Bon appetit, Gusties!
It’s 10:30 a.m. and Paul Jacobson is overlooking a grill where pork chops the size of fat pocket dictionaries are gently sizzling. They are starting to emit that maddening scent that makes even the most focused person suddenly start thinking about applesauce. A veteran chef of country clubs, hotels, and restaurants, Jacobson knows the right timing and touch these chops need in order to provide a tender, sublime moment for the lucky diners—all 400 of them.

The chops are placed on a tray, which is then taken into a nearby walk-in cooler and stacked along with dozens of others. These chops will be served later here at Gustavus Adolphus College for the Minnesota State High School All-Star Football banquet.

It’s a banquet job—one of several components to the College’s Dining Service that makes it integral to the school’s energy and identity. Just as students here are encouraged to embrace diversity, be fair, and do the right thing,
so too are the people behind these pork chops.

One of the most progressive, accommodating, and delectable food services—public or private—in southern Minnesota, Gustavus Adolphus College has in recent years become a model example of how meals at a college can transcend from three squares to flexible choices that do not favor the linebacker’s appetite over the ballerina’s.

The main idea at the Gustavus Adolphus College Dining Service is students first. But plenty of others, from banquet guests to lunchtime residents of St. Peter, are welcome to enjoy the delicious fallout from that idea.

The Dining Service underwent a major shift in the past several years. What was once a traditional college meal service—assembly-line service combined with an all-you-can-eat policy for the duration of the meal—was replaced by the equivalent of a fairly extravagant food court, dubbed the Market Place. Pizza, pasta, Thai food, burritos, vegetarian stir-fry, salads . . . a countless variety of foods both domestic and ethnic are cooked on-the-spot fresh at stations throughout the Market Place. Tray in hand, students (or, again, anyone) can browse from station to station, picking up what they want. Sausage pizza with two egg rolls and a side of hot and spicy Thai chicken? Ring it up—and in a system in which students pay for each item, the waste factor is dropped significantly.

This is a significant departure from the days when the meal policies at Gustavus, like other universities and colleges, were set up to best benefit students who ate a lot. It was also a system that fostered a lot of wasted food. But today, the food waste-processing machinery at Gustavus runs on 10 to 15 percent of what it did before the switch.

“Some were upset at the loss of all-you-can-eat,” says Gustavus Dining Services Director Steve Kjellgren ’86. “But lots of colleges came and took a look at what we do because somewhere along the line they’d like to catch up.”

Shortly after returning to Gustavus in 1994, Kjellgren wrote a letter to the College’s Board of Trustees detailing what he envisioned as a unique, fair, and popular food service for the College, based on interaction with students. Today, much of what he proposed is in place at Gustavus, particularly the emphasis on accommodating students’ various schedules.

“I want kids to use it like they’re telling me they want to use it,” Kjellgren says. “And the design consultants did a fantastic job. We wanted it to be bright and colorful. The design consultants designed around ideas we had.”

The 1998 tornadoes forced the issue, and with the reconstruction of buildings it
seemed a good time to make the changes. “At that point we were in a building that was 30 years old in a system 30 years old. It looked like a good point to change,” Kjellgren says. “The good news is we already had a plan in mind.”

The new system is, admittedly, less financially predictable than the traditional route, Kjellgren says. “That’s why colleges don’t want to do it. It was easier the old way: you take X number of students, multiply that by three meals a day.”

But putting quality of food, and the students’ quality of life, so high on the priority list is among the reasons Executive Chef Paul “Jake” Jacobson enjoys his job more than others in his experienced past. He also acknowledges a “wonderful” group of co-workers in the Dining Service. “Their skills and attitude,” Jacobson says, “are second to none.”

Jacobson is the kind of guy—with the kind of attitude—any restaurant owner would want in their kitchen. Whether it’s feeding two by candlelight or a college lunchtime rush, Jacobson has done both. The key figure behind keeping the food and ideas fresh in Gustavus dining, “Jake” has been the head chef here for 10 years, bringing with him experiences from colleges and country clubs since the 1970s. An upbeat guy with a small roar of a voice, he has children attending Gustavus and has found himself; he claims, in the perfect job.

“I would really like this to be the last job I ever have,” he says.

In addition to country clubs and hotels (including Best Western and 101 Main in Mankato) he has had institutional cooking experience at both St. Cloud State University and Minnesota State University in Mankato. The advantage Gustavus has over the state university system is its own food service—versus that of management companies that work within MSU and St. Cloud. Gustavus is interested in more than the bottom line, Jacobson says. And that allows him to put as much touch and care into the dishes here as at a country club, he adds.

### The Pedagogy of the Cafeteria

*by Lisa Heldke ’82*

“How well one may philosophize when preparing dinner. . . . If Aristotle had been a cook, he would have written much more. . . .”

