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## From liability to asset: A large health system's approach to transforming hospital food

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### Cover Page Footnote

This transformation was envisioned and supported by Michael Dowling, President and CEO, Northwell Health. The authors gratefully acknowledge the leaders and teams within Employee Wellness, Human Resources, Food and Nutrition, Procurement and Office of Patient & Customer Experience, alongside clinical and administrative leadership for their partnership and collaboration. Deep gratitude is extended to Jeffrey Jacobs for his expertise and assistance. The authors would also like to thank the Executive Chefs, Registered Dietitians, and site-based food department leaders and team members for their dedication and passion. This article is associated with the Environment & Hospitality lens of The Beryl Institute Experience Framework (<https://www.theberylinstitute.org/ExperienceFramework>). You can access other resources related to this lens including additional PXJ articles here: [http://bit.ly/PX\\_EnvHosp](http://bit.ly/PX_EnvHosp)

# From liability to asset: A large health system's approach to transforming hospital food

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## Abstract

Historically, hospitals are infamous for poor food quality. Valuing food as a tenant of health and well-being, Northwell Health, New York's largest healthcare system, is transforming its hospital food program to become an asset and market competition differentiator. By focusing on structure, workforce, procurement and process, Northwell has improved patient experience performance "Quality of Food" by 61 percentile rank points within three years with minimal impact on budgetary cost.

## Keywords

Hospital food, nutrition, wellness, leadership, experience, patient experience

## Introduction

Nutrition is one of the most basic ways to maintain good health, prevent sickness and maximize clinical benefit.<sup>1-3</sup> According to the Centers for Disease and Control and Prevention, between 2017 and 2018, the age-adjusted prevalence of obesity among United States adults was 42.4%.<sup>4</sup> If current diet trends and practices remain unchanged, the prevalence of overweight and obese adults and children are expected to rise in the United States.<sup>5</sup> Healthcare organizations have a responsibility for promoting healthy lifestyles, inclusive of hospitals serving nutritious food options. Promoting optimal dietary options for patients and healthcare professionals requires visionary leadership, education and nutrition-centered processes. Lesser et al relates the influence of the medical profession role modeling and "setting the standard for smoke-free campuses... the same could be true for healthy food."<sup>6</sup>

Historically, hospitalized patients have had low expectations in regard to their daily meals. Typically, mass produced, consisting of frozen, canned and/or processed food, menu selections often have limited nutritional value and lack flavor. As a result, patients are often left hungry, experience various mealtime challenges, rely on family to bring in food from home and satisfaction levels vary.<sup>7-8</sup> Valuing food as tenants of health and well-being, Northwell Health has embarked on a cultural transformation, redefining the way it purchases, prepares and serves food and beverage across the enterprise. The goal was to change how people view food. A difficult task given decades of organizational culture seeing food as a large budgetary consideration with limited return. In other

words, a liability, rather than an asset and competitor differentiator.

Northwell Health is a large, complex healthcare organization serving millions of New Yorkers each year via its network of 23 hospitals, 750+ medical practices and continuum of care services across New York City boroughs, Long Island and Westchester. Its steadfast commitment to quality food and nutrition is grounded in listening to the "voice" of its constituents including patients, families, team members and diverse communities. By focusing on four core constructs - Structure, Workforce, Processes and Procurement, local and large-scale improvements have been successfully implemented and sustained. This descriptive article outlines how Northwell's visionary leadership implemented a large-scale, multi-faceted organizational change management strategy focused on hospital food transformation and its impact on patient experience.

## Methods

### *Structure and Workforce*

In 2015, Northwell welcomed its first Chief Experience Officer, Sven Gierlinger, bringing extensive experience within hospitality, culinary arts and healthcare management fields. Under his leadership, the Office of Patient & Customer Experience (OPCE) was developed with a vision of inspiring, challenging and leading the organization to design and deliver experiences our patients and customers desire. The holistic experience strategy is grounded within the pillars of culture, care delivery, hospitality and accountability. In 2017, with Northwell's President and CEO, Michael Dowling's unbridled vision

and support, reimagining hospital food became an organizational priority due to its meaningful impact on experience, engagement, fiscal responsibility and community health.

