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EATING AT THE EVERGREEN SENIORS' COMMUNITY CENTRE RESTAURANT

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SUMMARY

This report highlights the results from 55 surveys and 13 interviews conducted with participants at the Evergreen Seniors' Community Centre (hereafter referred to as the Evergreen Centre or the Centre) about their experiences with the restaurant at the Evergreen Centre in Guelph. We explored what drew older adults to and kept them coming back to the restaurant, as well as factors, both social and practical, that might improve their experiences of eating at the restaurant. Going beyond evaluation components, we were also keenly interested in exploring the benefits of dining with others. Key findings from surveys include:

- Many participants (38%) ate at the restaurant on a weekly basis
- 80% of participants ate meals at the restaurant at least some of the time
- Key reasons for eating at the restaurant included affordability, convenience, enjoying the food, the welcoming atmosphere, and eating with friends
- Service could be improved by extending hours, being more attentive to customer dietary concerns, and more creative advertising for menus

Key findings from interviews include:

- Feelings of connectedness over meals, often tied to feeling comfortable and connected at the Evergreen Centre in general, with the restaurant providing a natural extension of the warm and friendly environment in which many older adults had built social networks.
- The Evergreen restaurant is convenient for older adults living near the Centre; the restaurant is also a convenient option for those who live farther away from the Evergreen centre but who participate in activities.
- Participants described the quality of the food in consistently positive terms, particularly the value for money (in terms of both quality and quantity).
- Some participants felt the restaurant catered to dietary preferences and restrictions, while others felt that the restaurant could do more to prevent cross-contamination (for example, for gluten-free diets).
- Suggestions for improving the quality of the experience ranged from expanding the hours to quality adjustment for food; generally, participants reflected that they enjoyed the restaurant as-is, sometimes suggesting small improvements.



These results map onto the broader literature investigating experiences of social dining. Particularly in survey responses, participants described eating at the restaurant as a key factor in their social life. Many saw the restaurant as a central element of the experience of being a participant at the Evergreen, for example highlighting how the restaurant felt “like home” or was “where [their] friends were.” Some explicitly referred to the restaurant as a facilitator of social contact, providing a welcome space for lively conversation. Other older adults told stories of feeling connected at the Evergreen Centre in ways that centered less around the actual experience of eating at the restaurant.

It is possible that the older adults who participated in the study did not conceptualize the restaurant itself as a facilitator of social experiences, instead seeing it as a place they could spend time with people in their existing social relationships. However, there was a sense that the eating experience in particular provides a venue for deepening social connection. These findings reinforce literature on social dining experiences that highlight the need to provide venues for older adults to eat together. Our results also gesture toward filling a gap in this literature, specifically around the social dining experiences of older adults who live in the community.

While these results provide evidence for the positive aspects of social dining, it should be noted that we may have accessed a group of older adults who are already quite well connected to their peers and to their community. As our sample comes from the Evergreen Centre, these older adults may already have strong connections, as is partially evidenced by their responses, which reflect that they often ate at the restaurant with existing friends. Future research might investigate the possibilities of reaching out to more isolated older adults. Further studies might also examine the impact of the existing outreach services offered through the Evergreen Centre to explore psychosocial benefits of social dining for a more isolated group of older adults. In light of our findings, further research into how the Evergreen Centre in general, rather than the restaurant as an isolated entity, helps older adults living in our community to feel connected.



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INTRODUCTION

In this report, we outline the results of a mixed-methods study investigating the experience of eating in the restaurant at the Evergreen Seniors' Community Centre undertaken in collaboration with a community partner (Wendy Kornelsen) employed by the City of Guelph. We used a survey and interviews to explore how seniors experienced the restaurant at the Evergreen Centre. In particular, we sought to understand how the restaurant might facilitate feelings of connection between seniors. While there is a body of research highlighting the nutritional benefits of communal dining (Keller, 2006; 2010; Millen et al., 2002) and exploring the experiences of older adults living in care (e.g. Zgola & Bordillon, 2001) we know less about the social dining stories of older adults living in the community. Social isolation is a predictor of poor nutritional health (Vesnaver & Keller, 2011) and social support is associated with better mental health among seniors (Fullbright, 2010; MacCourt, Wilson & Tourigny-Rivard, 2011). Communal or social dining experiences may contribute to maintaining or developing well-being and mental health among older adults, and may help to build or deepen feelings of connectedness (Keller et al., 2010). More research specifically investigating how social dining effects the quality of life, health, and well-being of older adults can help to design and tailor more appropriate and effective programming for this population (Drewnowski & Evans, 2001; Keller et al., 2004).

