



ICAA Culinary and Hospitality Standards of Excellence



Overview

The ICAA Culinary and Hospitality Standards of Excellence are designed to inspire innovation, elevate expectations, and establish a shared vision for what wellness-centered dining can and should be in senior living communities.

These standards provide a guiding framework that redefines the role of culinary and hospitality services—not just as support functions, but as influential contributors to quality of life, well-being, and community vibrancy. Rooted in the belief that food can add life to years as well as years to life, the standards emphasize that nutritious meals should also be exciting, flavorful, and joyfully shared.

More than aspirational language, the standards provide a strategic foundation for designing, evaluating, and enhancing dining experiences that reflect contemporary tastes, cultural diversity, and evolving health needs. They support a holistic approach that unites culinary, nutrition, and service teams around a common goal: to deliver memorable experiences that nourish body, mind, and spirit.



Importantly, the ICAA Culinary and Hospitality Standards of Excellence also serve as the foundation for eligibility to earn the **ICAA Culinary Plate of Distinction**. This recognition honors senior living communities demonstrating leadership and excellence in wellness-focused food and hospitality. Think of this distinction as a “Michelin star” for the senior living industry, celebrating programs that go above and beyond to create meaningful, elevated dining experiences.

Whether you’re seeking inspiration, benchmarking progress, or pursuing recognition, these standards are here to guide your community’s journey toward culinary distinction and holistic well-being.



The Standards of Excellence span five interconnected domains:

- 1 Culinary Excellence and Food Quality
- 2 Hospitality and Elevated Dining Experiences
- 3 Wellness-Driven Nutrition
- 4 Transparency, Trust, and Culinary Innovation
- 5 Active Aging Through Food and Community Engagement

Together, these categories provide a compass for communities looking to align their culinary programs with wellness values, resident preferences, and industry-leading practices.

Standard 1: Culinary excellence and food quality

This section assesses the foundation of your dining program, encompassing its quality, freshness, creativity, and alignment with wellness principles. From thoughtful sourcing to modern, diverse menus, this standard emphasizes how meals can nourish both body and spirit while meeting the evolving tastes and preferences of today's older adults.



1 At least 80% of center-of-plate proteins and side dishes are prepared using fresh, not frozen, whole-food ingredients and are responsibly sourced.

2 Meals are cooked to order from house-made ingredients, ensuring peak freshness and quality assurance.

3 At least 25% of standard lunch and dinner menu offerings feature global flavors and reflect modern culinary trends.

4 Chef-driven, interactive dining experiences—such as action stations or build-your-own meals—are offered three or more times per week.



5 Culinary and service staff receive formal training at least once a year, focusing on food presentation, hospitality, and wellness-informed service (e.g., plating techniques, IDDSI standards, or nutrition-forward dining).

6 Kitchen equipment and layout are designed to support evolving resident preferences and incorporate modern culinary methods and technologies (e.g., sous vide, combi ovens, CVAP, TurboChef, air fryers, digital temperature monitoring).

7 Meals are served at the proper temperature (hot foods hot, cold foods cold), with flavor profiles that match the menu description and meet resident expectations.

Standard 2: Hospitality and elevated dining experiences

Dining is about more than just food—it's a ritual of connection, dignity, and pleasure. This standard explores the quality of hospitality and how your dining team creates meaningful moments through attentive service, professionalism, and personalization. When hospitality is elevated, meals become experiences that deepen residents' sense of community, wellness, and belonging.



- 1** Employees receive formal hospitality training at least once per year, focusing on empowerment, empathy, and how to anticipate and respond to resident needs.
- 2** Servers are friendly, personable, and build rapport through genuine, respectful interactions with residents.
- 3** Dining managers are regularly visible on the floor, engaging with both residents and staff to support a culture of excellence and accountability.
- 4** Menus clearly identify options that meet special dietary, nutritional, and cultural needs, making all residents feel seen and supported.
- 5** Servers are knowledgeable about the day's menu and specials, can confidently answer questions, and accommodate special requests with care.