A Food Steering Committee was formed inclusive of key stakeholder groups representing Patient Experience, Employee Wellness, Human Resources, Food and Nutrition and Procurement, alongside clinical and administrative leadership. This interprofessional collaborative created a three-year strategic plan which was disseminated internally to Northwell's 70,000+ team members through a Commitment Statement signed by Northwell's President and CEO. The strategy began with the introduction of Northwell's Healthy Choice program which pledges to serve food that is nutritious, delicious, and supports the environment. Branded by a simple logo, awareness began to grow. Patients and employees became empowered around selecting quality choices, whole foods and sustainable ingredients. Deep fryers, heavily sweetened beverages and high caloric snacks and meals were gradually removed and replaced with more fresh, organic, locally sourced, minimally processed items.

In its baseline assessment of the organization, the Food Steering Committee identified a major gap in structure. Sites were essentially working within siloes, with staff lacking expertise in cooking, relying heavily on serving frozen and pre-processed meals. There was no system leader ensuring high quality food standards and accountability across the organization.

Northwell's improvement depended heavily on expertise in the kitchen - having the right people leading the charge, who are passionate, dedicated and exceptionally skilled. With this in mind, Northwell sought to recruit top talent, hiring externally and restructuring internally. This began with the recruitment of Chef Bruno Tison, the first vice president and corporate executive chef at Northwell. A native of northern France, Chef Tison began his culinary education at Belgium's prestigious Institut Technique Des Metiers De L'Alimentation, where he graduated with highest honors. His more than 30 years of experience includes serving as Executive Chef of the world-renowned Plaza Hotel in New York City. Chef Tison's nouvelle cuisine earned critical acclaim, and his leadership enabled the Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn and Spa in California to receive the celebrated Michelin Star recognition for three consecutive years. As a result, Chef Tison was possibly the first Michelin Star chef hired by a U.S. healthcare organization. His unique position and vision rapidly placed Northwell at the forefront of national media outlets with features on the Nightly News, Inside Edition, the New York Times, and the Wall Street Journal, among many others.

The "Workforce" component in this journey has been pivotal. Chef Tison prioritized building a high-performing team. With strong Human Resources partnership, a targeted and meaningful recruitment campaign was launched. Within the first two years, a majority of hospitals hired new Executive Chefs, many of which came from Michelin Star rated restaurants and/or have led successfully renowned kitchens across the hospitality field. Through new positions and attrition, onboarding non-hospital-based talent accelerated growing momentum. Having experienced and accomplished Executive Chefs, Sous-Chefs and Chef de Partie within a healthcare setting was unprecedented and inspiring. On the heels of the refreshed culinary workforce, an existing forum, Food & Nutrition Council, was reimagined as an operational leadership collaborative of executive chefs, registered dietitians, food department directors, Wellness, Procurement and system Patient Experience leadership. The Council primarily focused on disseminating standards, sharing best practices and fostering innovative solutions.

Northwell collaborated closely with the prestigious Culinary Institute of America (CIA) located in Hyde Park, New York, to host culinary externs, ultimately building a pipeline of talent by exposing select students to the art and science of cooking for patients and healthcare professionals. Other simultaneous offerings included culinary webpages and blogs, recruitment events, interview days, careers video spotlights, internal employee recognition, social media promotion, and additional school partnerships with institutions such as the Teaching Kitchen Collaborative and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. Further appealing benefits for promising food service and culinary team members included work-life balance, competitive health insurance/benefits and a newly offered Tuition Forgiveness Program. Offering a robust rewarding career with recognition, professional development and opportunities to be creative was important when building culinary career pathways. And so, the Northwell Chef's Challenge, a pinnacle annual event, celebrates true professional partnership and showcases culinary excellence happening each day across the organization.

