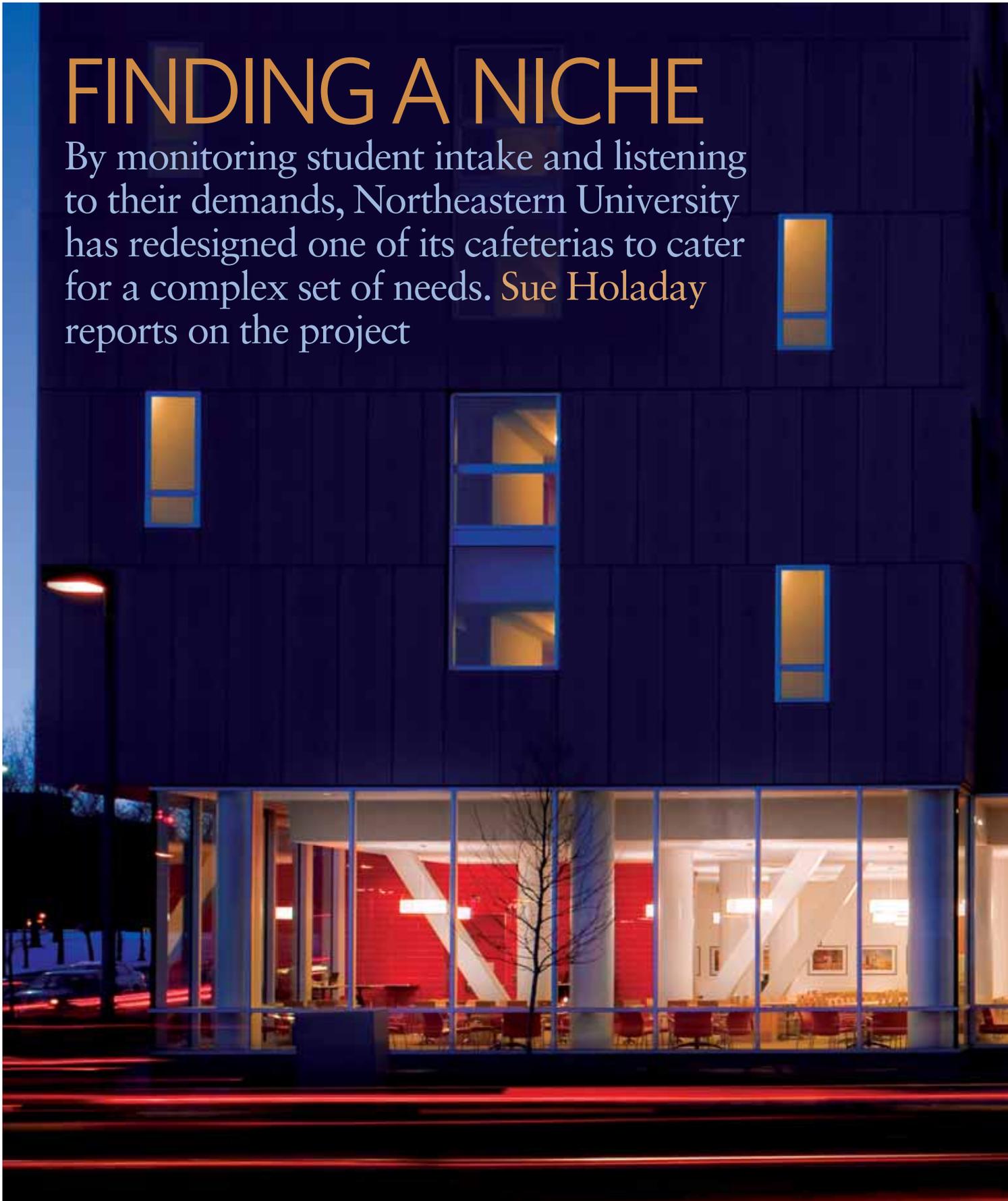


FINDING A NICHE

By monitoring student intake and listening to their demands, Northeastern University has redesigned one of its cafeterias to cater for a complex set of needs. **Sue Holaday** reports on the project





When Northeastern University opened the Curry Student Center Union in 2012, original plans did not call for gluten-free or kosher stations. Both were discussed as the project got underway in 2008, but the school felt it did not have enough students with food allergies and sensitivities or kosher demands to warrant those additions.

The original design, a total renovation of a facility that was last updated in 1992, revitalised the Center, long regarded as the focal point of student life on campus. When it reopened in late 2012 with a redesign featuring a “glassy mezzanine”, as architects Prellwitz Chilinski Associates put it, it quickly became both a showcase and a hub of student activity. Revenues at the 30,000 sq ft redesigned dining facility, with a seating capacity of 700-plus, increased by 20%.

Today, the Center offers catering for >



students with seven different allergic conditions in a facility named Zone 7, “a self-serve and a design that lets students see the food as it is prepped”, says director of dining services Maureen Timmons.

