

Baked trout with mango salsa has Cajun seasoning for some bite. About half a fillet per person satisfies athletes who are eating light.



What's on the Mizzou Training Table?

MU CHEF DESIGNS AN ECLECTIC AND ALLURING MENU FOR STUDENT ATHLETES.

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The enormous tiger face painted on the exterior windows is the first clue that a meal at Sells Family Athletic Dining Hall on the University of Missouri campus in Columbia will be a unique experience. The hallway through the Mizzou Athletics Training Complex that leads to Sells is the second. The short walk passes an enormous weight room and various sports' locker rooms, surrounded by walls covered with pictures of former Mizzou athletes who have gone on to the Olympics or careers in the NFL.

Fresh fruits and vegetables and healthy side dishes are always available at the dining hall, but the athletes must provide the discipline to choose them.

Then the powerful whiff of bacon hits, and it all feels normal again.

Sells Family Athletic Dining Hall is the formal title of what's often called "the training table," a sports term for a table full of healthy food options. But calling Sells "the training table" doesn't capture what happens here.

This might be the most unusual dining facility in the entire state. Sells is part dining hall, part banquet hall, part study hall, part social club, and part recruiting tool. It is partially responsible—in a subtle but significant way—for the performance of Mizzou athletic teams. Since Sells opened ten years ago, the players whose photographs adorn the hallway wall are pictured, in part, because of what they ate here.

Stephen Evans, head chef for Missouri Athletics, holds a stainless steel bowl with his left hand. His right hand, sheathed in a plastic glove, mixes mango, corn, and spices for a salsa to top the trout on the lunch menu. Trout with mango salsa ... it's a safe bet that few university dining halls in America offer such a dish, today or any day.

Stephen began his culinary career as a dishwasher at a restaurant in his hometown of Las Cruces, New Mexico. He spent four years in the Navy and cooked for hundreds of sailors aboard the USS *La Salle*, a command ship that carried as many as seven hundred people.

He says cooking for athletes and cooking for sailors is about the same, with one big difference—the Mizzou Athletics Training Complex (which houses the dining hall) never gets rocked by waves. When Stephen steps outside, he sees Faurot Field, not the endless rolling sea.

"The kitchen is always the backbone of the ship; it's the same way for the sports teams," he says. "They're our soldiers. They go out and fight for us."

Stephen sees cooking as a form of social interaction,



Omelet and sandwich stations provide made-to-order meals for the student athletes.

“The kitchen is always the backbone of the ship; it’s the same way for the sports teams.”



A Navy chef before he moved to the Mizzou Athletics dining hall, Stephen Evans cooks every week for hundreds of his friends.

as if he were cooking for a family gathering, albeit an enormous one, every single day. During the school year, his kitchen prepares one thousand meals a day and is open six or seven days a week; it drops to about half that output during the summer and is closed on weekends. “I always say, I go to work and just make dinner for me and five hundred of my friends,” he explains.

Stephen has an eclectic food background. He grew up in New Mexico, where virtually every recipe calls for green chilies. In the Navy, he was stationed in Italy, an ideal spot for someone who dreams of cooking for a living. He recently traveled to Thailand, where he ate frog skin, boiled pork blood, and durian (a.k.a. the world’s stinkiest fruit). If it were up to him, he would offer spicier food on the menu. But he recognizes two facts: one, not everyone is as adventurous in eating as he is; and two, though Mizzou attracts student athletes from around the world, Columbia still sits squarely in the heart of the Midwest, so he errs on the side of meat and potatoes in the dining hall and leaves the boiled pork blood for his personal life.

Still, he dabbles in dishes on the fringes of spicy, and if an athlete requests something new, he’ll do his best to make it. He laughs as he tells of a time a volleyball player made a specific request for gumbo and cornbread. He made it for her ... on a day she was traveling for a game, so she didn’t get to eat it.

When the athletes accept a new item, he adds it to the rotation. Take this common afternoon snack: turkey burgers. The treat is a staple of his menu and one of the more popular recurring items. Per the National Collegiate Athletic Association regulations, food served in the morning is a “morning snack,” and food served after that is an “afternoon snack.”

