes, pan fried Brussel sprouts with apple smoked bacon. And to finish? Bourbon pecan pie." He was ready, indeed.

SAGE OAK'S WHY

"We had a resident come to us last year at the end of his life," Atwater said. "His family said it was the best he had eaten in a long time. They were so worried about him, they often stayed the night, and the chefs and I made sure his family always had a meal to eat, too. We gave them the same special attention we give all of our residents. Not long ago, I was out with my family for lunch and ran into his daughter. She came up to me with a smile and gave me a big hug. She thanked me for everything we did for her father. She said Sage Oak made the end-of-life transition as peaceful and comfortable as possible for him, and she still thinks about some of the meals she ate. That's why we do what we do."

In addition to the Lake Charles location, there are five locations of Sage Oak — four in Dallas, Texas, and one in Denton, Texas. Sage Oak Lake Charles opened in August 2021. For more info, visit sageoaklakecharles.com or call 337-426-8755.