

The Gathering Plate

A Better Food Experience for Children's Hospitals

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Abstract

The Gathering Plate is a food and dining experience for children's hospitals that provides patients and families with experiences that transport them emotionally outside of the hospital, without compromising the care of the child. This food and dining experience consists of two parts: (1) an accessible restaurant that accommodates different health situations, preferences, and cultures and (2) an interactive component that allows patients to engage with food or food systems in a fun, safe, and inspiring way.

Background Research

Research has previously established that patient experience is directly tied to health outcomes and recovery (Doyle, Lennox and Bell, 2013) and that, particularly for children, the hospital experience can be so traumatizing that it damages the well-being of the child in the long run (Salmela, Aronen and Salanterä, 2010). Though patients come from a range of different family situations, in general, the transition away from family meals is a major adjustment and contributes greatly to the lack of a sense of normalcy in the hospital, and studies have shown that recurring family meals can have a positive effect on the social, emotional, and even physical well-being of a child (Harrison et al., 2012). Hospitalized children are already missing out on other developmental opportunities such as school and peer interaction and, since research has shown that frequent family meals lead to better lifelong outcomes for children (Fulkerson et al., 2006), a positive food experience gives them a developmental opportunity back. The current options for food experiences in the hospital are limited to in-room meals, overcrowded and repetitive cafeterias, and chain eateries.

Users

There are a number of users who could benefit from and be affected by The Gathering Plate: (1) parents of a hospitalized child, (2) families, including the hospitalized child, (3) families passing through the hospital.

(1) Parents of a hospitalized child

having a sick child has been shown to put strain on marriages (Joesch and Smith, 1997), and parents could use the space as a date spot without being far from their child.

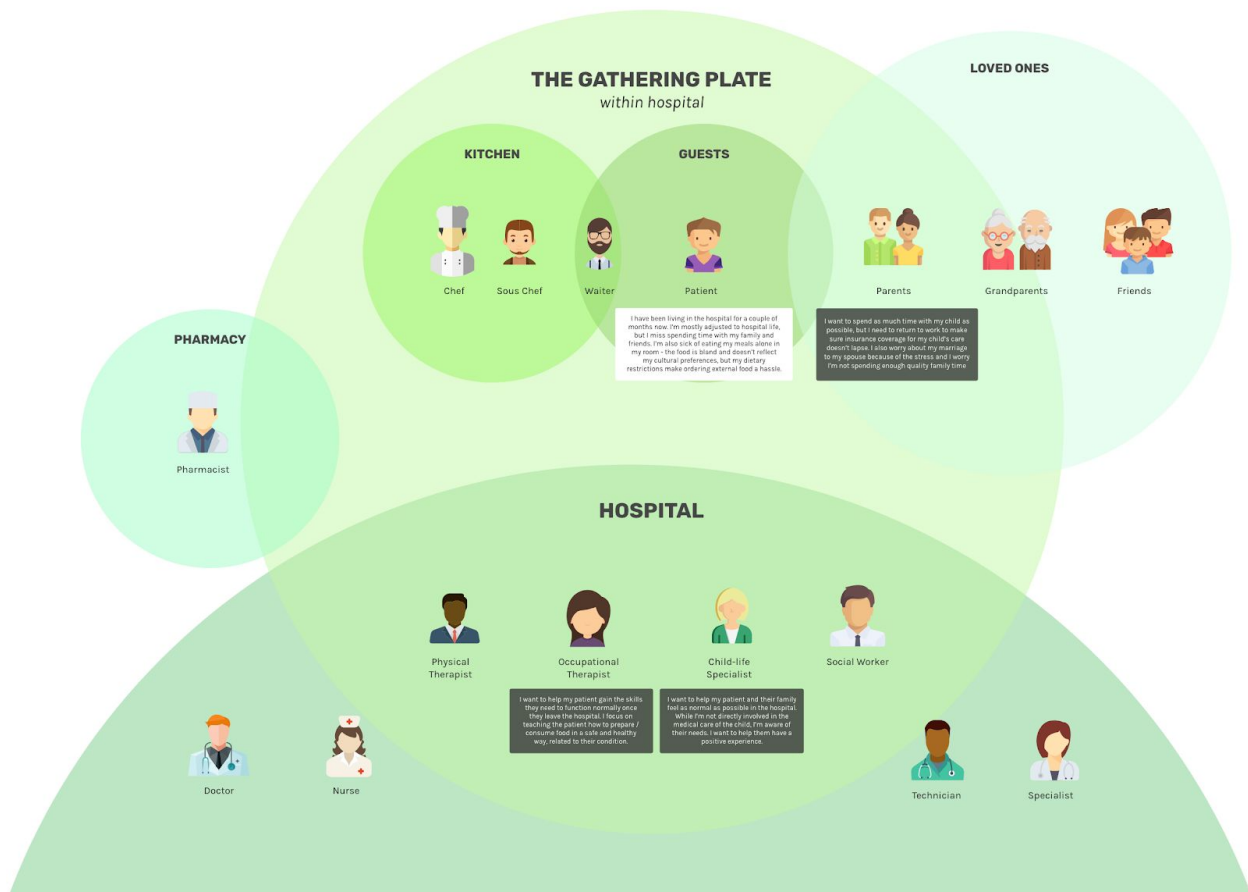
(2) Families (including the sick child) where the child must live in the hospital for an extended period of time

