



With an unlimited-access dining plan and extended hours, a Marché concept transforms one of Ferris State University's dining venues into a warm and inviting gathering place.

By Karen Weisberg

There's been a profound change in the dining philosophy at Ferris State University, Big Rapids, Mich.—redirecting focus from college needs to customer needs—and it's reflected in the look, feel and operation of the newly renovated dining center, The Rock Café.

Lori Helmer, director of dining services, was the driving force behind the renovation that took a 1960s-style servery and sent it charging full-tilt into the 21st century. With the ambiance of a contemporary Marché retail experience, where all food preparation is done in front of customers, it offers an inviting place to dine on freshly prepared food in a space that accommodates both socializing and quiet study.

The new Rock Café opened in Aug. 2009, just five months after construction began. The venue now offers more of what students, faculty and staff



In addition to the servery, the consultants designed a new dining room with a remarkable assortment of seating options from couches by a fireplace to booths, banquets and serpentine, high-top communal tables.

said they want on the menu. But new extended hours—seven days a week until midnight—and the all-you-care-to-eat, anytime-you-want meal plan, are revolutionary to campus customers.

The prior schedule—Monday through Friday, 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. with limited service hours for each of the three meal periods—has gone by the wayside. The new schedule reflects an approach that other colleges and universities across the country have or likely will adopt in the future.

Campus customers were vocal about wanting to extend hours and add weekend dining at the proposed Rock Café when they were surveyed in 2007 by Porter Khouw Consulting, Inc., Crofton, Md. H. David Porter, FCSI, CEO and president, heads

up MAS consulting for the consultancy. His partner, Albin Khouw, sr. v.p., heads up the firm's design services.

Survey Says

The consultants were hired at Helmer's request to completely analyze the campus' current dining services and recommend a plan to take them into the future. Porter Khouw drew up a master planning study for dining services, analyzing all dining locations on campus (there were four at the time, three today). The team scrutinized locations, hours of operation, traffic patterns during various day parts, menus, staffing and other details.

"We talked to students, faculty and staff, conducted focus groups and web-based surveys, and made our own first-hand observations," Porter explains. Porter quickly learned that on weekends almost all Ferris dining operations closed, forcing many students who were still around to go off campus in search of food. Since The Rock Café is located in a part of the campus where the majority of freshmen reside, it was seen as an ideal location to facilitate all-important, first-year social connections. Late night dining, as well as weekend meals, would become integral in fostering socialization and a sense of community.

"Despite FSU's tight budget parameters, we recommended the old facility be completely gutted and renovated to accommodate concepts that could run from 7 a.m. to midnight, seven days a week," Porter says. The department would be adding five hours of operation week nights, plus 17 hours of operation each weekend day, changing not only labor distribution, but the nature of the job for all foodservice employees. In the new Rock Café, cooking is on display.

Marché Madness

Porter's recommended Marché, or marketplace, concept includes display cooking stations (see sidebar, The Stations, p. 30). Once the Marché concept was approved, the project moved to the design team under Khouw's direction. Working closely with STV Architects—and keeping the survey preference results top-of-mind—Khouw's team set out to transform the dated, straight-line servery with center island salad bar into a full-of-action marketplace.

Almost every venue in this servery has a cooking component (except for the dessert station) since

At A Glance

Ferris State University Big Rapids, Mich.

Enrollment: 9,865 total (Big Rapids Campus only)

Total University Enrollment: 13,865

Undergraduate: 12,592 **Graduate:** 570

No. of Dining Halls: 3 (The Rock Café, Center Ice Food Court, Westview Dining)

The Rock Café Staff Includes:

1 manager, 3 assistant managers, 27 full-time food service production employees, 2 custodians, and approx. 100 student employees.

Hours of Operation: 7:00 a.m. to midnight, 7 days a week.

Cost of Renovation: Approx. \$7.3 million

Annual Revenue (projected): Approx. \$14 million

Director of Dining Services: Lori Helmer

Foodservice Consultant: Porter Khouw Consulting, Inc., Crofton, Md.

Architect: STV Architects, Inc., Douglasville, Pa.

Engineer: George Hopkins, Peter Basso Associates, Troy, Mich.

Fabricator: Great Lakes Stainless, Traverse City, Mich.



The Mongolian Grill and Wok station is a show stopper. Melink exhaust sensor systems in the facility's hoods detect and measure the output of effluent from cooking food. The sensor adjusts the hoods' fan speed lower or higher as needed. That saves energy because hoods are prevented from running full-out all day.



The Stations

Here's a list of the Marché concepts created for The Rock Café by Porter Khouw Consulting, along with the key equipment specified for each. Some pieces are tried-and-true standards while others fall into the specialty category.