#### *Procurement & Process*

Northwell prepares and serves nearly ten million meals per year. That high-touch component to healthcare should not be understated. And so, at the root of this journey remains the diligent work of the Procurement team. The Food & Nutrition Council created quality food standards based on the criteria of taste, nutrition and sustainability. From there, a locked Order Guide was developed eliminating items that did not meet criteria, reduce redundancy and create ordering standardization. For example, prior to the Order Guide, there were 150+ chicken products available, most being frozen, pre-processed and high in sodium. Diligence by the Council narrowed it down, with current

options only allowing for fresh, antibiotic- and hormone-free chicken selections. A staple within healthcare, chicken noodle soup, was elevated as a result of the locked Order Guide. Executive Chefs and their teams now make homemade stocks, broths and soups each day onsite, using only fresh and seasonally-based products. Such a simple concept, like soup, had immense impacts. Executive Chefs are empowered to purchase independently from the Order Guide for their individual hospital kitchen, creating recipes that are healthy, innovative and uphold the established standards of excellence. As a result, patients and healthcare professionals enjoy restaurant quality meals, consuming food that supports their whole-being health and wellness.

By organizing under a Group Purchasing Organization (GPO), Northwell gained bargaining leverage with vendors and suppliers. Buying large quantities of quality raw ingredients enabled competitive pricing and dollar cost averaging. Negotiating longstanding contracts, engaging local farms and businesses and streamlining purchases enabled budget neutral improvements. Coffee was the first product to be examined as it is highly consumed by patients, families and healthcare professionals. Historically, sites purchased “liquid coffee,” a syrup-based product that required a water dilution process. Today, Northwell serves fair-trade, locally roasted, fresh brewed coffee at all of its hospitals. This conversion led to a \$250,000/year system savings – a better product at a lower bottom-line cost. Savings in areas, like coffee, were then used to offset other costs when committing to fresh food culture.

With the growing popularity of “farm-to-table” cuisine, teams were inspired to start produce and herb gardens, inspiring a “farm-to-hospital bed” approach. On hospital grounds, food and nutrition staff grow, harvest and integrate ingredients into daily specials and garnishes. With the understanding that healthy habits begin at home, teaching kitchens are offered regularly in-person and virtually for employees, patients and families. They are often co-led by Executive Chefs and registered dietitians, a crucial partnership throughout this journey. These hands-on demonstrations provide tactile tools to prepare healthy meals with confidence. Given Northwell’s commitment to community-based care, impactful programs were developed such as food “farmacies,” food pantry contributions, onsite farmer’s markets and consults with registered dietitians. An unintended consequence of all of these collective efforts has been reduced food waste. Because Chefs are preparing meals using fresh products, they are conservative in what they order, instead of stock-piling in freezers. Kitchens are increasingly healthier, serving antibiotic-free chicken, grass-fed beef/pork, line caught fish and BAP (Best Aquaculture Practice) fish, crafted soups and broths, artisan breads and reduced calorie desserts. Chefs also update menus regularly to offer seasonally-based options.

