The Sweet Life of Chef Todd

Todd Sweet says working in hospitality is “God’s work”

Isabel Dreher, Managing Editor

As hungry University of New Hampshire (UNH) students flow into Holloway Commons (HoCo) at all hours of the day, it’s not uncommon for them to see a man in a white coat with two rows of buttons and a tall, white chef’s hat weaving through the crowd. He’ll check in with staff members, make sure students are enjoying their meals or just observe the menu items he brought to the floor that day. UNH Dining is a gigantic operation, and he moves fast, but if you’re lucky enough to share a moment of his time, he is a well of information.

This man is Chef Todd Sweet, the senior executive chef of UNH Dining. Sweet has been with UNH Dining for several years and has experienced many changes over that time, but none so dramatic as the COVID-19 pandemic that took hold in 2020.

This pandemic affected the hospitality industry most, with over eight million jobs lost. A university dining system is different from that of a typical restaurant or hotel in many ways, however, Sweet said the impact was huge nonetheless. Additionally, he said the program is still recovering from pandemic related staffing issues.

“A lot of people left hospitality,” Sweet said. “They didn’t think it was God’s work like I do, so they moved on ... we’ve had a hard time refilling those positions.”

Sweet takes great pride in showing off the dining facilities. One of the first things he said was, “do you want a tour?” second only to pleasantries.

“We’re going to go down three flights of stairs,” Sweet called over his shoulder, already racing down the stairs at a pace typical of restaurant chefs but not so typical of most others.

Throughout the tour, Sweet apologized for his words about the back end of the dining facilities sounding “canned.” He didn’t want the tour experience to seem impersonal.

Sweet proudly showed off the dining hall’s sustainability features that included a vat of recycled fryer oil, the composting machines, areas for recyclables and a large walk-in cooler packed with sustainably-sourced meat from New England farms.

“We are trying to put together our application for [the] NACUFS Sustainability Award,” Sweet said. “When you see ‘Award Winning Dining,’ a lot of times those awards came from NACUFS.”
The National Association of College & University Food Services, or NACUFS, is an organization that supports and awards excellence in college dining. According to Sweet, so far, the awards that UNH has won mostly involve the dining halls’ allergy-friendly food options and the special event meals they occasionally hold.

The next floor Sweet covered was where the majority of cooking takes place. For nearly everything that is served in the dining halls, there is some type of prep involved. Sweet says the menus are planned about a year in advance to ensure that they have all the supplies needed to pull the meals off. Dozens of employees in chef coats swarmed around giant versions of kitchen appliances that would be commonplace if it weren’t for their astronomical size; pots, stand mixers, refrigerators and ovens all existed on a scale nearly unfathomable.

Sweet said that 100 pounds of pasta are cooked at once in one of the giant boiler pots situated to the right of the entrance to this floor. A man introduced as Chef Steve stirred a cauldron-like pot with an enormous utensil that was almost as tall as he was.

This floor also includes dry storage, several days of prepped meals and some administrative offices. Sweet proudly showed off the allergy-friendly kitchen, which is entirely separate from the rest in order to ensure that there is no cross contamination in the preparation process of allergy-safe meals.

Sweet explained that one of the biggest challenges in cooking on such a large scale is taking a seemingly simple recipe and figuring out a way to prep it and scale it up feasibly for serving. For example, on this day, pasta was served with alfredo sauce and peas, which Sweet said was inspired by a dish he’s cooked for his son. Despite the dish seeming simple, making anything on such a large scale gets very complicated very quickly.

“We want to make sure that we have the pasta heated up and the peas heated up and the sauce heated up but we don’t want to have anything die in the process. So, if we heat it up all at the same time, then the peas would be like the color of this desk and the Alfredo might be scorched on the edges,” Sweet said, gesturing to the desk he sat at, which was a dark stained wood. “So, what we did was we tested a few different ways.”
Sweet explained that both the testing process, and the process that was ultimately decided on, are far from simple.

“What we came up with was the pasta is already cooked, the peas are frozen, we put in a measured amount of peas into the pans of pasta, just dry pasta and peas, and then we staged that on racks,” he said. “The alfredo sauce is already a bagged product. We heat that up separately in the kettles, in the bags. And then when it’s time to sell a pan of that we steam it ... up to 165 degrees. The pasta and the peas are, at that point, food safe and palatable. They’re tasty. We pull it out. We put one bag of the alfredo sauce on it, which happens to be the correct measure, and then we send it upstairs.”

Sweet says that the primary concern of the dining team is making sure students are fed and happy. One way they achieve this is by providing many customizable options across the dining hall menus.

“You eat at hotels and restaurants long enough, you get really sick of it. You want to eat your food,” Sweet said, describing the plight of students who rely on the dining hall as their primary source of sustenance. “That’s what we’re conscious of, because the dining hall is basically their kitchen, their pantry. We’re going to offer those things to make it so they don’t feel like they’re eating restaurant food, three meals a day, seven days a week. That’s just that’s too hard.”

Only having access to food that is wrong for a student’s lifestyle or bad for their health is a familiar issue. Just about every high schooler is warned of the freshman 15, the idea that new college students gain significant weight when they arrive at school due to a change in the way they eat. According to the National Library of Medicine, this myth is not entirely true, although it’s not unfounded either. A majority of students do put on some weight when they arrive at college, but only about 5% of students’ weight will increase by 15 pounds or more. Most new college students either maintain the same weight, or gain less than five pounds. The customizability that Sweet says UNH Dining prioritizes allows students to more closely emulate their preferred eating habits.

The careful, meticulous planning and execution of meals didn’t come to Sweet overnight; He has been working in restaurants since he was just 12-years-old. After spending his teenage years in various restaurants in his home state of Florida, he moved to New York to attend college at the Culinary Institute of America. Following culinary school, he moved to Europe, spent time working in kitchens in France and Italy and then went to work on a cruise ship.

“Then I moved around the country a little bit, doing restaurants and hotels and all those kinds of things, just kind of gaining experience at different places,” he said.

When he moved to New Hampshire about 20 years ago, Sweet started off working at a culinary school in Dover called Le Cordon Bleu. That school eventually closed, and he moved on to fill the role of executive chef at the Portsmouth Brewery.

“But the hours are, you know, restaurant chef hours ... 60, 70 hours a week. It’s not particularly sustainable for somebody with a young family. So my wife applied for me and filled out my application for [UNH],” Sweet said. “I took [the job] and haven’t looked back.”

Sweet is clearly proud of the work he’s put into the program that exists on campus today, even given the trouble that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused. He encourages students to send him messages or meet with him if they have anything they would like to discuss.

“We always have an open-door policy. I’m always happy to meet with anybody, any student that has any kind of concerns about the dining program, because I know it’s a hefty investment, and it’s a big part of people’s lives,” he said. Sweet paused, considering his next words. “It’s a big part of my life.”