Research Goals

By studying the experiences of older adults who have eaten at the Evergreen restaurant, we sought to determine:

- What drew older adults to the restaurant
- What kept older adults coming back to the restaurant
- Whether eating at the restaurant built feelings of connectedness among older adults
- Whether there were any suggestions for improving the restaurant experience

Background

This research study builds on a literature scan conducted in the spring of 2014 (Stehouwer, 2014) in response to the Evergreen Centre's desire to learn more about the experience of social dining for older adults. In this report, Stehouwer identified a gap in



the literature around the specific psychosocial benefits of social dining. While the literature highlights the positive nutritional benefits of eating as a group in older adulthood (e.g. Keller et al., 2010), fewer studies examine diverse models for social dining and how these might impact well-being and centralize the voices of older adults. Given that social support and supportive environments have been identified as a key predictors of positive mental health outcomes among older adults (MacCourt, Wilson & Tourigny-Rivard, 2011), we were interested in deepening our understanding of social connectivity in the dining context in our community.

The Evergreen Seniors' Community Centre is a hub for older adults' activities in the Guelph community, providing services and activities for adults aged 55 and older living in Guelph-Wellington. The City of Guelph and the 2600 members of the Guelph-Wellington Seniors' Association (GWSA) together offer approximately 90 different activities and services, many of which are run by their 500 volunteers (<http://www.gwsa-guelph.ca>). The Centre has a dining facility, which is open from 9am-1pm from Monday to Friday. The dining room, or restaurant, as participants at the Evergreen Centre refer to it, is managed by one full time chef and operated by volunteers. As well as the on-site eating area, the restaurant offers a delivery service to nearby apartment buildings.

Our community partners, Wendy Kornelsen, Manager of the Evergreen and Seniors' Services with the City of Guelph, and Marg Hedley, an active member of the GWSA, were instrumental in shaping this research project. Together, we discussed the potential of building a project that would explore the experiences of older adults who eat at the restaurant. We hoped that having older adults share their stories would help us to better understand the experience of dining at this community hub. The findings from the report also illuminate aspects of the experience that might be enhanced in order to keep providing services that meet or exceed the needs of the Centres' diverse participants.

METHODS

We designed a mixed-methods study to collect a broad range of feedback, as well as a more detailed exploration of the stories of older adults who have eaten at the restaurant. Accordingly, we created a survey to identify how often participants ate at the restaurant, key reasons for eating at the restaurant, and suggestions for improvement. The survey was open to all members of the Evergreen community, whether or not they ate at the restaurant. The surveys were displayed at the Evergreen Centre main lobby, with two boxes for responses: one for the surveys and one for the interview forms. Both boxes



were closed with a slot for responses to ensure confidentiality. A researcher spent a total of four hours during two weeks to answer questions about the content or purpose of the project. Survey responses were kept independent of identification, so that they would not be linked to participant names. Accordingly, each survey was accompanied by a detachable form on which participants could indicate if they were interested in participating in an interview.

In total, 55 participants completed the survey. The survey data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet and we analyzed the data for basic descriptive statistics (i.e. participant age and gender, number of responses in each column). This data was later explored in light of the themes that arose from the interviews, to draw links between our two methods of collecting data.