- 6** Dining rooms are staffed appropriately to ensure a premium experience aligned with the chosen service style (e.g., formal, casual, buffet, bistro).
- 7** Employees wear professional uniforms assigned by the community to promote consistency, pride, and a polished presentation.
- 8** Service and culinary teams work collaboratively to ensure meals are delivered efficiently, professionally, and with hospitality at heart.
- 9** Guests are warmly greeted and promptly seated; beverage orders are taken during the initial approach to the table.
- 10** Enhancing the meal is encouraged through thoughtful offerings such as coffee, dessert, or additional beverages.



11 Table maintenance is attentive and timely, with dishes and glassware cleared as residents finish, maintaining a clean and welcoming environment.

12 When appropriate, checks are presented and collected promptly, with discretion and professionalism.

13 Tableside touches—such as freshly cracked black pepper, grated parmesan, or wine carafes—are used to elevate the dining experience and create moments of delight.

14 Meal timing expectations are met:

Beverages	within 8 minutes
Appetizers	within 10 minutes
Entrées	within 18 minutes
Coffee and dessert	within 10 minutes
Servers check back	within 5 minutes*

* Servers check back within five minutes of each course being served to ensure resident satisfaction and address any needs.

Standard 3: Wellness-driven nutrition

Nutrition isn't just about adding years to life—it's about adding life to years. At the heart of every meal is the opportunity to fuel health, vitality, and joy. Healthy food doesn't need to be bland. It can be vibrant, delicious, and full of flavor, while still promoting wellness, longevity, and an enhanced quality of life. This standard focuses on how your dining program prioritizes nourishment that supports both

body and spirit. It celebrates food that not only meets dietary needs but also excites the senses, offering fresh, flavorful, and nutrient-dense meals designed to enhance every resident's experience. From plant-forward options to delicious, heart-healthy entrees, you strive to ensure that every bite contributes to a longer, healthier, and more fulfilling life.

1 Menus reflect core principles from the *CIA Menus of Change*, *Food is Medicine*, *Blue Zones*, and/or *American College of Lifestyle Medicine*, emphasizing plant-forward meals, nutrient density, cultural inclusivity, and environmental sustainability. At least one fully plant-based offering is provided per meal period, per day.

2 All daily menus consistently include a balanced mix of all five food groups: fruits, vegetables, whole grains, protein-rich foods (animal and/or plant-based), and dairy or fortified alternatives.

3 Recipes are crafted to limit saturated fat, added sugars, and sodium in alignment with current dietary guidelines.

4 Residents can easily request or access portion adjustments and dietary modifications, including: no-added-sugar options, salt-free seasonings, vegan and vegetarian meals, culturally specific diets, and religious or ethical restrictions.



5 A variety of beverages are offered with every meal and throughout the day, including:

Infused waters

Unsweetened teas

Low- or no-fat dairy or fortified plant-based milk

100% fruit and vegetable juices (served in recommended 4–6 oz portions)

Low-sugar or no-sugar electrolyte beverages

Standard 4: Transparency, trust, and culinary innovation

Building transparency and trust in the dining experience is essential for fostering a sense of connection and confidence between residents and culinary teams. This standard emphasizes the importance of open and honest communication about sourcing, nutrition, and sustainability, empowering residents to make informed choices. At the same time, culinary innovation ensures that dining remains dynamic, exciting, and

tailored to modern needs. By integrating cutting-edge technology, creating personalized dining experiences, and prioritizing sustainability, this standard fosters a dining culture that is both transparent and innovative. It's about more than just food; it's about building trust, enhancing connections, and offering residents a true sense of ownership and pride in what they eat.

1 Open-kitchen and chef's table experiences are available regularly, allowing residents to engage with the culinary team and witness the preparation process, strengthening the connection between the kitchen and the dining room.

2 Clear, easily accessible information on food sourcing, nutrition, and sustainability is provided to help residents make informed decisions about their food choices. Menus are designed with transparency in mind, including details about ingredients, sourcing practices, and nutritional benefits. Menus are designed to be readable for older-adult eyesight.

3 Technology is seamlessly integrated into the dining experience, featuring digital menus, tableside ordering, online reservations, and take-out options, enabling residents to choose their meals with ease and efficiency.

