

Hospital Food Gets Yummy

National University Hospital's Fish Curry and Cabbage Moong Dal.



Mount Alvernia Hospital's Double Boiled Chicken, Mushroom and Red Date Soup.



Mount Elizabeth Novena Hospital's Wok-fried Lobster.



Tan Tock Seng Hospital's senior production chef Leo Yui Thim (left) with Poached Hainanese Chicken served with mixed brown rice. PHOTOS: HEDY KHOO, KARYN LOW, MOUNT ALVERNIA HOSPITAL

Delish delights for patients

Restaurant-worthy food served in hospitals is part of patients' recovery process



Hedy Khoo
STFood Online Editor

When Ms Karyn Low was admitted to Mount Elizabeth Novena Hospital for spinal injuries in April, the last thing she expected was to dine on lobster for dinner.

The 49-year-old, who is head of marketing communications at a finance company, says: "I was in pain and worried about my condition. The lobster dinner cheered me up completely and I did not feel

like a patient. I could tell less salt was used, but the dish was still tasty."

She enjoyed the food so much that she was disappointed when she was discharged early the next day and did not get to eat her lunch order of slow-cooked Aged Black Angus Beef Short Rib.

Breaking the stereotype of hospital food being bland and boring, hospitals are serving their patients a tantalising range of dishes which are both enjoyable and healthy.

They span different cuisines and include options such as freshly made chappati with curry chicken at Tan Tock Seng Hospital and Seven-hour Braised Lamb Shank Biryani, a signature dish at Glenaeles Hospital.

Other dishes that might pique a patient's interest are the frequently ordered Ayam Masak Merah (spicy chicken) at Changi General Hospital and Seafood Penang Kway Teow at Raffles Hospital.

The Wok-fried Lobster With Ginger And Spring Onion which Ms Low had during her stay at Mount Elizabeth Novena Hospital is the hospital's star dish.

While the dishes look effortless on the plate, a lot of planning goes

on behind the scenes.

In hospitals, food is regarded as nutritional therapy that is part of the patients' recovery process, so menus are carefully put together by dietitians and chefs, who consider the ingredients and cooking methods, and develop recipes which meet the dietary requirements of patients.

Other factors considered include dietary restrictions, allergies, gender, age, physical activity, variety and presentation to stimulate appetites.

Menus can take up to a year of planning before implementation.

There are two broad categories of diets - regular diets where patients have no dietary restrictions and therapeutic diets for patients with dietary restrictions such as those with diabetes.

But even for patients on regular diets with no dietary restrictions, food is prepared with less sodium and oil using healthier cooking methods.

Group executive chef and senior food, nutrition and beverage manager for Parkway Pantai's hospitals in Singapore Catan Tan, 52, says

Hospitals say emphasis is on fresh ingredients while avoiding the use of artificial flavouring and



Changi General Hospital's executive chef Bryan Tan (above left) with Ayam Masak Merah (spicy chicken) and senior cook Johnson Neo (right) with Mushroom Chicken Baguette.

Raffles Hospital's popular items (left) include Roasted Honey Spring Chicken, Seafood Penang Kway Teow and Claypot Chicken Stew.

steamed then stir-fried, so that less oil is used in the cooking process. Hospitals say emphasis is on fresh ingredients while avoiding the use of artificial flavouring and

colouring. To add visual appeal to the food, care is given to the selection of crockery and natural colours of food like fruit and vegetables are used to brighten up a dish.

Chefs also turn to herbs and spices for flavour.

Ms Natalie Goh, 47, chief dietitian for Parkway Pantai's hospitals in Singapore, says: "We want to give the patients a variety of choices.

When they feel happy, they eat better. Emotions do play a part in the patient's recovery."

Ms Sarah Sinaram, 40, head of nutrition and dietetic services at Mount Alvernia Hospital, agrees. "Food and nutrition for a patient is important as it is part of the holistic healing that our hospital advocates. It can decrease length of stay, reduce reliance on medication and improve clinical outcomes for the patients."

Director of Changi General Hospital's department of food services Magdalin Cheong, who has been a clinical dietitian for more than 25 years, observes that "expectations of patients are different now" and hospital food has evolved from being purely functional to also being aesthetically pleasing.

She says: "These days, hospital food is of hotel standard, presented in an appetising way to meet the nutritional needs of patients and aid their recovery."

Even for patients who have difficulty swallowing and are on texture-modified diets, effort is made to cook flavourful food that is then minced, chopped or blended.

It is not uncommon for hospitals to hire chefs with hotel and restaurant experience.