All participants who indicated an interest in taking part in an interview were contacted and interview times were booked on a first-come, first-served basis. A total of 13 participants completed interviews at the Evergreen. Each interview was recorded and reviewed in its entirety and was then selectively transcribed, noting only the responses pertinent to the overall interview themes. This transcription approach blended Halcomb & Davidson's (2006) transcription method for mixed-methods research and Braun & Clarke's (2007) thematic analysis method for qualitative data analysis. Broadly, thematic analysis involves exploring data for concepts that are related in terms of content and/or tone, grouping related ideas to get a sense for how participants experience a phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2007). We blended this approach to analysis with a method of transcription specifically designed for mixed-methods research (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006) that entails deep listening to interviews, taking notes on emerging themes, and transcribing in detail segments of talk that provide evidence for a theme.

Findings were mapped onto existing literature reported in the initial literature scan for this project (Stehouwer, 2014) in order to draw meaning from survey and interview responses. Our research was approved by the University of Guelph Ethics Board (protocol #14JN016) as well as the GWSA Board of Directors.



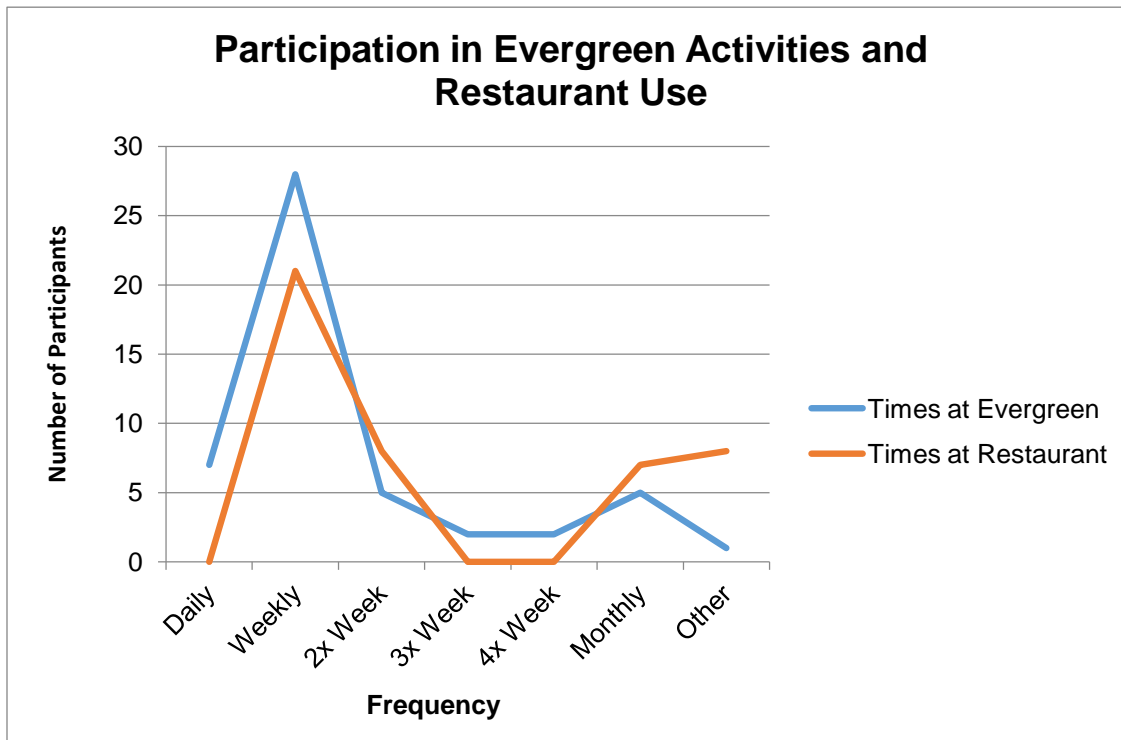
FINDINGS

Surveys

Of the 55 survey respondents, 35 were female and 15 were male (5 did not specify gender). The average age of the respondents was 70.6 years.