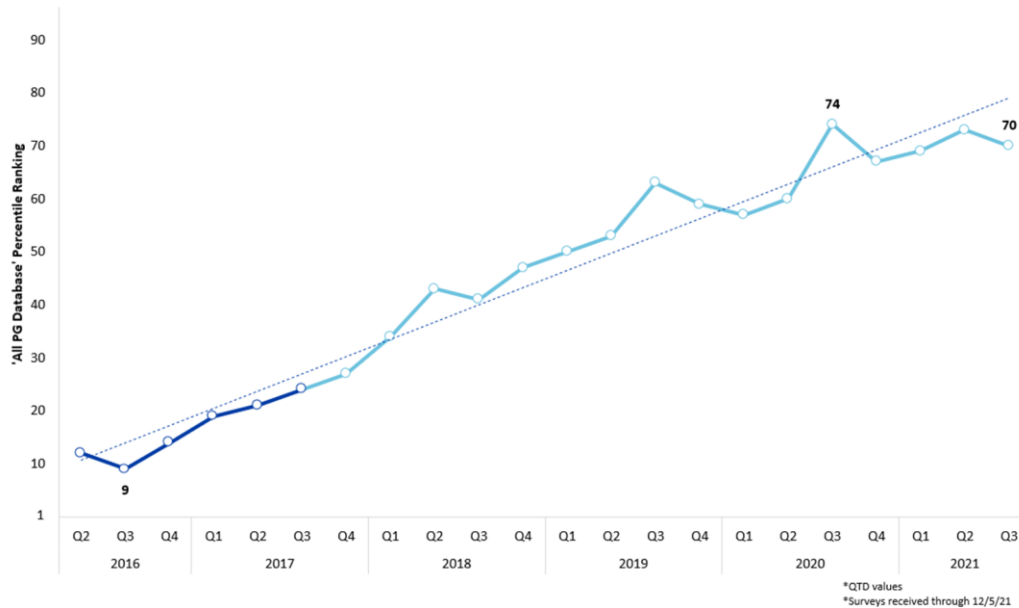
A Press Ganey analysis “suggests that the ordering and delivery aspects of food service strongly influence patients’ overall perception of food quality<sup>9</sup>.” Since Northwell spans across heavily diverse New York communities, one of the major shifts aiding in Northwell’s transformation was the elimination of “cook-chill” (reheating mass-produced, previously frozen meals) and implementing “cook-to-order” (preparing individual meals upon request). This patient-centered model allows for more individualized food offerings, preparation and delivery. This, alongside the introduction of an In-Room Dining Program at many of our sites, challenged the intricacies of hospital food programming. Cooking stations were re-engineered, a quality food standard manual was created and food servers underwent in-depth education on hospitality, effective communication, service recovery and meal-tray presentation. Executive Chefs round on patients daily to receive direct feedback regarding meal quality, temperature, choice and presentation. This opportunity fosters connection to professional purpose for the chefs along with real-time process improvements. The newly adopted high-touch experience affords the culinary team to deliver on the Northwell promise of excellence in service by infusing core hospitality elements into the healthcare environment.

## Outcomes/Results

The accumulation of refining Structure, Workforce, Procurement and Processes has resulted in a marked improvement within patient experience performance. Overall, Northwell Health’s ‘Quality of Food’ national percentile rank rose 61 points from the 9th percentile (Q3 2016) to the 70th percentile (Q3 2021); see Figure 1. As of November 2021 YTD, 80% of Northwell’s adult acute care hospitals rank at or above the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile, with nine hospitals ranking in the top quartile for this global survey item.

Qualitative improvement has been consistent and correlated to hospital-based food program milestones. Lenox Hill Hospital (LHH), a tertiary hospital located in uptown New York City, prioritized food and hospitality when redesigning their maternity program. Key highlights include adopting an In-Room Dining model with elevated menu selections, celebratory meals and high-grade china and stemware. As a result, the LHH Mother-Baby Unit experienced a 90 percentile rank point increase between Q2 2017 (7<sup>th</sup> percentile) and Q2 2020 (97<sup>th</sup> percentile) for the patient experience survey measure, ‘Quality of Food’ and has sustained that top performance to date. When examining LHH’s patient comments, the following positive themes and sentiments are noted: fresh and healthy choices, delicious taste, beautiful presentation and professionalism of food and nutrition staff. Long Island Jewish Valley Stream Hospital and Huntington Hospital, two community-based hospitals, saw similar

**Figure 1. Northwell Health Inpatient “Quality of the Food”**



improvements aligned with their food transformation, increasing 82 and 75 percentile rank points over a three-year and four-year period, respectively.

Fiscal responsibility remained top of mind throughout this transformation. Procurement team members understood their integral role in facilitating a budget-conscious approach. Following a zero-based budget approach, streamlining and improving upon purchasing practices, food costs saw a maximum 2% increase each year, which aligns with the standard rate of inflation. There was also an increase in hospital cafeteria revenue, signaling that families and team members were buying meals onsite, rather than relying on take-out, delivery and/or vendors. For example, one of Northwell’s major tertiary medical centers saw their hospital cafeteria revenue double, comparing 2019 over 2018.