these children are in a variety of circumstances; they often have strict dietary restrictions or feeding tubes and the child may also be confined to a wheelchair or even a hospital bed, all of which would need to be accounted for in the experience.

(3) Families passing through the hospital for follow-ups or outpatient procedures

these families may be here for a limited time, but may be experiencing more acute stress as the experience is out of the norm of them.

Stakeholders



Map representing the relationships and motivations between various stakeholders.

There are many different stakeholders that have different goals in relation to the patient and The Gathering Plate.

(1) The patient themselves

the child living long term in the hospital becomes sick of repetitive and bland meals and tires of eating alone when their parents can't visit. They crave social interaction and more exciting meals.

(2) The parents (and other loved ones)

the loved ones of a sick child want to spend time with the child, but aren't able to visit as often as they'd like. They also want to be able to do something with the child, as opposed to just sitting in the patient room

(3) The occupational or physical therapist

hospital therapists want to prepare patients to be as self sufficient as possible when they leave the hospital. Some of the skills they emphasize are safe consumption of food and autonomous navigation. They may be able to use The Gathering Plate as a forum to teach these skills in a setting that is enjoyable for the child.

(4) Physicians / caregivers

the doctors, nurses, specialists etc. that are involved in the care of the patient are invested in making sure that their care plan is followed closely, ensuring the greatest chance of success and positive recovery. It is essential that The Gathering Plate contribute to the healing process and does not interfere in any way.

(5) Pharmacist

the pharmacist needs to make sure that any medication considerations for the child are taken into account at The Gathering Plate and that any interactions are known and handled. They also need to consider when medication needs to be administered and whether or not it needs to coincide with food.

Concept

As established, hospitalized children are already missing out on many developmental opportunities such as school and peer interaction, in addition to the frequent family meals that lead to better lifelong outcomes for children. A positive food experience could give hospitalized children a developmental opportunity back and help them to build a healthier lifelong relationship with food.

The two main facets of the concept behind The Gathering Plate are (1) an accessible restaurant that accommodates different health situations, preferences, and cultures and (2) an interactive component that allows patients to engage with food or food systems in a fun, safe, and inspiring way.

Conversations with Chefs

The initial inspiration for the two-part concept of The Gathering Plate came from conversations with industry chefs.

I sat down with Cyrille Couet at his newest restaurant, Colette Wine Bistro (located in the Porter Square Hotel in Cambridge, Massachusetts). He sparked the idea to place the kitchen at the center of the experience, creating a conversation point. He also brought up how visually appealing cooking can be (i.e. fine chopping, rolling sushi, drizzling sauces), which inspired me to think of this experience as a show. We also discussed how crucial it is for a great chef to be able to accommodate and work in a variety of constraints, and that they should be excited about The Gathering Plate and could actually grow from working there.

I also had the privilege to talk to Christine Ha, the self-titled “blind cook,” and winner of MasterChef season 3. Christine has been blind for the majority of her life, yet she is able to excel independently as a chef. She will open her first restaurant later in 2019. I conducted an interview with her at SXSW and I was able to hear her insights on the project, particularly about the accessibility components. She spoke about the importance of using specific adjectives to describe cooking demonstrations in order to give visually impaired users a richer experience (“less usage of pronouns like “it” and “there,” but rather “the pot” or “to the left of the dish.”). She also lent insight about diversifying the menu, advising that The Gathering Plate balance the menu so it is both familiar and new, and that employing chefs from different ethnic background is the best organic way to increase that diversity. For the full transcript of my interview with Christine Ha, see Appendix A.

