

Today's Menu: Variety, Customer Service and Catering

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Managing a fresh food, made-to-order dining café for more than 8,000 customers has helped Matthew James gain a new appreciation for "customer service." From the cinnamon French toast for breakfast to the sushi for lunch, James said that his mission is to ensure that everyone has a great dining experience, which can be a very tall order.

It was almost a year ago when James took over the reigns of resident district manager for Eurest Dining Services, a subsidiary of Compass Group North America and the food service contractor for Census Bureau headquarters. Since, the 30-year veteran of the restaurant and hospitality business said he has been focusing on improving the overall dining experience for employees and visitors on the Suitland Federal Center campus.

"My goals for this operation are to bring this [café] to the next level by addressing what our customers are telling us," James said. "We want to make sure that we are hearing what our customers are saying."

The Washington campuses of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), the Department of the Interior (DOI) and the General Services Administration (GSA) recently launched WellnessWorks, a pilot program that aims to support federal employees in their pursuit of a healthier, more balanced lifestyle while controlling health care costs and saving taxpayer dollars.

The program inspired James to develop a new "destination station" by the grill, which will feature 600 calorie or less entrée items. In addition, he is in the planning stages of bringing in Au Bon Pain, a French bakery that specializes in authentic artisan breads, pastries, sandwiches, soups, salads and entrées.

There's also the Austin Grill, the new Tex-Mex shop on campus that sells everything from hand rolled enchiladas to charbroiled chicken wings. James said that the Grill is getting very positive feedback. The previous shop worked, said James, but it was more about variety.

"We also offer in-house catering services for birthdays, meetings, holiday parties or any other occasions," James said. "The great thing about our in-house catering service is that we will match or beat any outside quote, and we are flexible and convenient."

James, who always had a passion for food, has come a long way from the high-school work program that peaked his interest in culinary arts.

"I started by washing pots," James said. "But I moved my way up through the industry by picking the brains of a lot of different chefs."

After earning his associate degree in business from Montgomery College in Rockville, Md., he moved his way up from an executive chef, food service director, general manager and chef manager for various hotels, restaurants and private dining clubs.

"About 10 years ago, I decided that I needed to get into contract food service," he said. "It's Monday through Friday work, and I wanted to start a family."

James said that the timing was perfect. Today, he enjoys cooking crab cakes for his wife of 11 years and his two daughters, ages 7 and 19 months.



Photo by Robert Crockett



Photo by Heather Schmaedeke

Department of Commerce Gold and Silver Medal Award winners enjoy the crab cakes, carved turkey and more from the catering services of Matt James' team Oct. 19.

Matt James, a 30-year veteran of the restaurant and hospitality business, oversees dining services for Census Bureau headquarters.