The author of this pearl of kitchen wisdom was Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a 17th-century Mexican nun renowned for her scholarship and poetry. She made the observation while defending herself against the charge that the subjects she studied were inappropriate to her sex and calling. Her response pointed out that she only studied what was readily available to any woman. Was it her fault that Aristotle didn’t realize the profundities to be discovered in the kitchen?

Aristotle isn’t the only philosopher who neglected the philosophy of the kitchen; indeed, western philosophers have practically made a career out of ignoring humans’ relations to food. Such centuries-long disdain for the affairs of the stomach is a bit surprising, when you consider that philosophy has historically concerned itself with fundamental questions of meaning and value in human lives. What could be more fundamentally meaningful and valuable to humans than food? Humans define ourselves, in no small measure, by what we eat, when, where, and with whom, as well as by how we grow food and prepare it. Food is—or could be—central to our aesthetic, moral, spiritual, cultural, and political thought. If Socrates had spent more time in the kitchen, he’d probably be quoted today as having said, “The unexamined meal is not worth eating.”

As a philosopher, I’ve spent the better part of my career working to end philosophers’ silence on the subject of food. I’ve written and edited books and articles developing a philosophy of food1; I’ve taught courses on food and philosophy; and I’ve co-founded a society devoted to the philosophical study of food. My work, in turn, is part of a much larger food studies movement, an emerging “interdiscipline” that brings together humanists and natural scientists, artists and social scientists, who study an amazingly broad, diverse, and important set of questions about humans and food.

Working as a philosopher of food at Gustavus, I’ve been tinkering with a theory—a theory I hope periodically in conversations with Dining Service director Steve Kjellgren. My theory is this: just as food is a locus of meaning and value in human lives, so too ought the food service in a liberal arts college lie at its center—geographically, socially, and academically.

At Gustavus, we’ve figured out the geographic and social angles. We know, for instance, that many students choose this institution in part because of the quality of our food service; that “the caf” is a campus hub, where members of the community gather to socialize, to hold meetings, to see and be seen over a plate of Bosco sticks; and that food plays an important role—symbolic, cultural—in virtually every event on campus (cookies after lectures, the annual Kwanzaa banquet, the St. Lucia brunch, the end-of-year cookouts).

But we on the academic side of things have work to do if we are to realize the academic, intellectual potential that lies waiting for us, right there in the midst of Hello Wok and the line for Bosco sticks. Students’ experiences of food can serve as a starting point for the kinds of questions that lie at the very heart of the liberal arts enterprise, and the kinds of commitments that lie at the center of the Gustavus mission statement. Sor Juana would be proud.

Lisa Heldke ’82 returned to her alma mater in 1988 to teach in the Department of Philosophy. Now a professor of philosophy, she teaches courses ranging from epistemology to feminist philosophy to food ethics, and maintains a professional interest in food and culture that has led her to write a book titled *Exotic Appetites: Ruminations of a Food Adventurer and co-edit one titled Cooking, Eating, Thinking.*

---

“Here, the college wants the food to be the very best it can be,” Jacobson says. “Here we try to break even, not see how much money we can make.”

And with fresh ingredients shipped in daily, dozens of cooks creating homemade breads, soups, sauces, and entrees each day, the difference in quality between Gustavus and other large operations is huge, he notes. “It’s not even close. It’s like working at the Hyatt versus a diner,” Jacobson says. “Our philosophy is always the same—we don’t want to give second best when the best is available.”

The most difficult aspect of his job is the part requiring a clairvoyant: making the right amount of fresh food so that a minimal amount, if any, is wasted. Beyond that, he has a good knack for predicting what’s going to be popular in the ever-fickle state of student tastes.

Jacobson constantly keeps an eye out for what’s new and brings it into the Market Place grill. For instance, a bit over a year ago he saw lines winding out the door of the Chipotle restaurant—which specializes in big, fresh burritos—in Mankato near the MSU campus. That resulted in the Market Place’s popular burrito stand, Hola Cucina!, serving fresh Mexican food each day.

“It’s keeping an eye on trends that are out there in the marketplace,” Jacobson says, “and giving students what they want before they ask for it.”

Another new station will be added this fall with barbecue fare: a different specialty entrée each day, chicken, brisket, ribs, beef—inspired by Famous Dave’s.

Come on in
Good food is more than a way to make an hour or two go by pleasantly—it’s also an effective recruitment tool. Perhaps it’s not the first item on a prospective scholar’s list of questions, but somewhere near “Will we spend sufficient time on the Existentialists?” the question of “How’s the food?” can’t be far behind. And as in most other areas, Gustavus doesn’t like to be outdone.