Mongolian Grill & Wok

- CookTek induction wok warmer
- Town wok range
- Town Mongolian grill

Deli/Toasted Subs

- Lincoln conveyor toaster oven
- Doyon convection oven/proofer
- Delfield refrigerated sandwich unit
- Star Mfg. heated sandwich press
- Hobart slicer
- John Boos mobile bread display

Comfort Zone

Homestyle Entrees/International

- Blodgett double combi-oven
- Garland 4-burner range
- Magikitch'n radiant charbroiler
- Alto-Shaam carving station

Pizza/Italian/Pasta Sauté

- Wood Stone hearth pizza oven
- Vulcan pasta cooker
- Garland display sauté range
- Hatco heated stone shelves

Woody's Grill (named for Woodbridge Ferris, the founder of FSU)

- Keating counter griddle
- Magikitch'n counter charbroiler
- Alto-Shaam bun warmer drawer
- Hatco heated stone shelves

Entrée Salads, Soup & Salad Bar

- Keating counter grooved griddle
- True undercounter refrigerator
- Delfield drop-in cold wells
- Wells deluxe soup warmer/server

Dessert/Bakery/Condiment

- Federal bakery display cases
- Perfection powered condiment system



Highly styled, adjustable food shields by BSI, LLC, are incorporated into all the concepts, including the Pizza station, and enhance visibility to make the food the star. Designers spec'd adjustable shields to give foodservices the flexibility to switch a station to self-serve from full-service without a lot of effort, says Ron Lisberger, design project manager.

the budget didn't cover the cost of a huge kitchen redesign. "To me, the most exciting aspect of this project was that we could design each station efficiently so that each is not only engaging for students, but functions as the kitchen and a prep area for each concept," Khouw explains. "I would say 95 percent of our projects have a back kitchen component for at least minimal prep work, but not this one."

The Rock Café's back of the house is for storage only, including refrigerated storage and an ice machine. The loading docks are located where they were in the original building, but deliveries are received two or three times a week. "There's no prep or cooking at all back there. All prep is done in the stations," according to Khouw.

Even though some stations don't open until lunch, there's lots of activity at all the Marché concepts as staff prepares for upcoming meals. Every station throughout the facility is a feast for



design

the senses. “The Mongolian grill is the main attraction; it’s near the point of entry and is very ‘in your face,’” Khouw says. “It’s a combo Mongolian grill and wok station.

Savings

To become an anytime, unlimited-access dining facility—a bold recommendation—the consultants had to pay careful attention to the effect on labor and shift distribution. Helmer has not had to add any extra staff, even with the extra hours, but current staff has been given new shift schedules and has been trained to learn to cook in front of customers, essentially preparing food “on stage.”

In addition to no additional staff, Helmer reports that food costs have decreased because there’s much less waste. With the easy access and lack of limitations, students are only taking the food they want, because, psychologically, they know they can get more any time.

Cash Is King


Ferris State students have several meal plan options. Bulldog Anytime Platinum, Gold, Silver and

Bronze plans offer sliding-scale amounts of anytime, all-you-care-to-eat dining, guest pass allotment and Bulldog bucks to spend at campus cash venues. Commuter plans for nonresidents and 25-, 50-, 75- or 100-meal plans also are offered. Since The Rock Café opened, cash sales have soared 169 percent thanks to increased business from upperclassmen, staff and the local community.

Identifying the need for late night and weekend dining was one of the most interesting and pivotal findings on this particular project, according to Porter. “A successful dining program is central to the university’s recruitment efforts and plays a big part in retaining freshmen into sophomore year and beyond,” he says. “Those needs were met and exceeded and now upper classmen, faculty and staff, as well as neighborhood residents [who pay at the door], are coming in.”

Overall it’s the perception of fresh food, freshly prepared that’s engages the customers with an exciting “eatertainment” experience. “But what really determines a successful design?” Porter asks rhetorically. “It has to work for the customers. I think, from a pragmatic perspective, the café is beautiful and logistically, it works really well. But it’s the combination hours of operation, the meal plans and the menu selections and the way they’re prepared that create the DNA of a successful design; it’s the program plus the bricks and mortar.”

Ferris State has shifted from an old-school, limited, consumption-driven value proposition to an access-driven proposition. “That’s a huge paradigm shift,” Porter says. “The students’ ability to come and go as they want and the huge selection has more impact on the value perception than the amount of food they get when they get there.”

Khouw and his team spent a lot of time thinking through how the design could fit menu changes down the road without requiring costly renovation, as well. “We had to provide dining services with flexibility, and we carefully selected equipment and designed utilities to accommodate what they want to serve today and what they’ll be serving when menus change tomorrow,” he says. 

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The Bakery is the only one of the Rock Café Marché concepts that does not include a cooking component. All the other stations prepare, cook and serve food in front of customers. The Rock Café has no back kitchen, just storage.