As one of his employees cooks thirty turkey burgers at a time on a grill in the center of the kitchen, Stephen sits at his desk at the far end to order food. The biggest challenges he and dining hall manager Jeff Melegrito face on day-to-day basis are the unexpected issues that come up with an operation of this size and scope. Planning for, preparing, and serving the food for a university’s athletics

The dining hall features color-coded signs advising athletes Go, Slow, or Whoa for different menu selections.



Jason Saldana cooks thirty turkey burgers at a time and may cook three hundred of the popular afternoon snacks in the summer when fewer students are there.



Chris Harrison tailors an omelet with the exact ingredients requested by an athlete. Some athletes need to gain weight while others may need to lose.

program takes an immense amount of time, and Evans and his team have it down to a science—or at least, as near as they can get to a science, given the unpredictable nature of deliveries. “It’s like grocery shopping for six hundred people,” Stephen says. “You never know what everybody’s going to want on a given day.”

The menus are prepared a month in advance and run on three-week cycles. Stephen orders food for a summer Tuesday on Sunday and most of it arrives on Monday.

Tom Otto, a cook who has worked at Sells since the day it opened, comes into the office as Stephen puts in an order. Tom, who gets up at 3:30 AM so food is ready for the 6 AM arrival of football players, reports that as of mid-morning he has cooked forty-five pounds of bacon, which explains the alluring smell that saturates every inch of the place. And all of it will be gone by the time the morning snack is over.

For the afternoon snack, Stephen and his staff cook three hundred turkey burgers, twenty pounds of trout (with mango salsa), and forty-five pounds of chicken wings, which were left over from the previous day. The staff serves those entrées with red velvet cookies, Greek yogurt, regular yogurt, macaroni salad, double bean salad, chicken salad, Caesar salad, plums, honeydew, grapes, blackberries, kiwi, apples, grapefruit, strawberries, corn on the cob, broccoli, and a made-to-order sandwich station. To drink, there are six types of juice, milk, chocolate milk, three flavors of Gatorade, coffee, tea, and water. Notably missing: soda.

Volume and quality are only part of the story at Sells. The healthiness of the offerings is inseparable from the dining hall’s overall mission: “We’re an integral piece of the puzzle in preparing our student athletes for success,” Jeff says. The chicken wings, for example, were baked, not fried or breaded. They were gone in less than an hour.

Stephen wheels a cart loaded with recovery drinks through the double doors of the kitchen and across the dining room. His clientele are student athletes—all young and in good shape. Even the coaches who pop in are almost uniformly fit and trim. “I’m a big dude,” says the broad-shouldered, six-foot-four chef. “When I have to look up to the players, it’s like, ‘Dang, you’re huge.’”

For example, Yasir Duront, an offensive lineman on the football team, is listed at six feet seven inches tall and 340 pounds, and fellow lineman Tyler Howell is six-feet-eight, 330. They share space with gymnasts Allison Bower, Gabrielle Gottula, and Kennedi Harris, all of whom

are listed as five feet zero inches tall.

Despite the differences in body size, the same basic rules about nutrition apply to all the athletes. When students begin competing at the collegiate level, many discover they need to eat a lot more than they used to because they are expending a lot more energy than they did in high school. Roughly 650 student athletes eat at Sells during the school year, but Stephen prepares enough food for a thousand regular servings because athletes need so much more fuel for workouts, practices, and games.

As Stephen pushes the cart out of the eating area and down the hall, he passes the locker rooms and heads to the weight room, where he restocks the snack bar. He stops by the office of Nici Newquist, a nutrition assistant and team dietitian primarily serving football players and athletes in gymnastics, soccer, and baseball. This was Nici's last summer at Mizzou; she has accepted a position with the New York Jets of the NFL.

On the wall of Nici's office is a whiteboard that bears this message:

Undertrained and fueled you may not finish.

Overtrained and underfueled you may not start.

Trained and fueled you will smash.

