Remember the dining halls? You can still get a burger and fries, but pretty much everything else has changed. By Molly Petrilla
 Meals are also prepared without shortcuts. “Nothing is processed, and nothing is coming from a can,” Bulau says. In particular, salad dressings, pasta sauces, and soups—foods many dining halls remove from cartons, bottles, or freezer packs—are all made from scratch at Penn. Bon Appétit has even created an herb garden in the greenhouse-like basement of 1920 Commons, so a chef who needs rosemary can simply run downstairs and snip a sprig. They’re planning to add tomatoes, strawberries, and other plants soon.

Student response to the new management company and its approach has been overwhelmingly positive. Witt says voluntary meal-plan enrollment has gone up nearly five percent this year, and in December, The Daily Pennsylvanian gave Bon Appétit one of its tough-to-earn “cheers” in its biannual “Cheers and Jeers” editorial, “for bringing its mission of using locally grown and organic products to Penn Dining.”

The dining-hall fare is now “much fresher,” says Kevin Tucker, a Wharton senior who’s had a meal plan his entire time at Penn. While he says the overall difference in taste isn’t as vast as he’d imagined, he’s enjoyed trying new dishes, such as a goat cheese and tomato tart (“I was like, ‘Wow, I definitely did not see this in the dining halls a few years ago’”).

College senior Roopa Gogineni hasn’t had a meal plan since her freshman year, but still eats in the dining halls on occasion. She’s been there a handful of times this year, and says that “it seems a lot better now; there are more options, the sandwich selection is a lot better, they have multiple soups instead of just one, and the food just seems fresher. It’s nice to visit and have [access to] a lot of fresh fruit and vegetables, because those can be hard to find elsewhere on campus.”

Foodie alums have also been excited to hear about Penn Dining’s change in management and priorities. “That’s exactly the kind of step that a university of Penn’s caliber should be taking,” says Lolis Eric Elie W’85, a food writer and author of Cornbread Nation 2 and Smokestack Lightning: Adventures in the Heart of Barbecue Country. “The move from these cookie-cutter con-

**PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREG BENSON**
plans are “value-priced” and rank competitively with Penn’s peer institutions, hovering near the low end cost-wise.)

Kings Court Dining Hall, Lunchtime
It’s not even noon yet, and the swarm of hungry students has already descended on Kings Court’s dining hall, grabbing salads or soup or the day’s special, broccoli-chicken-pasta bake. Several students have said this is the best Penn dining hall food-wise, and based on the selection of sophisticated dips alone (chipotle hummus, basil white bean, black bean southwest hummus), it’s easy to believe them.

But as both students and Penn Dining officials will tell you, the dining-hall experience is about more than just food. Since freshmen are required to have meal plans, they spend a lot of time in the dining halls, and grabbing a meal together is “always this implicit excuse for freshmen to see their friends and meet new ones,” says Tucker, who is also a Resident Advisor. In fact, looking back from her senior year, Roopa Gogineni says she met some of her closest friends over dining-hall meals, when “we’d linger over our food for hours.” And that’s exactly what the Penn Dining higher-ups are aiming for: “The dining program is critical to creating community in the residences,” says Witt, who’s currently seated toward the back of the Kings Court dining hall. “In this College House in particular, you’ll see a lot of faculty eating with the students.” Sure enough, amid the tables of hungry stu-
dent types engaging in conversation with and eating the same food as the students. With their crowded tables and warm comfort foods, for many the dining halls are about as close to Mom’s kitchen as college gets. And since Penn has the largest number of international students in the Ivy League—hailing from more than 100 different countries—the food selection tends to be diverse. On a given day in the dining halls, you might start with a Western frittata, return for a lunch of Vietnamese curry soup with a side of couscous salad and eggplant dip, then grab dinner from the Korean noodle bar or a cheeseburger or Cuban sandwich.

The vegetarian options are equally plentiful. Dishes like sundried tomato quiche with garlic-roasted eggplant, falafel with sautéed broccoli rabe, and tofu green-bean curry have made dining-hall vegetarianism at Penn so effortless that PETA named the University to its 2009 list of the 10 “most vegetarian-friendly colleges.”

Compare these varied ethnic and vegetarian choices to the selection Shaw remembers from the late 1970s: “salad or sandwiches or soup or ‘blackened something,’” he says. “There was usually a sandwich of the day, a burger of the day, and at dinner, a fish protein or a chicken protein. At Commons, they had a salad bar and soft-serve ice cream, which were about as adventurous as it got.”

Houston Hall Market, Lunchtime

Wharton freshman Christianna Hay is finishing her lunch in Houston Market, Houston Hall’s underground eatery. “It’s fine,” she says, a container of vegetarian sushi in front of her. “I was warned by my upperclassmen friends that the food [on campus] would be horrendous, but it’s actually been pretty good.”

Around her, other students are eating Indian curries or carne asada tacos or grilled veggie burgers—just a few of the expanded offerings Bon Appétit has brought to Houston Market, carved out of the venerable student union’s basement as part of the Perelman Quadrangle renovation/construction project completed in 2000. It’s one of the more popular Penn-owned “retail markets,” all of which accept dining dollars via Penn Card, as well as old-fashioned cash or credit cards. Other retail options include a Starbucks and Subway at the 1920 Commons Market, cafés in the library and engineering buildings, a grab-and-go station in the Quad, and an Einstein Brothers Bagels adjacent to Houston Market. While the dining halls feed mostly students and faculty members, these retail eateries often serve staff and community members as well.

“I think they have one of the best carry-out burgers here,” says James J. Riley, administrative and financial officer for the Department of Cancer Biology and the Abramson Family Cancer Research Institute. He’s been grabbing the occasional lunch in Houston Market for over a decade, and is currently enjoying a bacon cheeseburger and fries there. (Burgers are also the bread-and-butter—or more accurately, specially made brioche and grass-fed local beef—of the Burger Stop in the 1920 Commons Market.)

Still, keeping up with ever-changing student palates can be like recreating a favorite restaurant’s spicy chili at home: nearly impossible to pin down just the right combination. To that end, “we’re always watching to see what students are eating or what they’re buying, and changing out what doesn’t work,” Cousart says. Earlier this semester, that meant transforming the Hershey’s Ice Cream bar in the 1920 Commons Market into Yo-Reka!—a self-serve Greek yogurt bar with a plethora of fruit, nut, and granola toppings. Bulau says that Yo-Reka! grew out of a student focus group, and has already been “wildly successful.”

The adjacent UnCommon Market is also in the midst of transition, from a Wawa-wannabe to a Whole Foods-inspired mini-mart. It now stocks energy bars, trail mix, fresh fruit and other staples of a healthy diet, and last fall, sold pints of pumpkin, ginger-snap, and molasses ice cream. The source of that creamy fall delight? The Penn Veterinary School’s dairy in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, which works with a nearby creamery to produce ice cream. Dining officials hope to begin offering the remaining skim milk—left over when the fat is skimmed off for ice cream—in campus dining halls soon, and to obtain local, humanely raised pork from the Vet School’s soon-to-be swinery. After all, for Penn diners, it doesn’t get much fresher than Quaker-raised cows and pigs.