Frequency of Activity Participation and Restaurant Use

The following chart shows how often participants were at the centre for activities and volunteering versus how often they visited the restaurant. As the chart shows, visiting the restaurant followed a similar trend to participation in activities. Many study participants ate at the restaurant weekly (38%) and participated in weekly activities (53%). Participants had more varied responses to their dining frequency, indicating that this was not as scheduled or regular as their participation in activities and often depended on other contextual factors, including who was at their activities (i.e. if friends were in attendance they might get a meal afterward) and what was on the menu.





Reasons for Eating at the Restaurant

Participants ate at the restaurant for a number of reasons; we invited participants to check all that apply and many chose more than one reason for eating at the restaurant. In order of most to least participants choosing the option, participants ate at the restaurant because:

- It is affordable (41)
- They were already at the Evergreen Centre (38)
- It is convenient (34)
- They enjoy the food (33)
- It has a welcoming atmosphere (32)
- They can eat with friends (30)
- They prefer not to prepare their own food (11)

These findings are particularly interesting as while many participants chose several options, very few selected “prefer not to prepare own food.” This suggests that while these older adults might be able to prepare meals, they still enjoyed eating at the restaurant for reasons other than not wanting to cook. This highlights the idea that participants felt that there is “something more” about social dining than solely nutrition. When participants did choose this option, many noted that it was because they lived alone or were in a state of transition in their living situation (e.g. waiting to get into the apartment building next door). Still, the social element appeared to be strongly linked to participants’ choice to eat at the restaurant. As one survey taker put it, the Evergreen restaurant is “a good place to socialize, sometimes the only time per day that some people get to socialize.”

Eating In vs. Taking Out

Participants either ate at the restaurant, ordered food as take away, or took home leftovers to eat at a later time after having eaten in the restaurant. Many endorsed more than one of these choices, indicating that they sometimes ate in, sometimes ordered food to go, and sometimes ate in and took leftovers to go. Many participants (44, 80%) ate their food at the Evergreen restaurant. Of those who took their food with them (14, 25%), many also ate at the restaurant at least some of the time: 11 of the 14 participants who indicated that they took food out also indicated that they ate in the



restaurant at other times, while 3 noted only taking their food to go. Evidently, these numbers do not capture those who receive the meal delivery service, and so cannot give a full picture of the amount of meals served versus how many are eaten out or in.

Areas for Improvement

Participants' responses to "suggestions for improvement" focused primarily on the areas of: food quality, restaurant hours, and the physical environment at the restaurant. Among suggestions for better tailoring the restaurant to the needs of the older adults who eat there, participants noted that:

- Food options might more clearly indicate which dietary needs are being met (e.g. via labeling on the menu)
- More options for restricted diets would be welcome; for example, including more gluten-free options. One participant noted that having a representative of the Celiac Society of Kitchener come and deliver an educational session, which could be helpful to inform preparation strategies and to provide more options to diners
- The quality and variety of the food itself, in particular the coffee and bread, might be addressed
- Longer hours, possibly with a more limited menu, would cater to those whose activities ended or began later than 1pm, the restaurant's closing time
- Larger tables or a rearrangement of tables would accommodate larger groups, and perhaps allow for more social interaction

Many of these suggestions were accompanied by an acknowledgment that it is "impossible to please everyone"; participants were aware that the restaurant is primarily volunteer-driven and that certain suggestions for improvement could be more difficult to implement than others, for example a suggestion that tables could be reserved for regular weekly meet-ups.

Qualitative Survey Responses

37 individuals who replied to the survey filled out answers to at least one of the 3 "long-answer" style questions inviting elaboration on things they liked best about the restaurant, suggestions for improvement, and general comments about the restaurant. Comments were grouped into three main areas:



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- Food
- Friendliness
- Atmosphere

The following table summarizes specific comments made in the first two areas (food and friendliness). Note that totals represent number of times a suggestion was made in any of the 3 long-answer questions. Not all 37 participants who responded to the long answer questions replied to all questions, but the 3 questions elicited similar responses.