4 A strong commitment to responsible sourcing is evident in the community's food program, with a focus on locally sourced ingredients, sustainable proteins, and eco-friendly packaging, ensuring meals are not only delicious but also environmentally responsible.

5 Personalized dining experiences are supported by AI-assisted meal tracking systems, enabling residents to tailor meals to their personal preferences, dietary needs, and past choices. These innovations provide a more tailored, user-friendly experience.



Standard 5: Active aging through food and community en

Active aging is about more than just maintaining physical health—it's about engaging with life fully and joyfully. This standard highlights how diverse dining options and community engagement opportunities can fuel both physical wellness and social connection. From flexible meal choices to innovative social dining experiences, this standard is designed to empower residents to be active participants in their dining and community life. Whether through cooking classes, food festivals, or partnerships with local farmers, the dining experience becomes a vibrant part of daily living. The integration of fitness and nutrition, thoughtful design of dining spaces, and active involvement in menu planning create a community where food is not just fuel, but an avenue for socializing, learning, and living well.



1 Multiple dining venues offer a range of flexible meal choices, including casual cafés, formal dining, grab-and-go options, and in-room dining, ensuring there is something to suit every preference and lifestyle.

2 Dining operation schedules are adaptable and designed to accommodate active, busy lifestyles, offering mealtimes that align with residents' schedules and activities.

3 Dining areas are thoughtfully designed to strike a balance between style, comfort, and functionality, creating an inviting and sophisticated atmosphere that enhances the overall dining experience.

4 Outdoor and alfresco dining options are integrated into the dining program, providing residents with variety and enhancing their connection to the outdoors while enjoying meals in a refreshing setting.



5 Resident involvement in dining decisions is encouraged through opportunities to contribute to special events, menu planning, and food programs, fostering a sense of community and ownership.

6 Culinary activities, including cooking classes, wine tastings, guest chef events, and themed dining nights, are regularly offered to promote socialization, learning, and personal growth through food.

7 Seamless integration of fitness and dining is supported by offering pre- and post-workout meals and fostering collaboration with wellness teams, ensuring that nutrition complements an active and healthy lifestyle.

8 Partnerships with food festivals, farmers' markets, and culinary tourism provide exciting opportunities for residents to engage with local food culture, enhancing both their dining experience and sense of community.

Bring the standards to life

Elevate dining to a signature experience

You're not just preparing meals—you're creating experiences that nourish the body, mind, and spirit. As a member of the International Council on Active Aging® (ICAA), you have the opportunity to lead a movement that redefines what exceptional dining and hospitality looks like in senior living.

Step 1: Set the standard

Use the **ICAA Culinary and Hospitality Standards of Excellence** as your blueprint for building best-in-class dining experiences. Whether your community is already achieving great things or just beginning its journey, these standards provide the structure to elevate your services—and the lives you touch.

Step 2: Assess your progress

ICAA's Culinary and Hospitality Self-Assessment gives you a clear baseline for your organization's strengths, gaps, and opportunities. Compare your results with peers across the industry to gain valuable insight into trends and benchmarks that will inform your growth strategy. This is more than data—it's a catalyst for continuous improvement.

Step 3: Earn recognition

The **ICAA Plate of Distinction** recognizes communities that go above and beyond in delivering quality dining and hospitality experiences. When you're ready, invite CrossCheck—ICAA's trusted on-site validation partner—for a thorough review of your services. If your community meets the criteria, you'll earn a Bronze, Gold, or Platinum Plate of Distinction. More than a badge, this designation is a bold statement of leadership, trust, and dedication that resonates with current residents, future families, and staff alike.

Exceptional dining services are a vital part of wellness and quality of life in senior living. By aligning with ICAA's Standards and pursuing the Plate of Distinction, your organization joins a select group committed to redefining excellence in aging services.

Are you ready to raise the bar? To learn more, visit <https://www.icaa.cc/culinary&hospitality.php> email info@icaa.cc or call 866-335-9777.

The ICAA Culinary and Hospitality Standards of Excellence were established in conjunction with Restaura and CrossCheck.

