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College cafeterias broaden their culinary horizons

By MARÁ ROSE WILLIAMS
 The Kansas City Star

The longest line Monday in the University of Missouri-Kansas City cafeteria wasn't for pizza, burgers or fried chicken, as it usually is.

Instead, students filed in at lunchtime hoping to treat their palates to something different — Peruvian cuisine prepared by campus cooks under the direction of visiting chef Juan Carlos Barzola from Peru.

Barzola was on campus for the day as part of the Sodexo Global Chef Program, which brings executive chefs from around the world to cook at universities and teach campus chefs to prepare foods from other countries.



UMKC students fixed their eyes Monday on Chef Juan Carlos Barzola of Lima, Peru, as he prepared a Peruvian beef tenderloin dish during the lunch hour. It was the first "Meet the Global Chef" event for students in the university's cafeteria.

Sodexo USA runs the UMKC food service program.

"Most of our customers are kids who live in the residence halls. They eat here every day, two and three times a day," said Jesse Pisors, UMKC's dining services general manager. "When you eat in the same place time and time again, you really need to have something different. That's where the Global Chef Program comes in."

Barzola, who also will cook for students at Rockhurst University and Emporia State University, will visit 10 U.S. universities this month.

On each campus, Barzola will watch university chefs put into practice techniques that he taught them earlier this year in training sessions in New Orleans.

Barzola said Peruvian food is a fusion of Asian, Japanese, Arabic, French and African flavors.

He said that bringing his country's food to the United States is "about more than just food, it is about sharing culture."

More importantly, it is what UMKC students want, said Pisors, who meets regularly with members of the Student Government Association.

"One thing I hear a lot is, 'We want to see food from other countries,' " he said.

College cafeterias have changed over the last few decades. Dining halls no longer serve just meat and fish patties, mystery casseroles, over-steamed vegetables, potatoes — mashed and fried — and anything smothered with brown gravy or red sauce.

These days, college cafeterias resemble mall food courts.

But as college campus populations become more diverse, food service operations face a challenge to "stay ahead of student interests and to avoid boredom before it starts," Pisors said.

Some palates are more finicky than others.

Rachel Hampton, a UMKC freshman from Lee's Summit, turned up her nose after tasting the Peruvian passion fruit dessert, which she said tasted "like Herbal Essence shampoo." She opted for pizza instead.

Aleshia Patterson could hardly wait to get to the serving area where campus cooks were flipping and shuffling a colorful assortment of vegetables, pasta and beef tenderloin sizzling in woks.

Patterson, a freshman from St. Louis, said she eats in the cafeteria at least twice a day and getting a chance to experience flavors she has never tried before is "really a treat."

From the two main Peruvian courses on Monday's menu, Patterson chose the Saltado Creole Taypa, a colorful assortment of sautéed spicy vegetables served over a mound of pasta. Cooks prepared the food right before her eyes. With her tray in hand, Patterson rushed to find an empty table in the crowded cafeteria and dug into the dish.

"I love the color. I love the texture. It's really good," she said. "They should do this again."

Campus cooks promised to incorporate the Peruvian cooking style into the cafeteria menu. Pisors said that throughout the year the cafeteria will feature other kinds of food, including soul food and a Mardi Gras night.

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