

UNH Project Makes Dining Experience More Enjoyable for Student with Celiac Disease

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DURHAM, N.H. -- For college student Sarah Stowell, eating a balanced diet is no easy task. A condition called celiac disease prohibits her from eating gluten, a chain of proteins found in cereal grains like wheat, rye, barley and oats. To compound the problem, the University of New Hampshire junior also cannot eat dairy or soy products.

American diets are loaded with these products, which make up such foods as breads, muffins, pastas, gravies and soups. UNH's dining halls are no exceptions. But with more than 800 students to feed at a meal, it would be nearly impossible to tailor individual menus for every student who has a special diet. Before this academic year, Stowell tried to make do.

This year, however, a unique partnership between a couple of animal and nutritional science students and UNH Hospitality Services is making it easier for Stowell to enjoy the campus dining experience.

It all began when another student, Margaret Udahogora, met with Rochelle L'Italien, the university's registered dietitian. She was looking for a project to learn more about the eating habits of American college students. L'Italien explained Stowell's dietary needs and thought developing a specialized meal plan for her would be a perfect project. She connected Udahogora with Vipra Rai, who was fulfilling part of her internship in food service management in Philbrook Dining Hall.

"Vipra is from India and Margaret is from Africa, and they both have their master's degrees in nutrition from their respective countries," says UNH dietetic

internship director Caroline Giles. "They want to become registered dietitians in this country, so they came to UNH to further their education in nutrition and on the eating habits of Americans."

All UNH students who wish to become registered dietitians must complete an internship before taking the dietetic registration examination. Through these internships, students learn clinical skills and gain practical experience in nutritional analysis, menu planning and education, as well as food production, delivery and staff management. Many of these students complete supervised practice in the UNH dining halls as part of their internship experience.

"Part of the mission of Hospitality Services is to support the teaching and research mission of the university," says L'Italien. "Both Margaret and Vipra were interested in working with Sarah as part of an educational project, and that's what made this happen."

Rai and Udahogora met with Stowell to get an idea of the foods she likes and dislikes, and met with Philbrook dining hall staff. They researched menus, bought and prepared special foods, and tested the meals for taste and appearance.

"Acceptability of the food is most important," says Udahogora. "It has to taste good and freeze well."

Stowell says some of the meals were hits, others misses. She is especially fond of the Indian dishes created by Rai. Others include blueberry muffins made with mashed bananas, rice and potato flour.

"As part of my internship, this experience has been invaluable," says Rai. "You're discovering what you can't learn from a book -- how to research, problem solve, evaluate and, most importantly, work as part of a team."

For Stowell, her UNH dining experience this year is "one-hundred percent better."

Sample Recipe

Blueberry Muffins

(adapted from "Going Against the Grain")

2/3 cup mashed banana
1 whole egg
1 cup rice milk
1/3 cup olive oil
1 cup sugar
2 tsp. Rumford baking powder
1/3 cup brown rice flour
2/3 cup potato starch flour
1 cup frozen blueberries

Mix the first five ingredients. Sift dry ingredients (baking powder, rice flour and potato flour) at least three times to make sure it gets mixed evenly. Add the mixture of first five ingredients to the flour mixture. Add blueberries and mix. Fill prepared muffin tins 3/4 full. Bake at 300† F for 40 minutes. Makes one dozen.

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