Restaurant

The restaurant space at The Gathering Plate is a space for patients and their loved ones to gather together to enjoy a high quality meal. The restaurant heavily emphasizes delicious food, but also toes the line between being sophisticated enough for adults to enjoy and whimsical enough to speak to children. There is also an extremely strong

focus on accommodation. Many of the children who will be eating in this space require special accommodations in order to enjoy a meal. Whether it be food allergies, nutritional supplements, pureed food, or others, these patients are used to feeling uncomfortable as they ask for changes to be made. Often it is disruptive to request accommodation and it can take away from the experience, especially if the kitchen is unfamiliar or uncomfortable with making those types of changes. Instead, at The Gathering Plate, the kitchen will be prepared for these requests, even anticipating them through reservations when possible, and accommodation will be the norm. No child will be made to feel an outlier for their dietary needs, as the diner will be put at the center of the experience.

In addition to dietary accommodations, cultural accommodations must be considered and accounted for. The patients and families that would be frequenting The Gathering Plate come from a wide variety of different cultural backgrounds, each with rich and unique food traditions, that are hardly ever found reflected in existing hospital dining options. This problem is especially prevalent at major Children's Hospitals where patients and families travel from all over the world to receive care (Boston Children's Hospital, CHOP, etc.). The comforts of good cooking are diminished if the food one eats is not reminiscent of home or family traditions. Therefore, The Gathering Plate will provide a diverse range of options, coming from a variety of different cuisines. This poses a challenge in what could be a seemingly disjointed menu, but The Gathering Plate will tie a common thread through all of the food by cooking seasonally and locally. The diverse options will also give patients the opportunity to explore new cuisines and expand their palettes. The menu and waitstaff will encourage patrons to try new foods, which has the added benefit of introducing patients to new ways to live healthily and eat happily with their potential dietary restrictions. For example, countries such as India and Thailand have cuisines that are almost entirely gluten free, by default; a caucasian child growing up in the United States who is diagnosed with Celiac disease might not otherwise be exposed to those flavors.

Due to the constantly changing nature of a restaurant like The Gathering Plate, chefs will rotate, in what can be thought of as an apprenticeship format. Up and coming chefs would cook for a period of a few months, where they can experiment, hone their technique, and learn, all while participating in a good cause. This rotation will allow for diversity in the menu, as well as exciting changes for long-term patrons. There would also be rotations involving celebrity chefs such as Gordon Ramsay of MasterChef, Bobby Flay of Food Network, etc.. Modeled after the Seacrest Studios, celebrities would donate their time towards Children's Hospitals in a philanthropic capacity. For a detailed description of the Seacrest studios, see Appendix B.

Architecture

Once it was decided that the best experience for patrons of The Gathering Plate would be to center the experience around the kitchen, the architecture began to come together. With the kitchen at the middle of the room, the seating rises in layers around it, allowing everyone to view the kitchen, no matter where they are sitting. The space was mocked up in Google Sketchup and turned into a VR walkthrough using Unity.

Within the layers, there are three different types of seating, (1) standard tables, (2) community tables, and (3) seats at the pass