Topic Area	Specific Suggestion	Number of Times Mentioned (of 37)
Food	Improve accommodation for dietary restrictions (e.g. gluten-free, low cholesterol, low sodium)	6
	Dietary restrictions are accommodated	2
	Food quality needs attention	4
	Food quality is good	14
	Good value for money	8
	Lower prices	1
Friendliness	Volunteers are great	9
	Restaurant is a place to meet friends/socialize	16
Atmosphere	Provide more options for table service (e.g. rearrange tables, allow reservations for groups dining in the restaurant on a regular basis)	5
	Extend hours of operation	3
	Menu placed outside the restaurant	1
	Monthly specials (e.g. coffee and a muffin)	1
	Beverage cards to improve line efficiency	1

Interviews

To expand upon the responses received from the survey, we conducted a total of 13 interviews, 6 with men and 7 with women. Interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2007). We found four key themes: This is Where my Friends Are, Efficient and Convenient, Quality and Quantity, and Tweaking Service to Move Forward.

This is Where My Friends Are

Participants described feeling connected over meals as a normal part of eating at the Evergreen restaurant. Social connectedness was par for the course of the experience of





being at the Evergreen more generally, and this connectedness carried through to the dining experience. For most participants, the experience of connection was an integral part of using the Evergreen centre. Some described the other members of the Evergreen community as “like family,” and saw eating at the restaurant as a natural extension of this camaraderie. Indeed, this community feeling that pervaded the Evergreen Centre emerged as a key theme throughout the interviews as well as in long-answer survey questions.

“The people I eat with there, we are very well connected [already]. But we enjoy the eating together. It’s a dining pleasure, if you know what I mean. I’ll be honest with you; I’m not trying to sell the place, but it’s cozier. Going to a restaurant anywhere it’s just not cozy. And I think probably because it’s all seniors, they’re doing things, there could be other things going on. When we’re in there it’s not strangers, it’s members of the Evergreen. So, that gives it a little bit better flavour.” (Participant 2)

These feelings of community and connection helped to set the Evergreen restaurant apart from other dining experiences. Some noted feeling a particular loyalty to the restaurant, for example choosing to eat or get coffee at the Evergreen restaurant rather than going across the road to Tim Horton’s.

“Now, when Tim Horton’s opened up across the road I did feel bad about that. Because I knew a lot of people who would just sit and have coffee with each other, maybe someone would have a sandwich, and now they’re off to Tim Horton’s [...] I feel there should be a certain loyalty.” (Participant 7)

Unlike eating in other restaurants, participants felt free to approach other diners and join them for a coffee or a meal. This was true regardless of whether participants ate with the same people each time or whether they tended to eat with whoever was around that day. While many participants had regular dining partners, many also saw the restaurant as a place where they could chat with other diners, staff, and volunteers.

“There have been a few occasions when I’ve dropped in here in the morning for a coffee [...] and there’s always somebody I can say hello to and sit down at a table and enjoy their company.” (Participant 3)

Notably, some participants saw the friendliness and ability to interact with others as so integral to the experience of being at the Evergreen and being a member of the GWSA



that they did not comment on it explicitly as helping them to build connections. For example, some participants responded to a question about whether eating in the restaurant helped them to feel more connected by saying no, but then elaborated about having good laughs and good conversations with friends while eating in the restaurant. Sometimes participants did have particular stories to share about a connection they built at the restaurant, and articulated how the eating experience in particular was a key one for building connections and deepening friendships.

“It would definitely be [a] better connection sitting and socializing over a meal. It’s part of a culture; food is part of pretty well any culture. That encourages people to be together. Very seldom do I eat alone- I do eat alone in the place that I live because I live alone- that’s the other advantage to coming here is you can sit down with some friends and chat.” (Participant 12)

“For sure. I think eating is more social than nutritious. You know? Like it’s a necessary evil, but I honestly believe that the social aspect of eating with other people is very, very important for seniors. Because you do make an effort to eat something, for example, if you’re out with people, because they can see what you’re doing” (Participant 8)

Efficient and Convenient

The Evergreen restaurant was described as convenient for three main reasons: the ease of accessing a light or hot lunch while already at the Centre, the proximity of the restaurant to apartment buildings where older adults often live, and the inexpensive prices of the food.