The additions affected several stations in the Center’s International Village. To make room for the relocated and new stations, the expansion replaced a dining hall entrance ramp and Cyber Café.

What was originally considered as a gluten-free station expanded to Zone 7, which addresses seven primary allergens – milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts, shellfish, gluten and soy. The change, prompted by the growth of the gluten-free movement, included training Zone 7 staff in food allergy awareness.

“We paid close attention to our students’ needs,” Timmons recalls, “and demand was growing in this area, so when we had the opportunity to expand, we chose to address seven of the top eight allergens at the Zone 7 station. We also offer halal options at each dining hall.”

Open for both lunch and dinner, seven days a week, the station shuts down from

3pm to 5pm to prep for dinner service and ensure food safety guidelines are monitored by the university’s quality assurance manager. Enrolment, admissions and student affairs teams helped identify the needs of current and incoming students.

The new kosher station prepares both hot and cold entrées as well as vegetarian sides and parve (a Hebrew term for ‘without meat or dairy ingredients’) menu items. An on-site mashgiach (a person who supervises kosher status) and the Rabbinical Council of New England supervise the kosher station and food preparation standards. On the Sabbath, meal options consist of prepared cold foods. The mashgiach, says Timmons, “functions as part of the team checking products and orienting the chef to kosher procedures, from lighting the pilot lights to checking produce for insects.

“Adding kosher, halal, Zone 7 and a third new option, Deli To Go (where guests build their own sandwiches), were each complicated in their own way and logistically challenging,

especially within a pre-existing dining hall,” she says. “That said, the opening went well and all stations are successful.”

The kosher station was able to use the hood already in place from the deli, recalls R Todd Guyette FCSI, principal at Colburn & Guyette, Rockland, MA. Creating the new stations involved juggling in tight spaces. “There were no blank slates. The space had a convection oven, open burner range, prep tables... We added a step-in cooler and hot and cold food wells.”

Disposable wares were used because there wasn’t room for a separate wash station, adds Kevin Sullivan, associate member of FCSI and senior associate with Colburn & Guyette.

In Zone 7, much of the prep work was relegated to the back of the house and induction burners put on the front counter for making gluten-free pasta. “Students can grab self-serve meals from the freezer and fridge and heat them in a toaster oven,” says Sullivan.

A Unox oven was specified for its flexibility. The small oven can roast, grill, steam, slow cook, >

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Tom Barton, executive chef



NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY



additions were a challenge, as Jef Leon, associate at Prellwitz Chilinski, explains. “It was a lot of things in a small space. The logistics were fun to solve, and Colburn & Guyette was a great team to work with. They knew the ins and outs of university dining. Today’s students like grab ‘n’ go options, and they want to know where the food is from.”

He adds, “it’s easy to overlook the fact the make-up of the student body changes every four years or so. We believe food is an influential common denominator. Northeastern believes this as well and through our decade-plus long partnership, we’ve strived to create cuisine in sympathy with the world around us.

“Today, students are savvier. We are all more aware of what we put in our bodies. We value humanely-raised meats, hormone and preservative free, local and seasonal produce, wholesome and nutritious food without sacrificing flavour. The students value this as well, and Northeastern has embraced the opportunity to teach health and wellness by example. This year’s expansion of International Village Dining is yet another commitment by Northeastern to evolve with student values and society holistically.”

“We share [with Northeastern] the belief that places are for people, and the character of a place is not defined by a layout and finishes alone,” he adds. “We have designed a stage. Operationally, it houses equipment; architecturally it aims to facilitate interactions. Aesthetically, the design aims to seamlessly blend with its surroundings. We worked with Northeastern and various consultants through various challenges: kitchen exhaust limits, running utilities over an existing electrical vault, kosher certification and the project schedule. The result is an understated vehicle that allows Northeastern to showcase its commitment to offer great food in a place that fosters meaningful social interactions.” ■

sous-vide, night cook, regenerate, bake bread, and cook desserts. Timmons describes it as capable of “almost everything except washing dishes”. This piece of equipment offered the flexibility to accommodate the station’s daily menu changes. Additionally, it had to fit the existing footprint. A Bready® robotic system is used to create fresh gluten-free breads with no wheat contamination.

Executive chef Tom Barton from Compass-USA’s Chartwells, which manages the foodservice programme at the school, recalls the Unox oven was

recommended by Colburn & Guyette, who originally discovered it at trade shows. “It does a lot of things and even cleans itself,” he says.

Barton also acknowledges the Zone 7 station is “so successful and popular. We wanted to prepare everything at that station. Before, we had gluten-free options but they were done in the main kitchen. The Deli programme was robust pre-renovation and now has less space, but we made it all fit. Certain deli salads have moved to the Salad Station now.”

The space demands created by the