At the heart of Northwell Health’s food journey are the dedicated, talented food and nutrition professionals driving true innovative vision and change. Examining year-over-year hire data, Northwell continues to outpace itself, bringing in more new talent each year within the areas of Chefs/Cooks, Dieticians/Dietetic Techs, Frontline staff and Leadership positions; see Figure 2. For the 2019

Employee Engagement survey, 48% of culinary teams (with 10 or more respondents) scored as a Tier 1, indicating a highly-engaged work unit. Of those teams, the mean engagement indicator score increased by 1.33 points between 2017 (3.03) and 2019 (4.36). In 2020, Northwell was proudly named a Great Place to Work for healthcare organizations. Throughout the survey, team members commented on many previously outlined improvements, one employee writing, “This company has and continues to encourage employees to live a healthier lifestyle. Starting wellness programs, having better and healthier food options in the employee cafeteria, as well as a fitness center are the best improvements I have seen in my 15 years of employment.”

**Discussion**

Transformational leadership drives culture and impacts employee engagement behaviors to accept and thrive during periods of change.<sup>10</sup> Northwell’s food transformation has relied on such leadership amongst numerous interdisciplinary stakeholders at the system and local level. Senior leadership support and buy-in provided clear directives that hospital food was an absolute organizational priority as it impacts experience,

**Figure 2. Northwell Health Year Over Year Talent Acquisition, October 2017-October 2019**

Food & Nutrition Talent Acquisition Category	Oct 2019 YTD	Oct 2018 YTD	Oct 2017 YTD
<b>Chefs/Cooks</b>	31	26	13
<b>Dieticians/Dietetic Techs</b>	37	32	28
<b>Frontline</b>	280	204	210
<b>Leadership</b>	13	10	5



engagement and community wellness. By engaging in synergistic partnerships, the multifunctional team was empowered to remain focused to the overarching goal of reimagining hospital food. Over time, we have seen a palpable shift within the organization's culture and psyche. Executive Chefs are seen as valuable members of the interdisciplinary care team. In white chef coats, they actively round on patient units, lead teaching kitchens, instruct servers on menu specifics and engage colleagues in food decision-making processes. This is often seen with them seeking feedback from nursing teams during taste-testing, since nutrition is a pillar within nursing practice.

Food is universal and plays such a pivotal role during life's most monumental moments. As the largest healthcare system in New York, Northwell Health cared for more COVID+ patients during the initial peak, March through May 2020. Executive Chefs and Food & Nutrition teams quickly pivoted, adapting to the increasingly high volume of acute patients as well as caring for essential healthcare heroes. Overnight, hospital cafeterias became mini marts, offering employees an opportunity to shop for basic food, household products and hot meals, all at cost. Inspirational quotes were written on to-go containers, energy boost smoothies were delivered to breakrooms, and large amounts of community donations were managed by the dedicated site-based food and nutrition teams. Due to displaced restaurant workers throughout the local area, Northwell saw an influx of interest. Healthcare is now seen as a secure employer within the food and beverage industry offering opportunities for autonomy and growth, better work-life balance and competitive pay and benefits. As a result, Northwell has hired and retained accomplished chefs and restaurant-trained professionals within its hospitals.

## Conclusion

Northwell's commitment to world-class service and patient-centered care continues to inspire, challenge and lead the healthcare industry to view food more than an obligatory expense, but as care. The vision forward is to double-down on education and development opportunities. There are plans to launch experiential teaching kitchens where employees and community members access instructor-led courses on food preparation, safe handling, cooking and nutrition. Now that we have acquired top talent, focus must be on retaining them. Career development pathways, continued education, apprenticeship programs and leadership opportunities will be pillars of a comprehensive approach and strategy. The Northwell Health food transformation is ever-evolving. With the patient and community as our North Star, focus remains on accountability, attracting and developing top talent, leveraging existing momentum and upholding quality standards.

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