As illustrated by the chart above from the survey data (page 8), which indicates that participants tended to visit the restaurant on days that they were at the Evergreen Centre already, (“Participation in Activities at the Evergreen and Restaurant Use”), interview participants spoke about the convenience of eating at the restaurant following or prior to an activity.

“We live in the South End so if we’ve got activities it’s not worth going home for lunch” (Participant 12)

More than just being convenient, however, there was something about the Evergreen restaurant and its centrality to the centre that made it a unique experience; if



participants were participating in activities elsewhere some noted feeling less inclined to continue socializing after an activity.

“In a lot of cases if we’re playing anywhere else say West End or something, the group will go for coffee. But not everyone goes. Here it’s a little different- there’s only us who know the Evergreen. And it’s not coffee, why we stop, after.”

(Participant 2)

The quote from participant 2 above also demonstrates the specialness of the Evergreen experience- the participant describes the difference between going for coffee or lunch after an activity at the Evergreen Centre, where friends can continue their conversations and everyone attends, versus when they play elsewhere and their group does not all continue their gathering after the activity is done.

Many older adults also live in apartment buildings near the Evergreen Centre. For these older adults, the restaurant can provide a place for a social and healthy meal, especially for those who live alone.

“I play cards here, 2-3 times per week. And I live next door, [it is] very convenient to come next door, and this is where my friends are. So I come in, I sit with my friends and chat. Like I say, I’ve got a lot of opinions, so I talk a lot” (Participant 4)

Quality and Quantity

Participants also described the quality of the food in consistently positive terms. Some discrepancies existed in terms of how well participants felt the restaurant catered to dietary preferences and restrictions.

When asked to describe their favourite thing about the restaurant, many remarked that the quality and quantity for the value was one thing that stood out.

“Number one the price, the value for the price. That would be about it. It’s not like you can go there and order what you like- there’s set menus. So you’d go if you like the menu. That’s what I do, I check the menu. [...] The soup is my favorite thing usually here. The prices and the quantity you get for it.” (Participant 7)

In terms of accommodation of dietary preferences, participants had somewhat differing opinions. Some participants felt that the restaurant could do more to accommodate



dietary preferences, for example by offering a wider range of gluten-free options and avoiding cross-contamination of gluten-free and gluten-containing foods.

“They would need to have very little education but they would be able to provide things for someone like me that spends many hours here to be able to have, to be able to buy. And that would be just plain, to me, not providing anything and not being willing to is not really catering to seniors, because I can’t be the only person that’s celiac that comes here.” (Participant 1)

On the other hand, some participants were enthusiastic about the restaurant staffs’ response to dietary restrictions, commenting on the various options that were available.

“A member of the groups I eat with has been very careful on changing her diet to something different, for health reasons. They’ve named a lunch after her because she has a salad with a scoop of tuna or an egg on top. They’ve made a new name for it so they’re very obliging.” (Participant 3)

In light of these mixed findings, it might be worth exploring the restaurant’s dietary options in more detail to map the needs of the older adults visiting the restaurant onto their menu offerings.

Tweaking Service to Move Forward

While participants noted feeling generally happy and satisfied with the restaurant, several participants had suggestions for moving forward. Among these, participants commonly remarked upon the possibility of providing options beyond 1pm, when the restaurant closes.

“For off hours if they were able to offer a hot drink, sandwiches, and cookies it would probably be a big improvement, I’ve heard people ask for that.” (Participant 12)

Other suggestions included “sprucing up” the restaurant by enhancing the physical space, expanding upon the suggestions put forth in the survey:

“Maybe they could do something in the décor to maybe spruce it up a bit, make it a little more like an eatery, you know, something like that would probably help, because I just feel bad at restaurants normally they have their own way of setting things up... the food may be lousy but they look nice.” (Participant 9)



Some also suggested that the food quality could be improved (also in line with survey responses), though there was a general sentiment that the preparation was well done.

