David May '78, above, head of UNH Hospitality Services, shows off some of the courses available through UNH Conferences and Catering; director of culinary services Ralph Coughenour, center right, with students Mark Avery '07, Nicole Wolf '05 and Meg Donegan '05. Taking the tour, far right: author Todd Balf '83 and college roommate Brad Anderson '83.
My ex-roommate, Brad Anderson ’83, thinks I’m kidding. I’ve just invited him to lunch at our old dining hall at UNH. He reminds me we left campus and moved to Newmarket because of the UNH dining halls.

Things have supposedly changed, I tell Brad, adding that we’ll represent a tough challenge to a dining system that has tried to remake itself. Brad is a long-time vegetarian; I, on the other hand, am an unabashed carnivore.
He denies himself cheap caloric desserts; I have to have cookies, lots of good cookies. Brad skips meals when he’s on a working roll and gets ravenously hungry at odd hours. I’ve never skipped a meal and dine at the conventional, God-intended hours of 8, 12 and 6. I’m a little bit country; he’s a little rock ‘n roll. We’re different, yes, but we have a common heritage: 20 years ago we fled the dining halls. It seems appropriate that we return, together.

Before D-day, however, I do a little research.

Since 1997, the university has put a remarkable amount of energy and money into changing the face of UNH Dining. There is a new dining complex, Holloway Commons, which rises Kilimanjaro-like off the T-Hall end of Main Street and which opened its doors for the first time in September. A makeover of Stillings is complete, and in the coming years an already spiffed-up Philbrook will likely be the beneficiary of a major multi-million dollar overhaul. Meanwhile, the MUB is the relatively new home to a food court headlined by Godfather’s Pizza and Taco Bell. One might wonder why the grand obsession with food, and Hospitality Services executive director David May ’78 has two ready answers: one, it’s important to students and two, the university had plenty of room for improvement.

This trend toward upscale campus food services is a national phenomenon. Wheaton College in Illinois offers fireside dining and a menu partnership with Bon Appétit; Boston College has “seven distinct student dining venues,” including a Mexican Taqueria and an el fresco café with smoothies to go. Numerous schools, including UNH, offer special dining events to mark the holidays or emphasize regional flavor. Skeptics may wonder what potstickers and portabello mushroom burgers have to do with academic excellence, but in the increasingly competitive world of colleges and universities, prospective students and their parents can have their cake and eat it too. “We can’t substitute for Mom’s cooking,” cautions May, careful not to let a bunch of recent awards and the thunderstruck expressions on the faces of a few hockey recruits get to his head. “But we’ll keep trying.”

On the stairwell to Stillings’ second floor, the first thing Brad and I notice is the absence of lines. It’s the noon hour on a fiercely blustery November day and the former scene of an anxious bottleneck of cranky, why-me students is now an effortless promenade. In the background a master chef in a white double-breasted smock strolls about purposefully. Shafts of sunshine pour through multiple skylights onto a produce-laden salad bar. Brad is about to drift off in the aromatic direction of a creamy clam chowder when assistant manager Deborah Scanlon offers a tour. “It was Swillings once, wasn’t it,” she admits. “Not anymore.”

Indeed, Brad gawks like Charlie Bucket on his first visit to Willy Wonka’s Gobstopper room: bread bowls here, three kinds of pizza there. The sunny, renovated Stillings is like a mini Faneuil Hall marketplace. An array of kiosk-style “display cooking” stations are center stage, with seating areas off to either side. Today’s sandwich menu features rosemary-and-butter-brushed Reubens, while the hot entrée is teriyaki mahi mahi. Several members of the football team, evidently unable to restrain themselves until the traditional noon lunch hour, are already finished. “You don’t have to wait for lunch to eat lunch,” explains Scanlon, noting that the dining hall hours are now continuous, which means a calorie-starved fullback with a hankering for a smoked turkey on sourdough can be made happy anytime between the hours of 9 a.m. and 10 p.m.

Seemingly the lone interior vestige of the past is the soft-serve ice cream machine. Yes, it’s still here, says Scanlon, wearily anticipating our question, but there are no cones anymore. Apparently there was some ice cream mischief—Scanlon thinks it may have been our generation—involving mailboxes, and target practice on a wall outside. “Well, they’ve been off the menu ever since,” she adds.

For a moment, we are taken aback. Her chefs will provide thick creamy batter for make-your-own Belgian waffles and entrust sushi-ordering 18-year-olds with enough wasabi to set their mouth afire, but the tasteless, featherweight wafer cone is verboten? We suggest that perhaps it is time to trust our young future leaders once again now that the bar has been raised, culinary tastes refined and...
behavior suitably modified. No, she says, the cones aren't coming back.

“You had cones when you were here?” asks Jen Williams, a junior volleyball player on her solemn, empty-handed way to class. “No way!”

“Way.”

Students, and alumni, can be finicky people. Stillings, with its rustic hand-carved market signs, was the crucial first phase of the campus-wide dining overhaul that had in mind winning over the seemingly unwinnable—the student body. Perhaps advantageously, May, the plan’s architect, was one of those students himself, having had his fill of Philbrook back in the mid 70s.

After graduating, May pursued a career in food service, working in several senior positions for Marriott before coming back to UNH in 1997. When he took a tour of the dining halls, he realized with some alarm that not much had changed. There were long lines at Stillings, a dour cafeteria ambience and a disturbing sense that students were eating there because there was no other option. In early 1998, reserves from the UNH Dining budget were allocated to refashion Stillings and the work began that summer. When the renovation was finished, the administrative staff was reminded of the “Field of Dreams” mantra: “If you build it they will come.” Student usage doubled in part because it was new and in part because waiting lines were virtually eliminated with the new open-floor layout. The trademark din was muted with new soundproofing materials, as well.

On the more subtle culture front, May tried numerous things, including a new language. The student wasn’t the *&#! student but a guest (and a regular one at that). The dining hall was a distinct dining venue with specialty shops. The entrance became the “front of the house” in May-speak and pointy-hatted chefs like Ralph Coughenour “performers.” May insists that food service is entertainment: “At Stillings for the first time you get to sit and watch the show.” Many of the changes were meant to enhance the employee morale, which it has, but May’s department also came up with a rallying cry that was both universal and easy to remember for everyone else. The slogan: “Real. Good. Food. Now!”

Wisely, May didn’t go completely post-modern. The quaint UNH tradition of napkin notes, something May remembers from his own undergrad days, was not only maintained but re-energized. Getting honest feedback was crucial to better food service, and the napkin notes, May and other administrative staff will tell you, are nothing if not honest.

Among last November’s memos tacked to large bulletin boards near the