

# Destination Restaurants

# GET IT RIGHT

## At University of Wisconsin's New Union South



Prairie Fire holds open mic nights and monthly wine tastings.

Breaking new ground in campus center dining, University of Wisconsin's recently opened Union South building features six "destination" restaurants that offer an exciting draw for the entire campus community. These distinct restaurant environments—individual, dynamic concepts located throughout the building—have brought students out of their study and living silos to gather in pleasurable, interactive community spaces. With options that mix recreation, entertainment, leisure, technology, ecology, and even a challenging three-story climbing wall, the restaurants are anchored with diverse and delicious culinary options to create an altogether new experience on their campus.

"At Union South, the restaurants create an ecology that interweaves the missions of student life with auxiliary services," said Jan van den Kieboom, Principal at Workshop Architects, Inc., describing the operations and design team's intent. "The organization of dining venues organically leads guests through the facility, inspiring a sense of ease and comfort. With scale, texture, finishes and lighting, intimate spaces welcome people and alleviate stress. Through thoughtful and intentional design, every aspect of the building facilitates community interaction."

When guests enter Union South's main lobby, they experience the warmth of a campus living room, filled with bright, soft seating flanked by two massive stone fireplaces designed to welcome them to sit, relax, converse and simply "hang out." From here, the center's restaurants—the Sett, Harvest Grain, Ginger Root, Urban Slice, Daily Scoop and Prairie Fire—beckon along an interior streetscape that acts as the building's circulation spine.

### Big Changes

Union South hadn't always been so inviting. The dramatic remodel decisions resulted from focus groups, student forums and a campus-wide survey of the entire university population, facilitated by Rob White, of Denver-based Envision Strategies. "Students told us what kinds of experiences they were looking for and what was important to them,

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Intimate, relaxed seating inspires a sense of ease and comfort.



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The Sett entertains its guests with a rock climbing wall, live music, and projection screen.

and we used that information to say ‘You’ve really got to restructure. You can’t just do what you’ve been doing. You need something that reflects the innovation and energy of a world-class university,’” White explained. “On the operations level, we encouraged them to get their people out of the kitchen and up in front of the students. Despite some initial resistance, they’re having a great time now.”

It was a big task to shift everyone from the mindset of the familiar food court layout to a more holistic restaurant concept approach. Some were dubious such a radical design would work. UW is a large campus of over 40,000 students. The sheer volume of transactions and financial feasibility were immediate concerns. The simple functional questions of how to engage guests with the culinary team, yet work on multiple levels, distribute food to the restaurants, and remove trash to the service dock while still remaining behind the scenes, were challenges the foodservice designer, Kathleen Seelye of Ricca Newmark Design, was charged to address. “Our approach was to design restaurants with individual storefronts and interior thematic environments that presented themselves as freestanding restaurants, yet were supported through a series of vertical and horizontal service connections in the back of house,” she explained.

While menus were developed by the University’s dining operations team, headed by Food Services Director Carl Korz, telling the UW Union South story through branding and signage was the focus of ZEBRADO, founded by Mark Schmitz. Creative Director Schmitz explained, “Our goal was to develop a brand architecture that truly mirrored UW’s unique culture and enhanced the building’s design. The names, imagery and materiality used in the signing are glue that holds the experience together. I felt that if you could ‘taste’ the food

by simply standing in the space, we would all be successful. I believe we have achieved that.”

## The Venues

The Sett—Union South’s pub area—is immediately visible from the Union’s “living room” on the main floor. Playing off the scientific name of a badger burrow—badgers being the university’s mascot—the Sett is a dynamic two-story space with a ground level restaurant and bar, stage area, and oversize projection screen. A mezzanine surrounds these primary spaces, allowing diners to enjoy brats, beer, burgers and deep-fried Wisconsin cheese curds while immersed in live music, entertainment and the vibrant décor of the stage area below.

A hip, crowd-pleasing feature in the Sett is the rock-climbing wall, contained in a glass tower, which begins in the Union’s lowest level. Climbers hitch on below, pass through the Sett, and continue to the third floor. Fun, different and cool, rock climbers entertain and engage Sett diners sitting in nearby booths.

