

APRON STRINGS

The main kitchen, some 15,000 sq. ft. in all, can be seen beyond the counters of The Apron Strings and Globetrotters stations.



READY...SET...GROW

Kennesaw State University's explosive growth has driven planners to create The Commons, a huge dining hall capable of nearly doubling output as enrollment increases.

W *By Janice Cha*

hen you walk through the main entrance of The Commons Student Culinary Center at Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, Ga., you're greeted by an expansive space filled with a cavalcade of colorful dining stations—nine in all. A bustling main kitchen is open for view behind the counters of Apron Strings, a popular comfort food station. Or, depending on your appetite, you can order food from the grill, Italian, Asian, international, deli, salad, coffee or bakery/desserts outlets. All told, cooks prepare a fiesta of food every day for anywhere from 6,000 to 8,000 students, faculty and visitors.

Three key factors make The Commons stand out from other university dining halls:

First, sheer size. The Commons' 54,000 sq. ft. footprint holds the dining area, kitchen and back-of-house support. That's more real estate than a football field (minus end zones). Some 1,350 seats, ranging from single spots and deuces up to tables for eight, ensure comfortable seating near any station.

Second, all meals served here, including the 3,500 covers sold during the



The woks at the Asian food station, featuring Chinese-style swing faucets, "burn up to 2 million BTUs if it's running at full speed," Skiber says. To save energy, they usually keep the fire-power turned down until needed.

Kennesaw State University



The Commons – Student Culinary Center

- 1 On-The-Fly (carry-out)
- 2 Piatti (Italian)
- 3 Dan's Deli (soups, sandwiches, paninis)
- 4 The Campus Green (salad bar)
- 5 The Grind (barista/coffee)
- 6 Stone Mill Bakery (bakery/desserts)
- 7 Apron Strings (comfort food)
- 8 Globetrotter (international)
- 9 Hwy. 41 Grill (sandwiches, burgers, fries)
- 10 Wok Your Way (Asian cuisine)
- 11 Kitchen
- 12 Walk-in cooler
- 13 Walk-in freezer
- 14 Dry storage
- 15 Soda pantry
- 16 Dishwashing

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two-hour lunch period, are restaurant-style small-batch cooking.

And third, as busy as it is now, The Commons has been designed to nearly double its output as the student population grows.

"The Commons kitchen has the capacity built-in to serve up to 10,000," during existing business hours, says KSU Chef de Cuisine and Director of Culinary Services and Sustainable Foods Initiatives Gary Coltek. "And as the student population grows, we'll lengthen dining hours as needed."

UnCommon(s) Background

Explosive expansion was the key challenge when planners began developing the new foodservice operations. Five years ago, KSU was a small commuter college. Today, it's Georgia's third largest university, a residential campus with a student body of 23,500 and some 3,000 beds. And the growth isn't over. Over the next 10 years, 4% annual growth is projected. All of it adds up to a major undertaking.

The answer: The Commons Culinary Center, a \$23 million dining facility designed not only to meet operational needs but to do it sustainably. The largest dining hall in the country to earn Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Gold rating, The Commons opened in August 2009 and has taken off like a rocket. Sales of optional meal plans to off-campus students plus faculty and staff increased by 300% in fall of '10 compared to the year before. Annual sales hit \$8 million last year and are expected to surpass the \$10 million-mark this year.

Environmentally friendly features include the use of LED lighting, food waste composting, "trayless" service to reduce water usage and food waste, use of compostable paper goods and the elimination of all expanded-polystyrene foam products. The dining hall kitchen is equipped with Energy Star-approved appliances, and each station operates independently of one another and can be turned off to reduce energy consumption.

Small-Batch Production, High-Volume Design

The Commons' layout and workflow were created around the idea of small-batch cooking at the stations supported by prep work executed in the main kitchen. The planning and design team, led by Faye Silverman, executive director of KSU auxiliary services and programs, included Coltek and architectural firm Flynn Finderup, with support from local equipment dealer Restaurant Solutions, Marietta, Ga., and equipment rep Sunlow Master Marketing, Atlanta.

Efficiency was a key goal from the beginning, and Coltek says he wanted to make sure all cooks had what they need "in order to let them stay at their stations."

Work-efficient elements in the main kitchen prep areas include:

FACT BOX

Kennesaw State University The Commons Student Culinary Center

MENU/SEGMENT: College/University

SIZE: 54,000 sq. ft., 1,350 seats

MEALS/DAY: 9,000 breakfast, lunch and dinner

TRAFFIC: Approx. 6,000-8,000

STUDENTS: 23,500

FF&E PACKAGE: \$600,000 for furnishings and fixtures; \$2.4 million for equipment

KEY PARTNERS: Choate Construction, Atlanta (building); Flynn Finderup Architects, Atlanta (architect); Restaurant Solutions, Marietta, Ga. (dealer + design help); and Sunlow/Master Marketing, Atlanta (manufacturer rep and design help),

FOR MORE INFO: kennesaw.edu/dining

- All worktables get hand sinks for food safety and convenience. "We have nine instead of the usual two as required for a kitchen of this size," Coltek says.