“A little bit better quality in the food. Not the cooking, I think the cooking is pretty good.” (Participant 5)

In general, the survey and interview results came to similar conclusions about possible improvements, with participants with diverse needs indicating adjustments to the space that might help them to feel even more welcomed in to an environment that felt, on a social level, very much like home.

IMPLICATIONS

Based on these quantitative and qualitative findings, it would appear that older adults are making use of the restaurant at the Evergreen Centre on a regular basis. These findings also indicate that older adults see the restaurant as a part of the Evergreen community, a place where new connections can be made and old connections maintained. Dining experiences were described in mainly positive terms, often relating to a general contentment with the Centre as a whole. While we received many responses to surveys and a strong interest in participating in interviews, participants tended to focus primarily on the quality of the food, rather than isolating social connectedness factors or telling stories that specifically linked dining to feelings of social connection. This may be linked, at least in part, to the way that older adults experience eating in general.

Research supports the nutritional benefits of eating in social settings, and there is a general acknowledgment in the literature that older adults may lose interest in eating, particularly if they perceive the eating environment or meal to be unappealing or if they feel isolated (Keller, 2006; Keller, 2014). Interestingly, our results contradict prior literature on the experience of community-dwelling older adults eating at seniors' centres, some of which has suggested that older adults may prefer to eat at home due to an unwelcoming atmosphere (Edfors & Westergreen, 2012). Several participants in this study reflected on feeling at home or “where their friends are” at the restaurant, which is a promising finding in terms of capitalizing of environments wherein older adults feel comfortable eating and interacting. This finding is encouraging in light of other research highlighting how positive social interactions in the dining context may



improve the quality of the experience for older adults (e.g. Crogan, Evans, Severtson & Shultz, 2004; Keller, 2006)

Limitations of the Report

One unexpected finding was that the interviews were much shorter than expected. In general, participants did not have many specific examples of times when they had felt especially connected over a meal or a coffee at the Evergreen restaurant. This was surprising as we expected that participants might have more stories of social connection at the restaurant. In light of the overall tone of the interviews and findings from the interviews and survey, we speculate that this is likely due in large part to the existence of the restaurant as part of the overall Evergreen experience. Participants' stories told of feeling generally connected to their community, especially at the Evergreen Centre. It may be that because we conducted this research with active members of the Centre, who appear to already feel connected, we did not receive responses that indicated particular improvements to social connection through the social dining experience.

It is also possible that we accessed a group of older adults who were either particularly in favour of or actively seeking improvements to the restaurant and hence were attracted to participate in this study. This could help to explain some of the divergence in our results, particularly around the restaurant response to dietary restrictions. Accordingly, our results should be interpreted with the knowledge that our sample may represent those who have had either primarily positive or primarily negative experiences at the restaurant. There may well be a group that did not feel strongly enough about the services to comment.

CONCLUSION

Despite the above limitations, this research does provide us some insight into the experience of eating at the Evergreen restaurant that could potentially guide the continued provision of a social dining experience to older adults in the Guelph Wellington community.

Key results from this research study include:



- Participants who make use of the Centre often eat at the restaurant prior to or following their activities
- The Evergreen restaurant is a welcoming and friendly atmosphere that may facilitate, for some, a social experience with others, including staff, volunteers, and fellow participants
- Some adjustments to the physical space or marketing, for example changes to the décor or the more prominent and marketable display of the menu might help to make the environment still more inviting
- It may be worth investigating the expansion of the current accommodations offered for dietary restrictions, as well as the possible expansion of hours
- Overall, participants were satisfied with the quality and quantity of the food offered at the restaurant. Though some remarked that the portion sizes were quite large, this could at times facilitate sharing between friends, or saving leftovers for a second meal.
- Many participants remarked, either implicitly or explicitly, upon the particular experience of dining together as one that helped them to feel connected to friends

Notably, one of our main objectives was to investigate the psychosocial benefits of dining for older adults in Guelph-Wellington, based on the experiences of a group of older adults dining in the restaurant at Evergreen. However, our participants focused more on the food quality in the restaurant than on the experiences of eating there. This may indicate that we either overestimated the potential for our questions to capture an experience that may not be a part of older adults' conceptualization of their social and mental well-being. We may also have accessed a population of very social older adults and thus does not see dining as a primary avenue for social interaction; perhaps, as some participants noted, for these older adults having a place to dine together is simply a natural extension of the quality of socialization provided at the Evergreen Centre.