Across the lobby are Urban Slice, a classic pizzeria, Ginger Root, offering pan-Asian cuisine, and Harvest Grain, a flatbread sandwich, soup and salad concept. Urban Slice pizzas, ranging from Chicago deep dish to New York slice, are prepared and baked exhibition style, with lasagna, calzones, pasta and side salads also available. At Ginger Root, chefs prepare perfectly seasoned noodles and create stir-fries in double barrel woks in the open kitchen. Dim Sum, Asian beverages, soups and side salads complete the meals in the Zen-inspired restaurant. Prix fixe dinners and Thai cooking lessons are also on the menu this fall. Harvest Grain provides fresh sandwiches



featuring local ingredients piled on artisan bread and toasted in the tiled hearth oven. Soups, muffins, cookies and more provide a close-to-home satisfaction.

Alongside the main lounge, the Daily Scoop, featuring UW's Babcock Dairy ice cream, also has a down-home appeal, with students happily queuing up in anticipation of their favorite flavors. From here, the circulation spine winds around to Prairie Fire, the coffeehouse and wine bar. Rising a few steps above the walkway, the area features a spectacular fireplace with beautifully worked iron prairie grasses enclosing the hearth. Guests entering this lounge space are then drawn to the terrazzo coffee bar that adjoins a wine bar, where seating offers both stools and intimate booths options.

The floor-to-ceiling glass exterior in Prairie Fire fills the coffee and wine bar with natural light and an outdoor connection to the campus activity. At night, Prairie Fire offers space for mike night, poetry readings and other gatherings—including a monthly wine tasting. From quiet study nooks to cozy booths or more energized community spaces, Prairie Fire's eclectic, bohemian style infuses the space with personality and warmth.

Overall, the restaurants provide seating for 40-280, with additional "streetscape" seating throughout the campus center, leading to a large terrace for outdoor dining and specialty events such as "Badger Bash" pre-game gatherings. This arrangement allows all concepts to maintain their individual identities, yet connect with the overall social activity at Union South.

## The Results

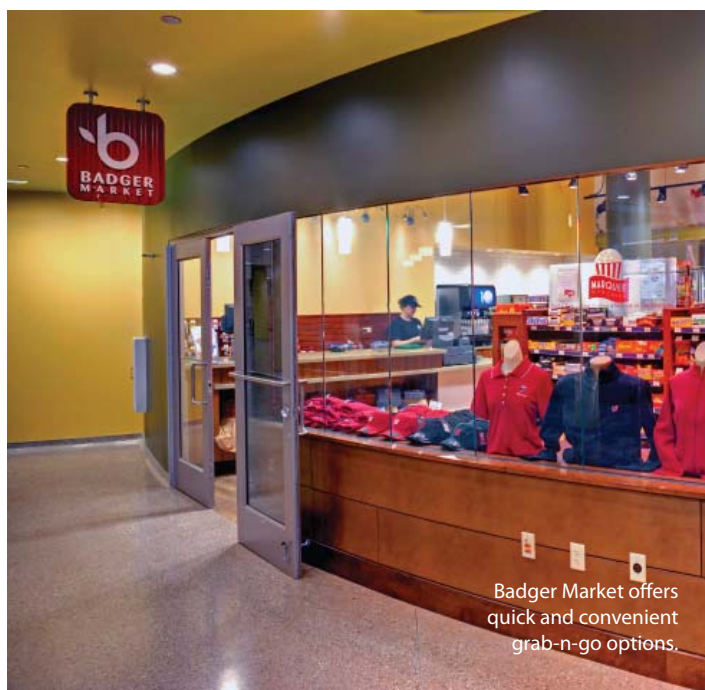
The result is a campus center dining experience unlike any other in the country. Food Services Director Korz describes the outcome: "The response to both the building and the new dining service approach has been tremendous. The new capacity, and the new capabilities of the operation, are allowing us to achieve success in ways that we could only dream of in our previous facility. Moreover, the positive change in morale is evident in the quality and creativity of everyone's daily work. Disbelievers are now converts, and the feelings of 'Oh-my-gosh, will the campus embrace this?' have been replaced with 'Why did we ever doubt? How can we take this further?'"

