



FOOD TO HEAL BY

By Shamrock Foods

You can look at the effectiveness of Executive Chef Richard Serna's work in terms of *before* and *after*.

Since taking charge of culinary operations at the Cottonwood Tucson behavioral health and drug rehabilitation center, Serna has transformed a ho-hum cafeteria that relied on frozen meals into a spa-style café worthy of acclaim. Today, patients are not only served the freshest meats, produce and grains in dishes made to order—they learn a pattern of eating that will benefit them for a lifetime.

“When people think of healthcare, they think of boring food. But if you're sick, why would you eat food that is deep-fried and full of preservatives? We're trying to put nutrients back in the body that have been deprived for so many years,” says Serna.

Food as medicine is both revolutionary and basic as can be—and something Serna is eager to see realized in more healthcare settings. The benefits are obvious. “When patients

come in Day 1, you can see how worn down they are,” says Serna. “Thirty days later, they are back to life.”

Serna's ever-positive approach is exactly what Cottonwood requires, and he's built a dining staff that reinforces that optimism. “Our patients are good people; they've just been sick for years. Now it's my job, and my staff's job, to come in and show them how to shop for and cook with fresh fruits and vegetables, making sure they have everything they need to heal.”

Healthy eating is based on healthy attitudes. “We always have to be in a good mood—always have to be on high alert and do whatever we can to make patients happy,” says Serna. “I hire people who are in this business to build a career, not just get a paycheck. That pays off in terms of effort and care.”

And it's not only the 45 patients on site that the dining programs serve; lunch numbers exceed 100 with the addition of family and facility staff. Serna and Sous Chef Thomas Mattimoe take pride that practically everything served at



Cottonwood is made in-house—from buttermilk ranch dressing and leek consommé to low-fat chocolate truffles.

Menus are built in a two-week rotation, changing every six months. Breakfast and lunch feature anything from omelet stations to sauté stations. “We might make pasta from scratch one meal and then sushi the next. Always changing and learning new techniques—it’s good not only for the patients, but my staff as well.”

The “station” style of service allows plenty of opportunity for interaction. The friendly greetings and expertise of staff members are just as important as the food. Staffers enjoy explaining, for example, how a simple stock and plenty of spices transforms quinoa, or how grilling asparagus or rutabaga adds complex flavor.

“Fresh herbs are the key to success here—I’m talking herbs galore.” Serna sources local and organic produce whenever possible, and is always finding ways to keep taste high and calories and “bad” fats low. Variety is truly king. “We’re all about produce here, and whole grains—I must use eight to ten grains on every menu.” These include less-mainstream options such as charcoal wheat or Thai purple sticky rice.

Many members of Serna’s team have worked with him since he was sous chef at Miraval Life in Balance Spa in Catalina, Arizona, and the Enchantment Resort in Sedona.

Serna also sees much value in his loyal relationship with Shamrock Foods.

“If I have any issues, Shamrock is here at my doorstep. They take care of me,” says Serna of district sales manager Mike Norzagaray and rep Cheryl Sparks. “Customer service is everything—top of the mountain—and Shamrock’s service is on par. I feel comfortable with them, because I know I’ll get good products.”

Serna values the mentoring relationships he’s experienced, and strives to deliver the same to his employees. “Being executive chef doesn’t mean that I know everything. I’m constantly learning so I can pass that on my employees.”

Along with education efforts in-house, which includes developing recipe cards that patients can take home, Serna mentors at the local high school. Up next? He’s looking to publish a Cottonwood cookbook.

“The key to being a successful chef is staying hungry—constantly learning about new cuisines and techniques,” says Serna. “Keep it healthy, keep it simple, and have fun.” Who wouldn’t improve under such a philosophy?

DUET OF BEET AND SPINACH ISRAELI COUSCOUS WITH 5 SPICE TURKEY MEDALLIONS AND LEEK CONSOMMÉ

Submitted by Richard Serna, Cottonwood Tucson

Yield: 6 servings

Ingredients:

- 1 cup rice wine vinegar
- 3 cups water
- 1 Tbsp. minced ginger, minced garlic, fresh fine herbs, Chinese 5 spice powder
- 1/2 cup brown sugar
- 1/2 cup soy sauce
- 1 boneless turkey breast
- 1 cup rough cut mire poix with bay leaf, pepper corn, and fresh thyme
- 1 medium beet
- 1 stalk celery
- 1 inch cinnamon stick
- 1 tsp. fresh ginger
- 2 medium yellow onion
- 2 cups spinach
- 6 cloves garlic
- 2 cups Israeli couscous
- 1 gallon good chicken stock, room temperature
- 1 lb. chicken
- 12 large eggs
- 3 cups mirepoix with tomatoes, bay leaf, peppercorn and fresh thyme
- 1 Tbsp. tomato paste
- 6 leeks

Method:

Turkey:

1. Mix first five ingredients to make marinade. Marinate turkey for at least an hour; truss turkey breast and bake on a bed of mirepoix for about 90 minutes at 300°F convection. Dust the top with more 5 spice, fresh fine herbs, salt and pepper.



Richard Serna credits his mentorship with well-known chef Cary Neff at Miraval Life in Balance Spa in Catalina, Arizona, as sparking his interest in spa cuisine. As executive chef of Cottonwood Tucson rehabilitation center, Serna takes pride in providing a world of flavor possibilities with fresh, wholesome ingredients. He continually finds opportunities to keep learning and mentoring, with success measurable in patient health and staff accomplishments. In this recipe, Serna works his magic with the season's best beets, luscious leeks and Israeli couscous.

Duet of Couscous:

2. Begin by making two stocks to flavor the couscous: Sauté onions, garlic, leeks, celery and spinach in one saucepan and onions, garlic, beets, ginger and a small cinnamon stick in another. Sweat everything to bring out the natural flavors, but don't let them get dark to keep the colors bright. Add water and simmer until the hard vegetables are soft.
3. Purée and strain both stocks, adding fresh spinach to the spinach stock for color. Chill immediately to retain the brightness of the colors. Once chilled, use stocks to replace water while making.
4. Layer the colors on top of each other in a silo or ramekin before service.

The benefit of these stocks is not only intense flavor and color, but also all the nutrients packed into spinach and beets. You can substitute any vegetable and use this technique with other starches like rice or quinoa.

Leek Consommé:

5. Make consommé as you normally would, adding the whites from the leeks to the raft. Rough chop all the veggies and proteins and blitx them in the Robot Coupe. It is essential in a consommé to get the right balance of proteins and acids to clarify the stock. Add the raft to the stock, and let it come up stirring twice before punching a hole in the raft and letting the stock clarify.
6. Pull the consommé out of the pot ladle by ladle and strain through cheesecloth. This consommé should be slightly sweet with the earthiness of the leek.

To plate:

7. In a shallow bowl, push the duet of couscous through the silo in the middle of the bowl and fan the turkey medallions on top. Pour enough consommé over the turkey to serve as jus for the turkey and couscous. As always, garnish with baby vegetables, fresh fine herbs and pepper curls or a microgreen salad.