At Changi General Hospital, which has a food service team of more than 70 people, many of its chefs have such experience.

The hospital also sends its chefs for further culinary training at At-Sunrice Global Chef Academy.

Tan Tock Seng Hospital's senior production chef Leo Yui Thim, 54, was a hotel chef before he joined the hospital in 2010.

He says: "In a restaurant, people are there to enjoy themselves, but in a hospital, we are cooking for people who are troubled by their medical conditions."

Chef Leo recalls an incident last year when he was told a patient wanted to see him.

Expecting to receive negative feedback about the food, he was surprised when the elderly patient, who was on a texture-modified diet, thanked him for making her meals tasty.

The patient's daughter told him that her mother, who did not have much of an appetite at home, enjoyed her meals in the hospital.

The daughter asked him to share his recipes so that she could cook the dishes for her mother at home. He gladly did so.

Chef Leo says with emotion: "Being able to play a role in a patient's recovery process gives meaning to my job."

Hunger Management

Magic of dill

Fish served with the aromatic herb brightened my hospital stay



Tan Hsueh Yun
Food Editor

Laugh if you want - I feel like doing it myself - but this week's recipe is inspired by hospital food.

I recently had surgery, followed by a hospital stay. That I am back, alive, kicking and cooking, should tell you I am on the mend. The surgery was not life-saving or sudden. It had been planned. A friend of mine describes it well, calling the work "repairs".

But I am in terrible despair before the surgery. Two days before, I fall into a deep, horrible funk I cannot shake off. Work saves me from going over the edge, but I am in a bad head space heading to the hospital.

In the operating theatre, the young anaesthetist says: "Think happy thoughts while we put you under."

My mind goes blank. Does she see the panic in my eyes?

She follows up with: "You have a happy place, right?"

Only then do images flood my brain. My happy place is Sushi Savada, a six-seat sushi-ya in Tokyo. Images come at me thick and fast - Savada's bar holding a rack filled with hot coals over tuna to sear it. Him urging me to pile on ever more wasabi on said tuna. A ridiculous amount. The tight nod when I take a bite the first time and realise that the oil in the fish has neutralised the heat from the Japanese horseshrimp, making it taste almost sweet.

Everything goes blank.

When I wake up, I am in a High Dependency room and various doctors and nurses stop by to check on pain, medication and vitals. At some point, someone shows me a menu so I can figure out what to eat the next day. I tell her I'll have two soft-boiled eggs for breakfast, no bread or oats.

The next day, the tray arrives and a nurse helps me crack the eggs into a bowl. Instead of yielding and spilling soft whites and yolk, that first egg bounces back in her hand. It turns out the eggs have been hard-boiled. And boiled so hard there is a grey ring around the yolk.

I figure the kitchen has gotten the order wrong. I cannot finish even one egg and am grateful for the soft, cottony wholemeal bread and the oats.

A staffer is going around the room, saying she is from quality assurance or some such department and is looking for feedback.

I ask her about the eggs.

"Oh," she says breezily, "We've stopped serving them. Patients don't like them and there's this bird flu situation. I don't dare eat them myself."

I couldn't care less what she dares or does not dare to eat. I just want my eggs done the way I want them done.

"Do you have any feedback?" "Serve soft-boiled eggs."

"I'll ask them to show you the menu so you can pick something else for tomorrow."

It would have been all too easy to take up offers from friends to bring food. My entire stay could have been a never-ending feast. My mother would cook my favourites. We says he'd bring me anything and I would have asked for a bucket of his prawn paste frog legs. G wants to come by with double-boiled soup to help me with my recovery.

I tell him and another friend, A, about the egg situation. Both are appalled. A immediately wants to bring food. She makes a terrific bone broth and I always feel stronger after a bowl.



BAKED SALMON WITH DILL

INGREDIENTS

- 600 to 700g salmon
- 1/2 tsp salt
- 1/4 tsp freshly ground white or black pepper
- 1 Tbs cooking oil, divided
- 30g fresh dill, divided
- 2 Tbs Dijon mustard
- 2 slices white sandwich bread, preferably slightly stale, crusts off, about 60g
- 1 Tbs honey

METHOD

1. Preheat the oven to 180 deg C. Line a baking tray with foil or baking paper; set aside.
2. Rinse the fish under running water and pat very dry with paper towels. Lay it on a chopping board and pull out the pin bones, located on the thicker side of the fish, with tweezers or clean fingers. Rub the salt and pepper on both sides of the fish. Brush half the oil on the baking paper or foil-lined tray. Rub the rest of the oil on the skin side of the fish. Place the fish on the tray, skin side down.
3. Separate the dill fronds from the stems and place the fronds in a small bowl.
4. Tear the bread into rough pieces and place in a food processor together with half the dill. Pulse - turn the machine on and off in rapid succession - until the bread is turned into coarse crumbs and is mixed in with the dill. Pour into a bowl; set aside (right).