Kjellgren says the College wants not only to provide nutritious, savory food for the students, but also to play a good role in the quality of their lives. For a while, Gustavus is going to be their world, with

---

From the Gustavus kitchen

Every soup, sauce, and bakery item is homemade at Gustavus. Here are two recipes used frequently. The flat bread is a recipe that comes from Executive Chef Paul Jacobson’s Swedish grandmother, Ada. Jacobson jazzed it up a bit with the herbs and tomatoes. The sun-dried cherry chutney, he says, is delicious on pork or wild game.

Herb-Seasoned Flat Bread

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ingredient</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 1/2 cups buttermilk</td>
<td>3 1/2 cups flour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2 cup heavy whipping cream</td>
<td>2 tsp sun-dried tomatoes (diced)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2 cup butter</td>
<td>1/4 tsp chili powder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/4 tsp salt</td>
<td>1/2 tsp ground cumin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2 tsp baking soda</td>
<td>1/4 tsp cayenne pepper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2 cup sugar</td>
<td>1/2 tsp minced garlic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Melt butter and stir in sugar. Mix flour, salt, and soda in mixing bowl, then add cream, buttermilk and butter. Add tomatoes and seasonings and mix to form dough.

Place on floured counter top and make into 1/2 cup balls. Roll out like pie dough (but thinner) to fit on cookie sheet. Spray cookie sheet with no-stick spray and bake flatbread sprinkled with onion salt 8 to 10 minutes or until lightly browned. When cool, break into pieces and serve.

Sun-Dried Cherry Chutney

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ingredient</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 T butter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2 cup minced red onion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 T minced jalapeno (canned or fresh)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 cup sun-dried cherries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/4 cup kirschwasser (optional)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 T brown sugar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 cup fruit juice such as apple, orange or cherry (use your favorite)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2 cup mango chutney</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Melt butter and add onion and jalapeno. Cook on medium heat until onions start to turn golden brown. If adding kirschwasser (cherry liquor), add carefully to pan off of burner. Return to burner and simmer one minute. Add sugar and cherries and simmer one minute. Add fruit juice and simmer five minutes. Add chutney and remove from heat. Serve over pork or any wild game.

... serving the crowd...
days or weeks moving on without step-
ing—or eating—off campus. And while their intellectual world expands, they should have a food selection that keeps up with that pace.

“With all the other pressures going on in the lives of our students,” Kjellgren says, “we don’t want what they had for dinner to be the worst part of their day. In fact, maybe it should be the best part of their day.”

Social causes

The food service aspect of a college can be ground zero for raising consciousness toward socially responsible causes, from corporate farming to waste. To the latter, one student group several years ago actually ate from discarded plates to demonstrate the amount of food wasted by students.

The College itself makes sure that the food it provides its students comes from local sources whenever possible, Kjellgren says—apple orchards in nearby Jordan, for instance, or greens from St. Peter. “A personal interest of my own is, what is the source of the food? What social implications does it bring with it? What ecologies did it come from? What choices can I make as a consumer?”

The Dining Service has to find balances between the progressive desires of some and the traditional desires of others. “Some students just want their chicken strips and French fries—they really don’t care where they came from,” Kjellgren says.

“Even though there’s not a majority of students who are vegetarian or vegan, those who are are passionate,” Kjellgren says, noting the number of vegetarian/vegan options at the Market Place. They aren’t fanatical or insisting on obscure vegetarian or vegan dishes, he explains. “They just want normal food that doesn’t have meat or cheese or eggs in it.”

Open since the fall of 1999, the Market Place and adjacent Evelyn Young Dining Room, by design, both encourage social interaction—another goal of the Dining Service. The hope is that the new structure will generate a similar loyalty and legacy and high standard of quality that marked the tenure of former Food Services director Evelyn Young ’33. The evolution of student expectations away from the single-line, traditional food service is reflected in the new structure, which also allows the Market Place to be packed with hundreds of students and still be serving them quickly.

Beyond the Evelyn Young Dining Room, there are more intimate dining rooms available for students, faculty, and guests. The Gustavus buffet, for instance, is offered each day and is set up in a smaller room, an ideal place to take a guest of honor or have a more intimate student-teacher chat. Here, staff members in white blouses and black aprons tend to the simmering soups, entrees, and desserts while diners carry on in a slightly more elegant format.

The various faces of Gustavus’ Dining Service include catering for weddings, banquets, visiting dignitaries, and such noted events as Christmas in Christ Chapel. Whenever we can, we try to complement the other social events on campus,” Kjellgren says.

The Gustavus Dining Service enters this fall with 60 full-time employees, 250 college employees, and 30 high school students.

“We’ve got a wealth of ideas in our Dining Service staff,” Kjellgren says. “They’re an invaluable resource to have.”

Joe Tougas is the editor of Static magazine and teaches in the mass communications department at Minnesota State University, Mankato. He is a former staff writer for The Free Press and lives in North Mankato.