The credo summarizes a major reason Sells Dining Hall exists: It can also give athletes a competitive advantage.

Just as the students come in different shapes and sizes, so do their diets.

The dietary requirements vary from sport to sport, position to position, and athlete to athlete, Nici says. For example, the offensive line of the football team might have one player trying to gain twenty pounds and another trying to lose twenty pounds. Whatever their weight-related goals, the athletes are taught how to reach them by eating properly, and then it's up to them to have the discipline to follow the instructions.

"They're doing way more work here than they ever have before, whether it be on the field, at the weight room, in the classroom. Their schedules are crazy busy—they're constantly go-go-go," Nici says. "They don't realize how much they actually need for their bodies. So we talk about performance—'How is what you put in your body going to (help) your performance?'"

Nici teaches athletes to eat more, eat more often, and

stay hydrated. Mizzou's nutritionists use an advisory sign system; the food is labeled accordingly with green, yellow, and red signs:

GO (green): Fruits and vegetables and lean proteins comprise a sizable chunk of every meal for every player.

SLOW (yellow): "Sometimes" food includes steak, which is served six times a year.

WHOA (red): As in, "Whoa, should I eat that?" WHOA foods are high-calorie, high-fat items that should be eaten rarely and in small amounts. Athletes trying to gain weight eat more WHOA foods, such as macaroni and cheese, lasagna, and most sweet desserts.

Nici walks from her office to the dining hall at mealtime to help athletes and answer questions. Her job combines her two passions: "Sports and food have always been a love of mine," she says. "It's amazing how something as simple as what you put in your body can truly affect what you do on the field."

The dining hall tripled in size after a 2008 expansion and now has 9,200 square feet, though it's usually only half full in the summer months.

Four members of the women's college basketball team—Hannah Schuchts, Jordan Frericks, Sophie Cunningham, and Jordan Roundtree—gather to eat after a morning workout. They eat together at Sells regularly. Often, they join members of the volleyball team when their schedules overlap.

It's clear the student athletes have absorbed what their coaches, trainers, and nutritionists have taught them about eating healthy. Rusty Burney, Mizzou's senior director of athletic performance, says strength coaches and nutritionists work together to repeat the same "eat healthy" messages to the athletes over and over again. "Once they kind of catch on to those basics, that's when a lot of them will be able to individualize what they do and take it further, to gain lean muscle or lose body fat," Rusty says.

Soon, the athletes show improvement on the field. "The stronger and leaner athletes are able to produce more power," Rusty says. "They run faster, they jump



Stephen Evans says goodbye to Nici Newquist, a nutrition assistant and team dietitian who just took a position with the New York Jets.



Dining hall manager Jeff Melegrito oversees budgets and personnel and has overall responsibility for the dining hall. He and chef Stephen Evans work closely together.

The Sells Family Athletic Dining Hall can seat about 260 athletes at a time, but they don't all come at the same time. The hall is less crowded during the summer.



higher, they generally perform better."

The basketball players are proof. Ever hear the old saying about the "freshman fifteen"—a reference to how many pounds first-year college students gain from stuffing themselves full of junk food? Jordan Frericks says for athletes, the "freshman fifteen" more often means fifteen pounds of muscle from a dedication to working out.

She and her teammates learned quickly that when they "cheat" and eat a bad meal, they will pay for it with a bad practice or a bad workout. "We can tell when we aren't following it," Hannah says. "You get fatigued easily."

They say they love Stephen's cooking, both for the variety and the quality. Taco Tuesdays are a big hit. Sophie says she loves the freshness. Hannah gets the same omelet every day—sausage, cheese, peppers, and onions. When Jordan tore the anterior cruciate ligament in her knee, she made sure to pile her plate full of fresh blueberries, which are credited with helping the healing process.

Jordan says she sees her visits to the dining hall as just another class: preparation with a lifelong application. When she goes out into the real world, she will bring good eating habits with her, and she credits Stephen, Nici, Rusty, and the rest of the Sells staff for that. "They're here to care for us," Jordan adds, "and we really appreciate it."