(1) Standard tables

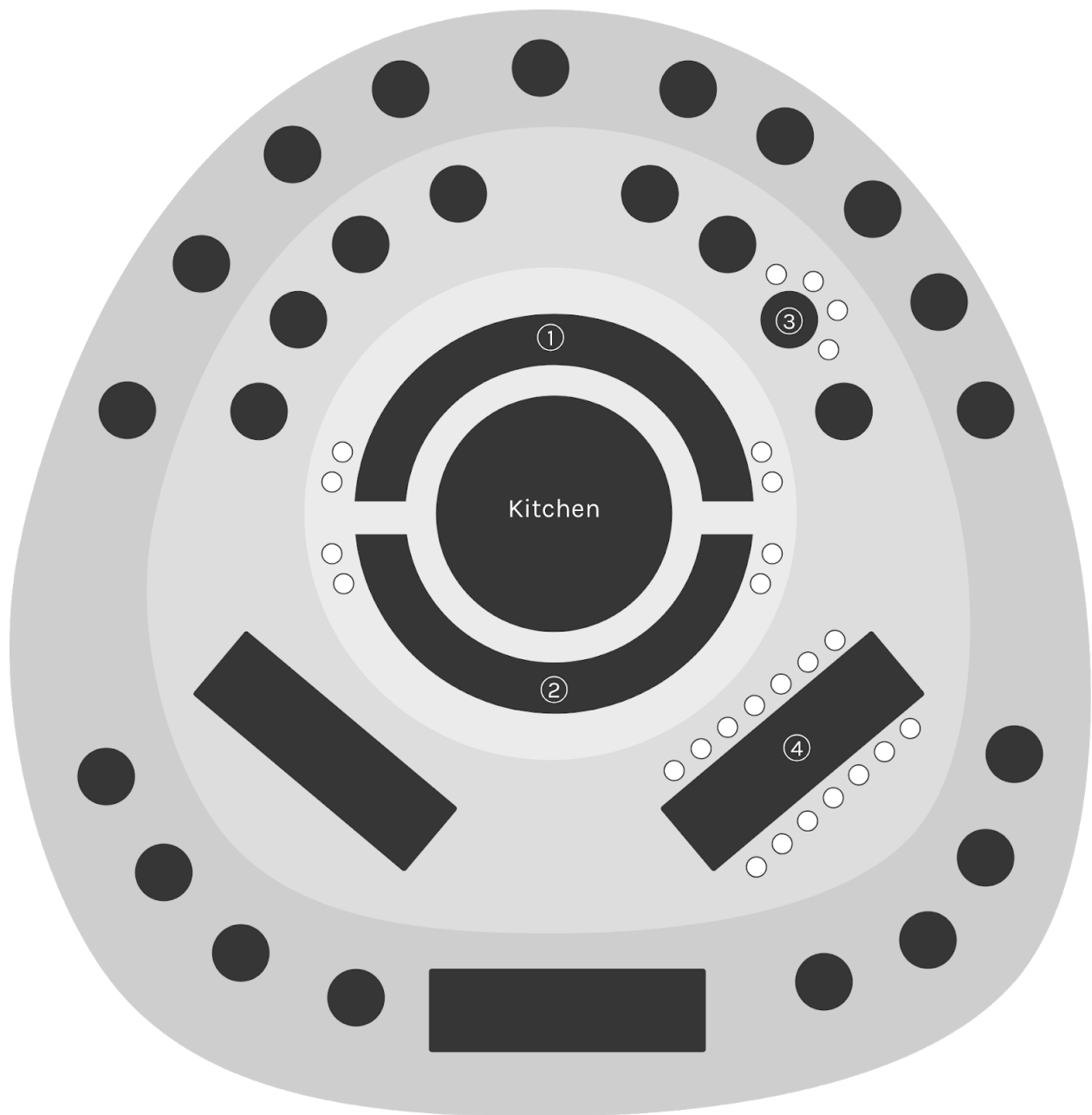
these tables can accommodate 1-2 or 4-6 people comfortably, depending on the size. They come in round and rectangular variations, and the chairs can be arranged to either face each other (as you would typically find), or around 1 side if there is a show or event happening that everyone wants to see

