

Lodi Memorial Hospital opens cafe

By Maggie Creamer/News-Sentinel Staff Writer | Posted: Friday, July 20, 2012 12:00 am

With two large metal spatulas, Josh McCulloch flips vegetables as the rotating grill in front of him slowly spins. He waits for it to come back around before scooping the vegetable medley and two pieces of teriyaki chicken kabobs into a blue bowl.

Tess Martin smells the Mongolian grill dish in front of her and is especially excited about the lemongrass and bok choy.

"This looks great. I'm very excited, and it's healthy," she said.

This might sound like Lodi's newest trendy restaurant, but it's actually the Vineyard Cafe — the new kitchen and dining room for Lodi Memorial Hospital.

The cafe will open Monday for patients, visitors, hospital employees and the staff from doctor's offices in the nearby area. It will be open from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily. On Thursday, there was a preview for department directors and staff at the hospital.

The goal is to make eating an experience, as a way to give people a break from the often high-stress environment of the hospital, kitchen supervisor Mike Atwater said.

"If you come here, we don't call it a cafeteria. That's a dirty word. We call it a cafe," he said.

As people weave through the different food stations, they can customize their meal. Everything is grilled or made to order. People can choose from about 20 different vegetables, fruits and toppings at the Mongolian grill, six sauces and then rice or noodles. The pasta area offers people choices between fettucini, penne and cheese tortellini and several sauces.

The hospital started renovations on the kitchen and dining room in October 2011. Before that, the hospital still had its original kitchen from 1952. The entire project cost \$15 million.

"Everything is focused on the idea of fresh and healthy," hospital spokeswoman Carol Farron said.

For example, the Mongolian grill cooks all the food in sesame oil, the sauces are low in calories, the salad bar is filled with healthy vegetables and the cafe is likely one of the few places in town that serves tofu, said Becky Olvera, nutrition and food services director.

Healthy options are important because people who work in high-stress environments tend to overeat while grabbing a meal quickly and also they eat what's nearby, even if it's an unhealthy choice, Farron said.

"Here, whatever is close and handy when you come up for air is healthy," she said.

In the morning, the cafe will serve breakfast, including breakfast quesadillas, pancakes, hash browns and a variety of egg dishes. Lunch and dinner features chicken tenders, hamburger, garden or black bean burgers, fried asparagus, deli sandwiches, wood-fired pizza and paninis.

Many of the offerings have been designed by local chefs, like the mushroom and cheese panini or the shrimp pizza with feta, mushrooms and olives. Atwater created several of the paninis, and said it was an exciting experience to design the menu.

"There were no limitations. You couldn't think of everything in one sitting," he said.

In the hallway outside the cafeteria, there also will be a small kiosk with a variety of coffee drinks and pre-made lunches for people to take on-the-go. It will be open from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday through Friday and 6 a.m. to 2 p.m. on the weekends.

The dining room includes 168 seats, including booths and a counter where people can sit on stools.

Lodi Memorial President and CEO Joe Harrington tried the gelato on Thursday, and said the new cafeteria is a big improvement from the temporary space hospital workers were eating in previously.

"We think it's going to be a huge hit. We already know it's a huge hit for us," he said.

Pharmacy director Sandy Atwater, whose son Mike manages the kitchen, said she is excited there are fresh and healthy options.

"It's very important to me because I don't have time to go anywhere, so I like to have variety here at work," she said.

When people walk in, Mike Atwater hopes the setting relaxes them.

"You wouldn't really think you were in a hospital when you see everyone eating," he said.

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