5. Mix the mustard and honey in a small bowl. Chop most of the remaining dill, reserving a few fronds for garnishing. Mix the chopped herb with the mustard and honey.
6. Spread the honey-mustard mixture onto the fish. Spoon the bread crumbs over, pressing down lightly with the back of a teaspoon to make sure they adhere.
7. Bake for 12 minutes in the centre of the oven. The centre of the fish will be raw. If you want it more cooked, or your fish is thicker than 1cm, bake another three to five minutes but no more or the fish will overcook. Turn the broiler function of the oven on to brown the bread crumbs. Watch the fish like a hawk - it should take no more than two to three minutes for the bread to turn golden brown.
8. Remove from the oven. Divide the fish into four portions and use a thin spatula to transfer the pieces onto four dinner plates. Serve immediately, with a salad or other side dishes.

Serves four



Baked salmon with a dill-and-breadcrumb topping will whet appetites. ST PHOTOS: ZHANG XUAN

But I want to stick to the bland hospital diet to reset my palate, which is almost always over-stimulated. Eating healthily for a few days isn't going to kill me. It is, in fact, just what I need.

Then those eggs reappear the next day, together with the bread and oats, as if to mock me. Evidently, the smoke signals did not reach the kitchen. If I had the strength, I would have hurled the tray at the wall.

Yes, still in that funk. I know I have to figure a way out of it or derail the healing process. You can read any number of studies that tell you a positive attitude is important for this sort of thing. I have plenty of attitude, just not the positive kind.

While reading after dinner the second night post-op, I have one of those rare things - a moment of clarity.

I take time to process it and, by the time I am done, the fog lifts. It is temporary, I find out later. But for a while, being able to appreciate light is everything.

Breakfast the next morning is a laughably small omelette on a comically large white plate. There are sliced canned mushrooms inside. I take a bite. It isn't bad. It isn't great, but it beats boiled-to-death eggs.

At lunch time, the nurse who brings the tray smiles and says: "It smells delicious."

Yes, I usually order whatever fish

dish is on the menu and this is a fillet of white fish, baked and topped with a not-too-decadent creamy dill sauce. The aromatic dried herb makes me hungry. I eat all the fish and the two potato patties served alongside.

What magic power does dill have? I think of it now as a happy herb - fresh and perfumey. I decide to create a dish around it and this week's recipe is baked salmon with a dill-and-breadcrumb topping.

The fish and herb are a natural match and I love the kick that mustard brings to the party. I use fresh breadcrumbs made, ironically, from stale white bread. I figure you probably have bread at home and two slices is less of a commitment than a whole packet of panko. The other advantage is that bread crumbs toast up beautifully in the oven, giving crunch to the finished dish.

Dill, lots of fresh dill, is a must. The rest of my stay is much brighter, due in large part to the brain reset and the nurses.

I chat with them when they have time. H's sunny personality makes it hard to be surly, especially when she gets me to sniff the berry-scented multi-vitamins I am given. One night, K asks what I do for a living and our conversation steers towards food. She tells me the hospital's chapari are legit and they are. I mop up lentil curry and yogurt with them. The spinach and tomato con-

coction served alongside is meh.

From C, D and K, I learn there is an art to dressing wounds. Their skill and patience, the pride they take in their work, are inspiring. S, who gives me sponge baths, makes me laugh. I would like half her sass.

L and I are fighting a battle few other people understand and it is good to trade stories with a fellow warrior.

The senior nurses are lovely too. Sister Y, a ball of energy, makes me want to get up and about, to shuffle around the ward instead of lying down all day. On a quiet Sunday, when I know the place would be less crowded, I want to go get coffee from the Starbucks downstairs on my own. Sister L firmly but kindly says no. At tea time, I get a cup of java, instead of tea or Milo, and two almond cookies. I enjoy every sip.

Their job is so very tough. But they do it with grace, verve, kindness and humour. Almost stealthily, they lift my spirits - by remarking on how good lunch smells; by steering me in the direction of flavour instead of always chasing fish; by remembering that one patient, out of too many they have to care for, is craving a cup of coffee.

Nurses are proof that superheroes live among us.

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