Retirement home catering has never been the most glamorous part of the foodservice industry. Think of it and the scenario that usually comes to mind is an institutional set-up: minimal choice and set feeding times for unappealing, mushed-up meals with little nutritional value.

But with Baby Boomers hitting retirement age at a rate of 10,000 a day in the US alone and bringing with them familiarity with fast casual dining concepts, experience of global cuisine and demand for healthy, locally-sourced ingredients, things are set to change dramatically.

As Robert Kramer, one of the founding partners of the US trade group for this industry, the National Investment Center for Seniors Housing and Care (NIC), recently told Forbes: “We’re entering a time of disruptive innovation. The basic business model and system will be radically disrupted. Boomers won’t retire. They will transition.”

Fresh, sustainable, global cuisine

Many catering providers for senior living communities are already upping their game, introducing fresh, modern design, restaurant-style dining and globally-inspired, locally-sourced menus that change sometimes on a monthly basis.

Take Ohio Presbyterian Retirement Services. A couple of years ago its Goodale Landing community introduced a pub-style hangout with big-screen TVs, a gourmet coffee shop and a grab-and-go outlet, as well as remodelling its 70-seat sit-down restaurant. It now overlooks the swimming pool and features an open kitchen design so guests can see the chefs at work, spotlighting the restaurant’s focus on healthy cuisine.

Elsewhere, Erickson Living, which has 20 communities across the US, recently opened a fast casual eatery called the Mile High Café in Colorado, which serves made-to-order pastas, soups, salads, flatbreads and baked goods from its exhibition-style kitchen, all advertised on digital menu boards.

Morrison Community living, a subsidiary of Compass Group, which works with over 350 senior living communities in 42 states, has also transformed its offer in anticipation of the arrival of the Baby Boomers.

Its ‘A Meal in the Life’ program takes diners on a yearlong journey of 12 cultures supported by chef demos, cooking classes and social media contests, with everything made from scratch and sourced sustainably.

From now until 2030, 10,000 Baby Boomers will hit retirement age every day in the US. With almost 40% of them living alone, the demand on residential care is set to skyrocket. But they won’t be satisfied with a diet of unappealing mush.

58% believe The role of catering is part of the whole experience for the residents.
**Medical conditions and dietary requirements**

Senior living communities, where residents live independently, are just one part of the residential care sector. At the other end of the scale are nursing homes, where caterers’ focus is – or should be – on providing elderly people with medical conditions like dysphagia (difficulty swallowing) with delicious, nutritious, well-presented meals that look as close to the real thing as possible.

Dysphagia currently affects around 15% of the US’s elderly population and 13.5% of the UK’s.

At Cardiff’s Sunrise residential care home in the UK, the kitchen team use various technical tricks, including moulds, to achieve this. Even sandwiches and cooked breakfasts can be pureed and put back together again.

**Attracting the right talent**

The only way to ensure innovation continues in retirement home catering is to attract talented chefs to the workforce, which has traditionally been staffed with lower-skilled, lower-paid workers.

**The basic business model and system will be radically disrupted. Boomers won’t retire. They will transition.**

It’s another area in which progress is being made. At Chicago-based Vi, formerly Classic Residence by Hyatt, for example, one community offers resident-funded tuition programs (they’ve so far awarded 34 employee scholarships) and competitive salaries.

But it’s the UK that’s really leading the way on the training front. In collaboration with the National Association of Care Catering (NACC) and the Hospital Caterers Association, The Institute of Hospitality recently launched a new diploma in professional cookery in health and social catering, the first professional qualification of its kind.

The hope is that it will raise the profile of care home chefs and help reduce the stigma of their profession, as well as creating a direct path to the retirement home kitchen.

For professional chefs already working in the sector, its appeal generally lies in the creativity and out-of-the-box thinking required to feed elderly and often infirm residents well – how do we make the food look and taste good, but also meet the raft of extra requirements they have?

**Keeping costs under control**

Introducing high-tech kitchen equipment can be a double whammy for retirement home catering providers. Firstly, it makes the working environment more attractive for prospective chefs, and secondly, it’s a way to raise food quality while improving efficiencies in the kitchen.

RATIONAL SelfCookingCenter®, for example, replaces numerous appliances such as convection ovens, boilers deep-fat fryers and steamers with one compact system that takes up less than 1m² of space.

On top of its versatility, it helps chefs avoid overproduction and wastage as well as reducing cooking losses to a minimum. Moreover, intelligent, automated systems improve the overall efficiency in the kitchen, meaning operators can put more time into serving the customer better, safe in the knowledge their costs are under control.

Beyond the meals themselves, catering providers are doing their best to offer a hospitality-style dining experience to nursing home residents too. At Morrison Community Living, this has meant expanding the number of options available and allowing residents to order at the point of service, rather than booking their meals days in advance.

Opening up dining facilities to family and friends is also becoming more common, as it boosts residents’ moods and contributes to their overall wellness.

Find out more: catering2019.com