This does not mean that the restaurant is not a valuable addition to social experiences, however. Older adults' responses indicated that they saw the restaurant as a positive and friendly space that allowed them to socialize with friends, primarily those that they knew from the Evergreen Centre. Thus, while the study does not provide strong evidence for the psychosocial benefits of social dining, it does help to support research on older adult connections in social spaces including but not limited to social dining. For example, good health more generally can be optimized by enhancing social connectedness among older adults (MacCourt et al., 2011; Shields & Martel, 2006).



Further, though participants tended to focus on the quality, quantity, and price of the food, these may be unexpected facilitators of overall health, both physical and social. Finding food unappetizing or not liking food available in social settings may make older adults' less likely to attend a particular food venue and put their nutritional status at risk (Edfors & Westergreen, 2012). In aiming to improve the service to better suit the needs of older adults, we might also consider participants' suggestions around improvements to restaurant décor and overall look and feel. While older adults in this study were generally satisfied with the restaurant atmosphere in terms of social interaction, the physical environment might be enhanced in line with Way, Keller & Dupuis Schindel Martin (in press) suggestion that "institutional" environments may be less conducive to eating (Keller, 2014).

There is increasing impetus in the Guelph-Wellington community to create age-friendly communities, for example through the emerging Older Adult Strategy. The Older Adult Strategy initiative began in 2012; together, City, stakeholders and consultants have been working toward articulating and implementing services and supports that will qualify Guelph as an "age friendly" city according to the World Health Organization (WHO) criteria for age-friendliness. The vision for the Older Adult Strategy is for Guelph to be "an age-friendly community that values and supports older adults, optimizes opportunity for choice, independence, and quality of life, celebrates diversity, and is inclusive of all, reducing inequalities" (The Osborne Group, 2012). As noted in the forthcoming City of Guelph Older Adult Community Profile (Anderson, Omar & Robson, forthcoming), one of the WHO's dimensions for "age-friendly" communities is social participation. This report points to the Evergreen centre as one space within the Guelph community where older adults can participate fully in a number of activities, including social dining. The Guelph Community Wellbeing Survey identified that participation in a wide range of recreation and cultural activities increased older adults' wellbeing (Smale, 2012). Among recommendations for moving age-friendliness to the fore were providing convenient and cost-effective ways for older adults to engage; the results from our study suggest that the restaurant satisfies both of these criteria. Cost-effectiveness is especially salient as the Guelph-Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination has highlighted the ways in which cost can prevent older adults in our community from participating fully in the community (Schumann & Robson, 2012). The Evergreen may be particularly well-placed to provide a social dining experience where older adults feel welcome; participants in our study remarked on feeling a part of something when at the



centre, in line with the WHO recommendations that welcoming and inclusive environments be made available.

Given this growing interest in meeting the needs of older adults in our community, this report is well-timed to offer insight into the value of social dining experiences of older adults who live in our community. While the 2012 report does not explicitly address social dining among older adults, the Evergreen Centre more broadly fits with the strategy's goal to continue to focus on expanding options and enhancing quality of life for older adults. Future research might incorporate innovative strategies to hone in on the added benefit of social dining above and beyond the services provided at the Evergreen Centre; however, it may prove difficult to extract the restaurant service from the rest of the activities provided at the Evergreen as older adults are the primary clientele for the restaurant.

With this in mind, we might take these results as one step in better understanding how the Evergreen Restaurant fits within a broader sense of social support stemming from community involvement. Further evaluating social connectedness at the Evergreen Centre might extend investigation beyond the social dining experience, perhaps using validated measures of social support, wellbeing, and mental health, to further explore and understand the benefits of the full suite of activities for older adults in Guelph-Wellington.



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