

LISTENING AND ENGAGEMENT CRITICAL WITH RESIDENTS

March 17, 2023 | Culinary, Resident Experience, Staff Experience

Senior Dining Association



*Sheila Fioretti, CDM CFPP, Dining Services Specialist,
Watercrest Senior Living Group*

“Anything that we can do to enhance the lives of our seniors I think that is so vital, and that is our goal, the most important thing we all work toward every single day,” said Sheila Fioretti, CDM CFPP, who recently transitioned into a newly created corporate role as Dining Services Specialist at Watercrest Senior Living Group.

“We work to not only meet our residents’ needs but make their experiences better by ‘creating meaningful, memorable, and unique experiences’ of their lives every day,” in the words of Regional Director of Sales Education Mike Marlow, who she quotes often with her teams.

“When everybody has that same goal, and there’s a very clear picture of this, you feel very empowered to be able to do that on a daily basis, still do what’s right for the company, and what’s right for everybody. That’s always going to be a win.”

With a Culinary Arts degree from Le Cordon Bleu School of Culinary Arts, Sheila has more than 30 years of experience in the hospitality and dining industry. Most recently, she was Executive Chef at Watercrest Sarasota, the largest of the Watercrest campuses, overseeing all aspects of culinary management for independent living, assisted living and memory care dining.

While her culinary career has spanned acute care hospitals, long term rehabilitation units, high-end restaurants and a catering business of her own, she has spent the majority of her time in senior living communities.

“I’ve been doing this all my life, and senior living is pretty much where my heart is,” she said during a recent interview.

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Watercrest Executive Chefs at their first quarterly staff meeting with Sheila Fioretti. Only Chef Ryan Matlaga was missing due to Watercrest Richmond's opening.

First things first

New on the job, Sheila recently set up a first quarterly staff meeting bringing together all the Watercrest executive chefs for collaboration. “We’re starting to build this culture from the chefs on out, so everyone really feels part of the team.”

Watercrest leaders and chefs are encouragers, always learning from each other and sharing their teams' plates and ideas, like one who recently adopted another chef's idea of doing a plated brunch vs. set-up buffet. Same menu available, all written out, but seated residents were waited on as a brunch. Feedback from residents was that they liked not having to get up to help themselves to a buffet and liked not having to carry their plates to their tables.



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"Watercrest Myrtle Beach Chef Sam spent some time with a fresh catch. Our residents live to watch the chefs' bar demos daily during lunch breaks," wrote Executive Chef Geoffrey Blount on a LinkedIn post.

What's trending at Watercrest?

Currently residents are loving their intimate Bistro areas with bar menus, in-person cooking demos, and action stations with pizza ovens where chefs can cook pizza and other things right in front of everyone in the dining rooms.

Residents also love the ever-increasing interactions with the chefs—some bringing food preparation out into the dining room for show and tasting, like dinner rolls for the next day's lunch, French Bread for breakfast's French Toast, or a dessert. Watching a chef fillet a fresh catch of the day that will be on the dinner menu is pure fascination.

"Dining teams collaborate, sharing what new culinary trends they're seeing in restaurants, hotels and especially country clubs, as we are always looking to elevate our culinary offerings," said Sheila. "At Watercrest we have culinary signature offerings such as flatbread pizzas, signature wine and private labels, whiskey bars, cigar bars, and martini bars."

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Listening and engagement critical

Especially with prospective residents and their families, everyone wants to know there's going to be a variety of foods because they may be coming to the same restaurant three times a day, every day.

“So that’s where we really just have to stay fresh, stay up on things, and always look for ways to engage them,” Sheila said. “People want to know that somebody wants them here. They want to be able to trust them, feel comfortable, know that someone will take care of them, staff will interact with them—and then it’s ‘What are we going to eat?’



“Sweetheart Brunch was a success! A BIG Shoutout to an Amazing Chef and Servant Leader, Will Poirier! Not only was the food delicious but I watched & listened today as he greeted and served every person that passed through the line. He knew them all, it was like they were old friends! Thank you for being one of the best parts of Watercrest Santa Rosa Beach,” wrote Executive Director Kim Haddon on a LinkedIn post.

“We do make sure we listen and pay attention to residents, asking them what they want, what they like. We investigate and work a lot with the sales department because culinary is important to their efforts. ‘What are you going to do here? We’re going to eat, we’re going to have fun, we’re going to go to the bar, going to watch movies, and all those things.’



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“We can't control what a doctor may say about medications or whatever, but the rest of it we can control and provide value,” Sheila emphasized.

Chats with the Chef

Each community has “Chat with the Chef” sessions at least once a month, some even weekly in larger communities, as they meet with different sections of residents.

“Chats usually include kind of demo or something fun going on. We ask residents what new things they'd like to see on the menu, what else we can do for them, and that results in some great ideas,” Sheila said. “Coffee bar? What do you want on your coffee bar? Sunday ice cream by the pool? No problem.’ Whatever they tell us, we'll always try to work it out for them. And that's another way we add value to their stay and make this what they want it to be.”



The Watercrest Winter Park dining team led by Senior Executive Chef Nathan Shifflett never disappoints on food and costumes for special events.

Watercrest menus change every 90 days. There's a lengthy “always available” menu used in memory care, as well as assisted living and independent living, as well as “chalkboard specials.” For example, half a prime rib left from Sunday's brunch becomes Chalkboard Special Prime Rib Sandwiches.



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“Everyone loves to see what the ‘special’ is. You’re not really spending any more money; you are making their day, really livening up the situation. You take it seriously, but it still needs to be light. You need to go to your tables, and all our chefs are mastering that. We need to be involved with our residents on a daily basis because otherwise we don’t know what they want.”

Our chefs walk the dining rooms, or they catch up in the hallways, and absolutely, that’s how you know what residents’ value is. For Mary, it might be different. For Sam, it's not going to be the same. It's not one size fits all.”

Special events add variety

All the Watercrest communities do a monthly Sunday Brunch, every second Sunday, and it’s a “big to-do” says Sheila. “It’s prime rib, all the salads, it’s everything brought out. It’s the chefs and the hats, and everybody’s doing a demo. There’s an omelet station and other action stations. It’s the whole 9 yards. Everyone invites their families, the bars are open, and it’s really a great time for families to come and just enjoy.”



“Chef Marvin prepared the Watermelon, Feta Cheese and Mint appetizers with a Balsamic Reduction, running out twice,” wrote Watercrest Fort Mill Executive Chef Scott Simka on a LinkedIn post. Sunday Brunch featured Lobster Risotto with Steamed Mussels and Grilled Teres Major Steak with Red Onion & Shallot Port Wine Jam, Texas Chocolate Sheet-Cake with Ganache Frosting, and an Amaretto Flan with Amaretto Caramel and Broken Almond Brittle.



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With a distributed schedule of corporation-wide planned special events January through December, everyone always knows what the special events are, like a fall festival party, holiday festival of lights, summer party, Fourth of July, and extra themes like Taco Tuesday and Stuff the Bus Thursday.

“Everyone has their own freedom to roll with it, and it’s a collaboration of everyone—sales and marketing, programming, life enrichment, and culinary,” Sheila concluded. “Then different planning goes into each, all with their own spin on things. We always talk to the residents and find out what kinds of things they want. Engaging them and giving them meaningful, memorable, and unique experiences is always our goal.”