(2) Community tables

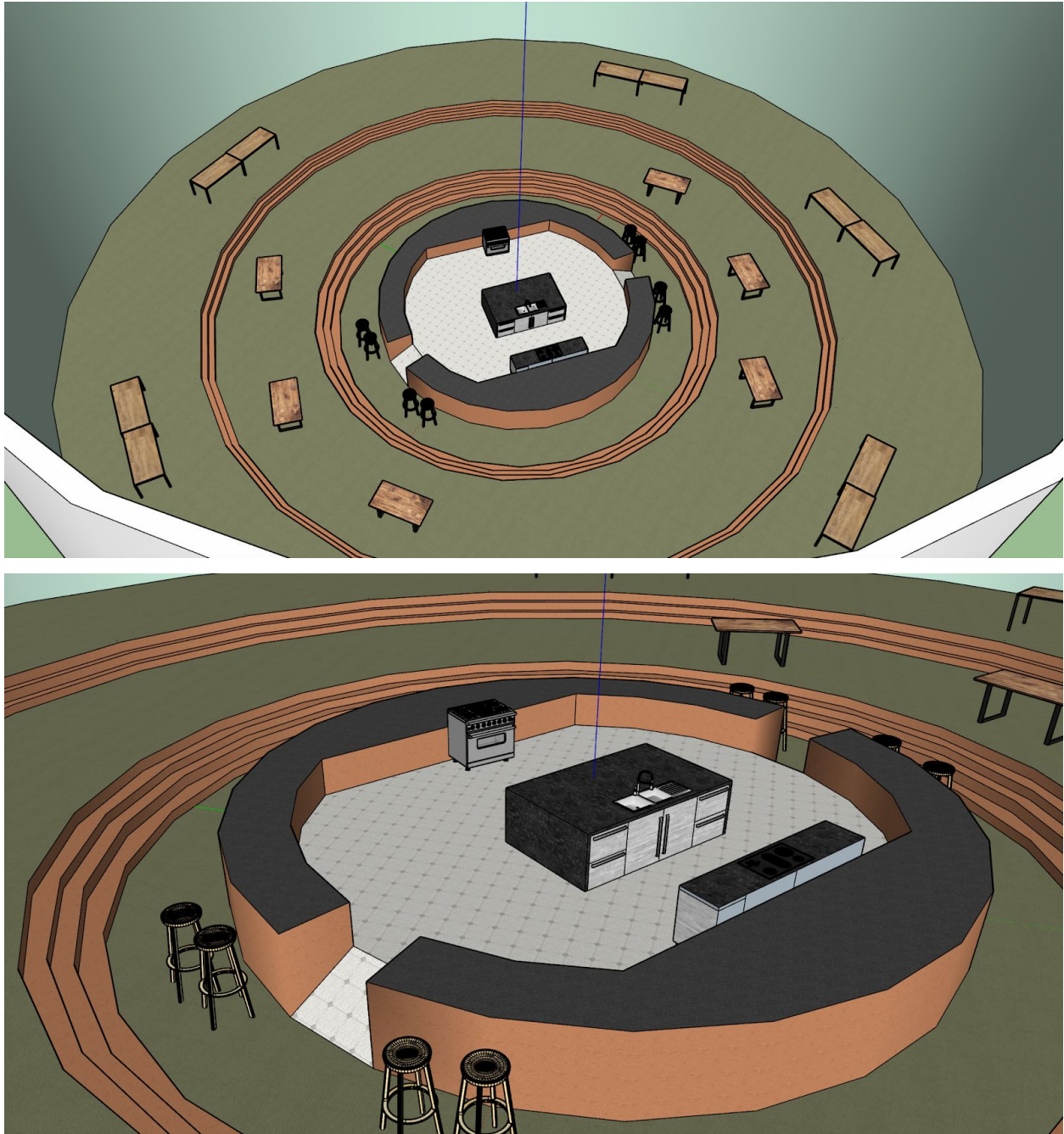
these tables can seat up to 20 people, as they are long, with many chairs that can be added and removed (or replaced with wheelchairs or walkers). These tables are meant to foster community, and are intended to be a place where patrons can come together and share a meal, even if they do not already know each other.

(3) Seats at the pass

These few seats are for people who want to dine alone or in groups of 2. The up close view allows them to participate in the action, while still being able to have a quiet meal to themselves.



Initial sketch of the layout



3D renderings of the space

Brand & Styling

An important component of The Gathering Plate is its brand and styling. The space, decorations, and menu strike a balance between sophistication (for the adults) and whimsy (for the children). Since Children's hospitals accommodate a huge range of

ages of patients, not to mention their parents, the space needed to be enjoyable and relatable for all patrons.



Capitalizing on the local ingredients and seasonal menus, The Gathering Plate's brand relies heavily on green and blue tones and used whimsically drawn flowers as its key accent element. The logo is a simple plate, surrounded by flowers, which are also featured on the menu. The brand is accessible and approachable, and the language used on the menu and around the restaurant also strives to introduce patrons to new flavors and cuisines.

Logo



A sample menu

The menu features the same flowers as the logo and the same two typefaces (Karla and Rubik). The menu is made up of small and large plates from around the world, described in language that is familiar to children and will encourage them to try something new. An introduction also explains that patrons can ask for any adjustment, putting them at the center of the experience.

The design of the space will also strike a balance between fun and sophisticated, bringing together “adult” and “child” experiences. The two bars shown in the rendering represent a (1) drinks bar and a (2) food bar.

(1) Drinks bar

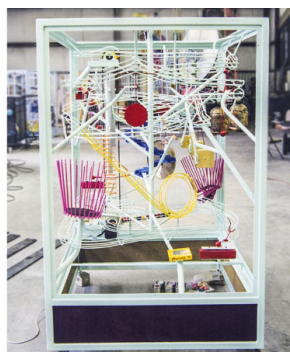
A traditional-style bar, but with non-alcoholic drinks as the default. The experience will engage kids in the exciting aspects of having a drink made - the shaking, stirring, choosing the ingredients.