- Electricity is supplied to each prep area by overhead power cords so "cooks can bring the [processors] over to the station to process food on the spot," Coltek adds.

- Smallwares, such as pots, pans, knives, etc., are stored within arm's reach on overhead shelves.

- Narrow 4-ft. aisles in the cooking area mean cooks can "literally turn around and grab what they need with limited movement," Coltek says.

- Storage space, both dry and chilled, is "cut back to approximately a quarter of what was in the original plan," Coltek says. "Reduced storage means lower inventory costs, less food waste and fresher food."

In each front-of-house station, the key efficiency element is coolers large enough to hold the roll-in carts that hold *all* necessary meal components.

"Cooks should never need to leave their station for backups or additional ingredients during meal service," Coltek says. "Food is prepared in small batches, so when it's time to replenish dishes, people on the line yell the order back to cooks just behind them." Refrigerated drawers placed at cooking stations also save time during the heat of (lunch) battle.

The Commons, which earned the LEED Gold certification last September, is currently the largest dining hall in the country to achieve this standard. Its environmentally friendly features include LED lighting, food-waste composting, "trayless" service and compostable paper goods. Designers spec'ed Energy Star-approved appliances throughout the cooking areas. And finally, each station, such as Dan's Deli and The Grind Coffee Co., operates independently of one another and can be shut down during non-peak times.





Equipment Highlights

Equipment in the main kitchen and prep area, which covers about 15,000 sq. ft., is of the “tried and true” variety. “We chose models that are easily serviceable, reliable and where possible, made in the United States,” Coltek says. “When we’re feeding this many people, we can’t afford to have anything down for more than an hour.”

In addition, the KSU Culinary Services team relies on training opportunities from manufacturer partners. “We ask them to send factory people here to train us on how to use the equipment to its full capability,” Coltek says. Manufacturer training also covers preventive maintenance and repair information for KSU’s dedicated maintenance team.

Key kitchen pieces include 55-gal. kettles and tilting skillets to ready large batches of soups, stocks, sauces and pasta, and the all-important combi oven/blast chiller partnership.

“We can take racks straight from the ovens and roll them into the chillers,” says KSU Campus Executive Chef Billy Skiber. On weekends, when most of the baking takes place, bakers can complete as many as 45 cakes in less than an hour. “We’ve essentially doubled our capacity that way.”

Skiber gets plenty of mileage from the combis’ smoking ability, too. “We can smoke meats, cheeses, enchiladas for 12 hours, then

In front-of-house stations such as the Hwy. 41 Grill (left), coolers large enough to hold roll-in carts supply cooks with all necessary components. “Cooks should never need to leave their station for backups or additional ingredients during meal service,” Coltek says. The Commons’ 1,350 seats ensure comfortable seating near any station.



clean the ovens and put them back in service for the bakery or wherever needed.”

The blast chillers represent a great leap forward for the university, which used to rely on frozen stirring paddles to speed cooling. What’s more, “the computerized HACCP software that’s part of the blast chillers makes it much easier to meet and report on HACCP guidelines now,” Skiber says.

The bakery has “only scratched the surface where capacity is concerned,” Skiber notes. Its heavy-duty equipment includes a dough mixer capable of handling up to 275 lbs. of dough, and a rounder-divider capable of turning out 1,600 rolls per hour.

Specifying authentic equipment—and hiring experienced cooks to use it—was especially key at Wok Your Way. This showpiece Asian food station, featuring two side-by-side wok ranges, each with six burners, water-cooled tops and Chinese-style swing faucets, “burns up to 2 million BTUs if it’s running at full speed,” Skiber says. “We hired cooks from local Asian restaurants who know how to use and maintain the equipment.” Wok Your Way serves about 1,500 or more covers per day.

Capacity To Spare, For Today And Tomorrow

When the operation reaches the 8,000-customers-per-day average, which will likely happen in the next few months, Coltek plans to launch a night commissary mode for round-the-clock production. (Prep currently starts up at 5 a.m.)

In addition, the team currently is in the middle of planning KSU’s second dining hall, a 35,000 sq. ft. facility opening next fall. The Lodge will serve as the campus dining center on the opposite side of campus. “The Lodge will take some of the [production] pressure off this building,” Coltek notes.

The Lodge will feature five totally different concepts, including an all-day breakfast bar, a vegan/vegetarian station, a wood-fired pizza oven station and a wood-fired pit barbeque station and a Mexican station.