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WEB EXCLUSIVE

## Catering to Mature Audiences



Café Plus concept brings senior centers to next generation. [By Mark A. DeSorbo](#)

Along with 35-cent bottomless cups of coffee, an all-day breakfast menu, and entrée options for under \$10, the elderly patrons of Mather's—More Than a Café can take part in a host of activities, including programs on health and wellness, care-giving resources, consumer tips, spiritual programs, monthly luncheons, special events, and day trips.

Mather LifeWays is a Chicago-based nonprofit organization dedicated to making the “adventure of aging better.” The More Than a Café concept is part of the group’s Café Plus initiative, which incorporates health and wellness programs in three Windy City neighborhoods.

The Café Plus program is intended to change the way society views and values older adults and the way the elder community perceives and regards themselves, says Betsie Sassen, executive director of café development for Mather Lifeways.

The initial draw into the experience, Sassen says, is the food, but benefits go beyond cuisine and nutrition. Once older adults are engaged, Mather can provide them with tools to age well, including classes and programs that offer opportunities to meet new people, learn something new, and re-discover old and new passions.

“Research shows that staying socially engaged has an independent influence on how long one lives, so the trick is attracting people initially—and that’s through the restaurant,” Sassen says. “The cafe environments are very hip. It would most likely remind people of a Starbucks. We are very deliberate with our language in that we try to steer away from the word “senior,” and we don’t offer bingo because we don’t think it offers anything engaging.”

The three Mather’s—More Than a Café, located at 7134 W. Higgins Ave., 3235 N. Central Ave., and 33 E. 83rd Street, cater to the working class and the affluent.

“These are very different neighborhoods with different economics, so the tastes are different,” says Mary Beth Lutjen, who oversees kitchen operations of all three cafes and carries the majestic title of Mather’s “Master of Culinary Delights.”

The three cafes share a menu. Breakfast choices includes eggs, pancakes, French toast, bacon, sausage, corned beef hash, ham, fresh fruit, sweet rolls, doughnuts, toast, and bagels. For lunch, its turkey clubs, Monte Cristos, hamburgers, and various salads. Mather’s cafes even make their own soups.

Each café, however, are distinguished by daily specials that cater to patron palates of a given neighborhood. Café specials include everything from sloppy Joes to salmon burgers to jerk chicken to Cajun lime tilapia to chicken feta and lemony crab salads. Chefs tend to steer away from foods and ingredients that are high in calorie and fat content.

“Most of what we sell comes off the special boards, and everything here is fresh and made to order,” Lutjen says. “Every two weeks, we come up with different special ideas, and we post the menu two weeks ahead of time in each of the cafés. Each set of customers is different, with one set being very adventurous, but we rely on responses from our patrons

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In addition to a great meal, patrons can play Nintendo Wii or sign up for art, Tai Chi, Pilate, fitness, or yoga classes. There are also events, such as “speed meeting,” and free consumer lectures that address financial organization, brain exercises, sexuality and older adults, and guaranteed income for life.

Mather LifeWays says it has no plans to franchise its Café Plus concept, but is training other organizations to start restaurants with workshops and how-to manuals, she says. More than 100 social service providers from 30 cities have attended Mather Lifeways’ \$975 two-day, start-up workshop. Valparaiso, Indiana, and Sun City, Arizona already have the café concept in place

“At the end of the day, we are trying to bring older adults together to gain new interests, embrace old ones, and empower them to stay independent. The other goal is to break down stereotypes that surround services for older adults. The Café Plus concept does this by allowing the restaurant to be open to the community, regardless of age to avoid being labeled as a place for old people,” Sassen says. “The setting is hip, vibrant, architecturally interesting, modern, and upbeat. This does work.”

For more information, log onto:

[www.matherlifeways.com/iyc\\_mathersmorethanacafe.asp](http://www.matherlifeways.com/iyc_mathersmorethanacafe.asp)

or [www.matherlifeways.com/iyc\\_cafe\\_workshop.asp](http://www.matherlifeways.com/iyc_cafe_workshop.asp)

### **2008 Workshops**

WHEN: Tuesday-Wednesday, October 21-22, 9 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

WHERE: Mather LifeWays, 1603 Orrington Ave., Suite 1800, Evanston, IL 60201

Cost is \$975. Register additional attendees from your organization for \$900 each. Price includes a two-day interactive workshop, café tours, and the Café Plus “How-To” manual.

### **Registration**

For questions, to register or to request individual consultation, workshops, or technical assistance to design a Café contact:

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