

## ABHOW Takes Its Place at the Head of the Table



The celebrated Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw once said, “There is no sincerer love than the love of food.” A notoriously complicated man, Shaw had more than a few gray hairs in his beard when he said those words. Like so many people of a certain age, Shaw had reached the point in his life where he’d learned what was really and truly important. And that was food.

ABHOW learned a similar lesson long ago, that to provide exceptional care for its residents meant placing a premium on the quality of their dining experience. In fact, the company can trace its rise to the top of the senior living leaderboard to its innovative, ever-evolving dining operations. Today, residents at ABHOW’s continuing care retirement communities are saying bye-bye to bland, cafeteria-style food and hello! to cruise ship-style cuisine.

The company’s unique partnership with Sodexo Senior Living, a division of the multinational food and facilities management firm Sodexo Inc., has a lot to do with that. Jeff Glaze, ABHOW’s senior vice president and chief operations manager, says the seven-year partnership allows each organization to leverage their strengths and assets in serving a very savvy resident population.

“Our residents are consumers who know the marketplace, know what they want, and want to be wowed,” says Glaze. “That means you’ve got to keep raising the bar in every aspect of the dining experience.”

Translation: Create a dining experience at each community that rivals that of comparable restaurants in town. Offer seasonal, locally grown foods. Keep things fresh and fun by opening bistro cafes. Host reservation-only fine dining events and tasting menus. Offer a nightly selection of haute cuisine. Turn kitchen cooks into well-trained chefs. Treat the community like a cruise ship, so residents can eat when, and where, they want.

It helps that the man in charge of serving up the wow factor at ABHOW’s 11 CCRCs is himself a highly trained French chef. Yannick Himer joined the company in 2006 as dining services director at The Terraces at San Joaquin Gardens in Fresno, Calif., where

his exceptional performance earned him the prestigious Presidential Citation in 2009. Himber has been promoted no less than three times since then, and today is district manager of dining services with Sodexo Senior Living at ABHOW.

“ABHOW has one of the best dining services programs for the senior living market in the country, no doubt about it,” says Himber, who should know. “I’ve visited the competition.”

If there’s a certain French flair on today’s menu at The Terraces at San Joaquin Gardens’ Bistro Terrazzo – one of four bistros ABHOW has opened to date – it’s because of Himber. From soups to braised meats to sauces, the food is classically prepared, upscale fare with a contemporary presentation.

For Brian McQueen, a Bistro Terrazzo line cook, mastering the sauces came easily. Now he’s looking forward to expanding his culinary repertoire with techniques learned at the prestigious Culinary Institute of America, or CIA, in Hyde Park, N.Y. McQueen and two other ABHOW line cooks will return from the weeklong training later this month ready to whip up high-end bistro style cuisine for residents, while the long-term goal is to give them the skills they’ll need to take on executive chef duties in the future.

“This is such a great opportunity for me and my career because ultimately I do want to become an executive chef, but also I’m just looking forward to bringing back some new techniques and recipes to the residents,” says McQueen. “They know good cooking and they appreciate it, and they’ll tell you when you do it right.”

Joining McQueen at CIA’s Bistro Boot Camp training are line cooks from Judson Park in Des Moines, Wash., and Valle Verde in Santa Barbara, Calif. This is the second such trip to the CIA for ABHOW cooks, and Himber says there will be similar opportunities in the future.

ABHOW’s executive chefs have their own in-house training opportunities through Sodexo, which sends specially trained chefs to each CCRC kitchen to help fine-tune cuisine, update menus and implement procedures to help executive chefs keep their kitchens running smoothly. So called ‘culinary champions’ help ensure food consistency and safety – critical issues for any senior living provider.

Himber and the Sodexo support team is currently working on yet another leading-edge idea to keep ABHOW chefs at the top of their game. ABHOW Culinary Academy will be a kind of test kitchen near the company’s corporate office in Pleasanton, Calif., where executive chefs and line cooks alike will come often and learn the latest techniques, share ideas and develop new menu options. And because excellent food goes hand-in-hand with hospitality, Himber is also ready to embark on specialized training for dining room managers.

“We’re going to have them go to maître d’ training where they can foster the kind of presentation that you’d expect in high-end dining,” says Himber. “It’s a very specific curriculum, and at the end of it the dining managers will be able to go back to their community and pass it on to their wait staff.”

That’s a wise move on the part of ABHOW, which recently received the results of its annual resident opinion survey. Residents who said they were most happy living at an ABHOW community in 2010 often cited exceptional service in the dining room as a major factor.

That comes as no surprise to Rae Holt, executive director of The Terraces at Los Altos in Los Altos, Calif. Holt’s community scored highest among all 11 ABHOW CCRCs in the Holleran survey – so high, in fact, that Holt took home 10 Highest Honors awards at ABHOW’s annual meeting in February. The community scored in the 90th percentile or better on 10 key indicators of resident satisfaction, five of which had to do with dining services.

“We did well in almost all areas of residential living, but we really did well in the dining room,” says Holt. “That is such an important place in a retirement community. The socialization and interactions that happen there determine how the residents feel about everything in the community.”

As chair of the dining room committee at The Terraces at San Joaquin Gardens, Johnnie Sowell helps her fellow residents voice their opinions and ensures that they are heard – loud and clear. The food at her community has been excellent “as long as I can remember” she says, allowing residents to focus on other issues that are important to them, from a planned expansion of the dining room – “We are so excited about that!” – to their recent request to open Bistro Terrazzo for lunch on Saturdays.

“I’ve never eaten any better in my life than I have in the 12 years I’ve lived at The Terraces,” says Sowell. “And not just the eating, it’s the fellowship we have around the table. Some of the best times in our lives are spent in that dining room, just being together and having fun. You wouldn’t believe the fun we have.”

Sowell’s words speak to the senior living industry’s sweet spot – exceptional experiences. It takes a lot more these days to impress a prospective resident than a laundry list of services and amenities. A beautiful dining room is an asset to any retirement community, but by itself is not going to appeal to a new generation of seniors who expect a variety of campus dining venues, in-residence dining options, and flexible meal plans like My Choice, which allows residents to save up and use allotted meal points as they choose. Ten of ABHOW’s 11 CCRCs have adopted My Choice.

Himber says the senior living industry – and ABHOW, especially – has done a good job of responding to the demand for more and better dining options in residential living.

What needs to happen now, Himber believes, is more of a person-centered care approach to dining in the assisted living and skilled nursing communities, where food is just as much a driver of resident satisfaction.

At ABHOW, the menu at a particular community is the same across all levels of care, so the challenge is to serve skilled nursing residents in The Village a meal that looks and tastes the same as the dish served in the dining room. The endeavor is well worth it and is working, Himber says, as evidenced by the results of the last three Holleran surveys.

“We’ve stayed at the leading edge in another way, too, and that’s liberation from diets,” says Himber. “We don’t offer a low-sodium diet, we do no-salt-added instead. The old-fashioned way was to say you can’t have pie. Our philosophy is: have the pie, but only have a sliver.”

Soon, Village residents will have another dining option all their own, one Himber feels will be “our best person-centered care initiative ever.” Residents will be able to order meals off the menu 24-hours a day, seven days a week, in keeping with ABHOW’s philosophy of adapting to the residents’ needs and working within their schedules.

So just how unique is ABHOW in the senior living industry in terms of its dining operations? Very, says Himber. Whereas other organizations may have flexible and enhanced dining options of their own, few – if any – offer them as fully or in the same capacity as ABHOW.

“The industry is looking to us,” says Himber. “That means we’ve created something kind of magical here.”