(2) Food bar

Whether it be sushi, fruits carvings, or intricate plating, this bar provides some sort of food based experience that is visually exciting. This bar should provide variety and visual engagement, potentially even letting the children participate (adding a decoration to a plate, etc.)



These bars additionally have interesting elements built into their structure that allows children to get up and move around, while still engaging in the space. Potential concepts for these bars include a fish tank, a terrarium, and a George George Rhoads-style kinetic sculpture.



Interactive Component

In addition to the standard meal service (during which the cooking can be observed), The Gathering Plate also features an interactive component on certain nights. This component is designed to engage the patients even more in the world of food, giving them an opportunity to participate. These events could include cooking classes, competitions (i.e. the Chopped model), and/or interactions with celebrity chefs. The events would depend on the visiting chef, but would be designed to allow the child to participate, either through directly cooking, eating, or “judging.” These events could also include the participation of occupational and/or physical therapists, who would work with the patients to help them develop skills related to cooking and eating.

Future

At this stage, The Gathering Plate is a conceptual exploration, without consideration of cost or feasibility. The next steps in this project would be to begin discussions with hospital executives and consider the business case for an endeavor of this size. The architecture and interior design of the space would also need to be expanded upon in order to make the idea viable.

Conclusion

The Gathering Plate is an opportunity for a hospital food option alternative that will provide patients and families with an experience that transports them emotionally outside of the hospital and allows them to have a positive experience without compromising the care of the child. Bringing together cuisines from all over the world and high-quality, healthy ingredients, The Gathering Plate introduces patients to a new and better relationship with food and allows them to engage in community oriented meals, ultimately with the goal of improving their experience as they stay in the hospital, and their relationship with food going forward.

Appendix A

Interview with Christine Ha

Me: In your talk, you noted that she was planning for her restaurant for have some “easter eggs” or hidden features specifically for visually impaired people to discover - what are some of those features?

Christine: I want to incorporate Braille menus as a choice for the visually impaired and eventually place little Braille messages around the station...maybe it would reveal a riddle, and if someone solves it (secret password?), they get a free dessert.

Me: I am planning for this space to be part eatery, part show. You mentioned that on MasterChef they created a second meal for you to touch when the challenge was to recreate a plate, which got me thinking about the accessibility of cooking events/demonstrations. What advice would you give for hosting food-related events / demonstrations, in regards to visual impairment?

Christine: Being able to feel a dish is important. Also person giving the demo needs to talk through the demo like it was radio—less usage of pronouns like “it” and “there,” but rather “the pot” or “to the left of the dish.”

Me: How can I present special options of any variety (i.e. braille menu, gluten free, pureed, etc.) in a way that is supportive, positive, and not condescending? I really want users to feel comfortable asking for any accommodation they need.

Christine: Add the feature into the description of the dish in a way that is not so “in your face.” For example, if someone needs a puréed dish, you could use that word in the description of the dish or use words like “soft” or “carrot puree,” etc.

Me: Boston Children’s Hospital (my hospital of inspiration) has a huge proportion of patients and families who come from outside the US - one of the problems they often complain about is that the food is all bland, unfamiliar, and American, so menu diversity is an important focus for me. You talked about your Vietnamese heritage and how it has played into your cooking, so I was wondering if you have advice about integrating flavors and textures into a menu that may be unfamiliar to people?

Christine: This comes from education and balancing the menu so that it is at the same time familiar and conducive to introducing new flavors and cuisines. Employing chefs and cooks with different ethnic backgrounds will also increase diversity in an organic way.

Appendix B

Ryan Seacrest Studios

“Seacrest Studios is a state of the art TV and radio station broadcasting on Channel 19 to all BCH televisions on the hospital's main campus. Patients, families, and visitors can call in to LIVE broadcasts by dialing 5-RYAN (5-7926) or stopping by the studio located on the first floor of Main (above the musical stairs and adjacent to the Patient Entertainment Center).

Seacrest Studios is part of the Creative Arts Programs within Child Life Services. The programming ranges from music request hours to game shows to celebrity guests and more. Patients can make song requests, participate in games or be a guest DJ. Patients get an opportunity to explore their creativity and hidden talents on air or from the comfort of their patient rooms... The patients have also been able to meet many local and national celebrities through Seacrest Studios like Meghan Trainor, Shawn Mendes, Keith Lockhart, Olympian Medalist Dara Torres, Charlie Puth, Alessia Cara, Michael Franti, Dustin Lynch, Andy Grammer, Super Bowl LI Champions the Patriots, and many more.” (Boston Children’s Hospital)

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