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Ron Pantier describes himself as a creature of habit, at least when it comes to cooking equipment.

"I don't like to change equipment unless there's a feature that catches my eye," says Pantier, associate director of residential dining services at Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado.

About seven years ago, while walking the NAFEM show, a piece of equipment did indeed catch Pantier's eye: Keating of Chicago's Miraclean® griddle. "I was very impressed with the chrome, the bright shining griddle, the ease of use and cleanability," Pantier says.

As it so happens, Pantier was in the midst of renovating the foodservice facility at one of the school's 10 residence halls. The facility, an old-fashioned straight-line servery, was being refashioned into a more contemporary servery, complete with

global food items and display-cooking stations. When Pantier returned to Fort Collins from the NAFEM show, he specified a 36-inch by 36-inch Miraclean® for Cactus Junction, a new Mexican concept at the renovated facility. "I thought I'd give it a try," Pantier says of the griddle.

Nowadays, five of Colorado State University's dining halls sport Miraclean® griddles. In addition, Pantier

plans to purchase two more Miraclean®s for a new dining hall scheduled to open in fall of 2007. The Miracleans® will be installed in a sports grill and a Euro Kitchen offering homestyle meals such as meatloaf, roast beef and mashed potatoes.

And Pantier's become a loyal Miraclean® fan. "Employees love them," he says. "They're just so much easier to clean than standard griddles." And faster, too: Pantier says employees can clean a Miraclean® in about 10 minutes, compared to 20 to 25 minutes for a steel-topped grill.

Ease and speed of cleanability are crucial, especially at dining halls where hoards of hungry students need to be fed well and with lightning speed. All told, 25,000 students attend Colorado State University; its 10 residence halls accommodate 5,000 students. The dining facilities with Miraclean® griddles are among the university's busiest.



Colorado State University shows Keating its Ram Pride. Pictured left to right: Eliza Ann Keating, Keating of Chicago, Inc.; Crystal Elmore, Publications Coordinator of Residential Dining Services, Colorado State University; Eliza Keating, President, Keating of Chicago, Inc.; Ron Pantier, Associate Director of Residential Dining Services, Colorado State University

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To start, there's Cactus Junction at Edwards Hall, where Pantier installed that first Miraclean®. During the renovation of Edwards Hall, which took place seven years ago, the wall that divides the kitchen from the serving line was removed. Pantier replaced a stainless-steel counter with a Corian counter, then added a refrigerated holding unit, hot wells, a deep fryer and the Miraclean® griddle. Voila: A display kitchen was born.

The display kitchen produces a to-order Mexican menu of tortilla-based wraps, fajitas and quesadillas, the concept's most popular menu item. Cactus Junction is open from 4:45 p.m. to 11 p.m. Sunday through Thursday, and serves 600 to 700 students per day during that time period. Students travel from other halls specifically to eat at Cactus Junction, Pantier says.



Chris Glenn, on his first day working at one of CSU's display kitchens, does a great job making Quesadilla's on a Keating Miraclean® Griddle.

Another Miraclean® spot is Braiden Hall, which was renovated six years ago. The hall, which also features display cooking, is open from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. most days. At Braiden, the Miraclean® is used to prepare to-order eggs and omelets at breakfast, and grilled chicken-breast sandwiches, burgers and hot dogs at lunch and dinner. Since Braiden is closest to the university's academic center, it serves 500 to 600 students at lunch, 250 at dinner, and 150 during late-night hours, from 7 p.m. to 11 p.m.

Parmelee Hall, another renovation, also serves three meals a day; the Miraclean® is used for to-order breakfast dishes and for sandwiches at lunch and dinner. The hall is open Monday to Friday from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., and serves 600 students a day.

At Braiden and Parmelee, the Miracleans' high productivity is crucial during rush times, Pantier says. "There are minimal cold spots compared to the old-style steel griddle," he says. That means more of the griddle's surface area can be used, which means students can be served more quickly. While the cooks do as much to-order cooking as possible, Pantier says that they sometimes make sandwiches before rush periods to facilitate speed of service.

One of the campus's newer renovations is Durrell Express, a grab-and-go spot open from 2 p.m. to 1 a.m. seven days a week. Each day, anywhere from 300 to 500 students stop by to grab a burger, chicken sandwich, hot dog or brat. At Durrell Express, a 36-inch x 72-inch Miraclean® handles the high volume of sandwiches. "It's a high-productivity grill to this point, and it's not being used to full capacity," Pantier explains.

Colorado State University's latest renovation, Corbett Marketplace, opened a year ago. The Marketplace offers students nine different food stations, including Cactus Junction, which uses a Miraclean® for Mexican items. "That grill is right on the serving



Corbett Marketplace, one of CSU's latest renovations, offers students nine different food stations, including Cactus Junction (seen to the left) which uses a Keating Miraclean® Griddle for mexican items.

line," Pantier says. "It's most impressive because it's more of a showpiece." The marketplace is open from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. Sunday to Thursday, and from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and serves 1,000 students a day.

Pantier was pleased to see that meal counts at Corbett Marketplace rose 30 percent after the renovation, and that increase has held steady. He attributes the facility's popularity to display cooking: "Students perceive the food as fresher when it's prepared in front of them."

And the Miracleans®, of course, are part of that fresh perspective. "The equipment helps create greater satisfaction because of the perceived freshness of the product," Pantier says.

Philip Nicolai writes frequently about restaurants.



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