Students are equally enthusiastic. Upon viewing all the amenities on opening day, one senior expressed dismay over his coming graduation: "No way! I'd be here all the time otherwise!" An incoming student summed it up, "These places are so cool. Every time I turn the corner there's another restaurant or place to check out—they're awesome."

"How am I?" said another, "I just had fresh hot salty garlic Parmesan cheese fries. In short, I'm great."



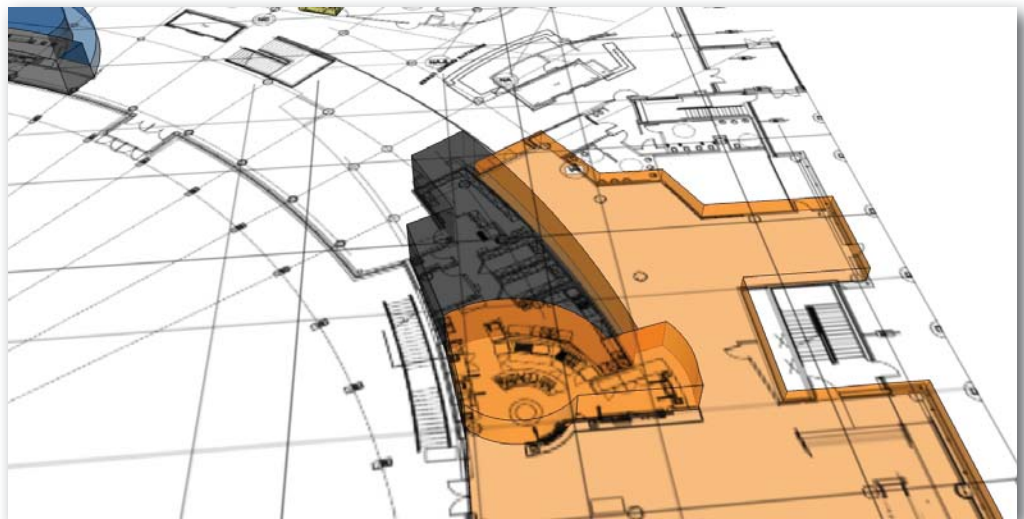
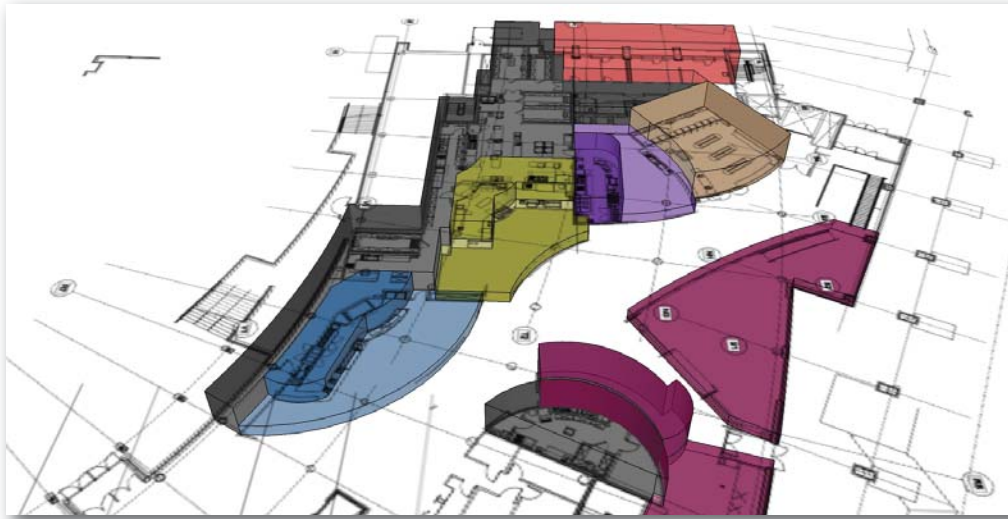
Pan-Asian Cuisine is featured at Ginger Root



Badger Market offers quick and convenient grab-n-go options.



Urban Slice pizzas are prepared and baked exhibition style.



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