

Comfort food

Perth Clinic's focus on high-quality food is not only meeting patients' dietary needs, it's nourishing for the heart and soul

We're photographing Perth Clinic executive chef Mark Longton in his chef's whites standing in front of a healthy-looking passionfruit vine in the West Perth hospital's sunny courtyard when two curious patients wander by. After suggesting the 39-year-old chef should also be photographed without his shirt, the women go on to offer more compliments. "That pasta last night was amazing," one of them says. "Those meatballs!" says the other. "You're doing a story on the food at the mental hospital?" she continues. "Take it from me - it is really good."

Eleven years ago, Mr Longton was pulling late nights and working six-day weeks at a cucina in Perth alongside the likes of Graham Arthur, Herb Faust and Michael Forde. He loved the cut and thrust of the restaurant kitchen, but the father of three craved more family-friendly hours and a deeper level of job satisfaction.

He found out about the vacancy at Perth Clinic, a private mental health facility, through a family member. "I wouldn't have applied for a hospital job," he says matter-of-factly. But he was interested in the clinic's dedication to serving healthy, restaurant-quality food prepared fresh and from scratch. "The only reason I even considered it was I knew we don't cook and serve to a room. The patients come to us, so at 12.15pm just before lunch we're trying to do things until the last possible moment to keep the food fresh and at its peak. That was enough to make me go and have a talk."

Once he signed up, Mr Longton says he had to leave his ego at the door. "When I came here I had to tone down a bit what I was cooking, obviously in a restaurant people might come once a week, once a month or once a year to eat your food. When people are here and staying for 10, 15, 20 days, you can't have it as rich or really restauranty. You're cooking for a different kind of clientele, but they still deserve the best you can offer."

While restaurant chefs are usually hidden away in the kitchen, Mr Longton loves the contact he has with his happy customers. "The customer satisfaction is so rewarding," he says. "In a restaurant you don't really know who comes in. To have the contact we do with everyone so frequently and when they do come back you remember their name, that they loved a particular dish. You see people's faces light up when they're feeling down. When people give really positive feedback, we joke 'it's the only reason you come here.'"

Such were the rave reviews that Mr Longton and the clinic published *Healthy Food, Healthy Mind*, a collection of his favourite recipes to help nourish the body and brain. With instructions for dishes such as roast chicken breast with braised lentils, roast onion and bacon, it provides an insight into the beautiful and "real" food being served. Mr Longton heaps praise on the clinic's board and chief executive Moira Munro for supporting his passion.

She says good food is integral to her vision for the clinic. "We wanted Perth Clinic to be the place where they would

not be ashamed to tell their friends and family to visit but also a place of sanctuary and safety where they could begin to understand the need to care and nurture themselves. Food was essential to this process - being able to invite their family in to have a meal with them and begin the process of enjoying themselves again was so important. I had one patient who I will never forget who had been a patient for 20 years in other facilities. She had never allowed her children to visit her as she was so ashamed to be seen there, but for the very first time invited them to join her for a meal. We can never underestimate the effect of that action on her recovery."

She says Mr Longton is a "very rare chef". "Not only is he an absolutely superb chef but he is a people person, he understands our patients, he always treats them with the utmost respect and will do anything. I think Perth Clinic and the demands placed on him have allowed him to flourish not only as a chef but also as a person."

Mr Longton writes two six-month menus; each has 160-odd dishes and 56 desserts. "There's always vegetarian and then there is everything from curries, prime cuts, braises, pastas, and risottos."

Although the dishes boast high-quality ingredients cooked restaurant style, there's a distinct lack of fussiness. "We don't head down the molecular gastronomy path," Mr Longton says with a smile. "What I'm most comfortable with is Italian and European so there's a bit more of a lean that way."

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impact of good food on mental health, but it’s now a central consideration when coming up with his menus. “It was a bit of a battle at the start. Things like lentils, polenta, Persian feta, goat’s cheese: ‘What’s that? I don’t want that. Can I have no lentils?’ But after continually plugging away and keeping those things a little bit more challenging – for cook and client – rather than just doing meat and three veg all the time, now things like a lentil salad are as popular as grilled steak.”

The process was “common sense, or trial and error”.

“You just know what people love. Comfort food is one thing. If you’re feeling crap you don’t want to eat but then if you can see it’s cooked fresh and we serve it with a bit of a smile and a chat ... The nurses and the therapists are all telling them what to do but we’re just here to serve them.”

The key is presenting healthy, appetising food that is “normal – but still a bit of a treat”. “We don’t want them to feel like they’re stuck in an institution.”

On the day we visited, mountains of freshly cooked polenta chips were on offer for an afternoon snack, as well as bowls of fresh fruit. Not your average hospital chow.

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Mr Longton says Perth Clinic sets a benchmark for how other hospitals can augment their medical care with soul and tummy-soothing meals. “The only thing holding them back is money.”

After 11 years, Mr Longton can’t see himself working anywhere else, nor can he imagine more grateful customers.

“That’s what we are here for, to look after these people. Some people say ‘You’re wasted here’. I don’t know about that! I just think I’m exclusive.” 

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