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Andy Irion of Sheridan will be the executive chef at Sheridan Memorial Hospital beginning in December.

Spicing up hospital food

• Memorial Hospital hires new executive chef

By Dan Fischer

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Hospital food seems to have a negative image in the eyes of most: mysterious meat-loaf and suspicious spaghetti.

But Sheridan Memorial Hospital is trying to tackle this perception, bringing in a new chief executive chef who has 20 years of experience, altering the menu and focusing on fresh, healthy fare.

Sandy Fuller, manager of nutritional services at the hospital, said Sheridan Memorial has received its share of less-than-favorable ratings about food quality from patients.

The hospital is graded by patients on a scale of 1-5, with 5 being the best. Fuller said this year Sheridan Memorial scored an aver-

age score of 3.9. In 2007 it received a 2.

But the hospital has a lofty goal for its nutrition services.

“We want,” Fuller said, “to be the model hospital.”

Andy Irion, the hospital’s new chief executive chef, will help achieve that goal when he starts work in December.

According to his resume, Irion has worked as a private chef at The Flying H Ranch and Polo Club and The Polo Ranch, both located in Big Horn. He graduated from The Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y., and also served an apprenticeship in Heidelberg, Germany.

As a private chef, Irion said his duties ranged from family dinners to groups of several hundred, and he directed a crew and did

hands-on preparations as well.

Irion said he hopes to use his experience to help the current kitchen staff improve and provide hands-on help with food preparation.

“With everything you cook,” Irion said, “there’s a technique that I’ve learned.”

Irion said strong food service includes delivery and presentation. That means avoiding delays and transporting the food so that it arrives looking and tasting as it did leaving the kitchen.

Presentation includes how food is placed on the plate and the garnishes or accompaniment that come with the food.

“I’m big with believing you taste with your eyes first,” Irion said.

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Chef

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Irion and Fuller both spoke of providing a healthier, more varied menu.

“I think,” Irion said, “healthy food and health care should go hand in hand.”

Both described ways to jazz up selections.

Irion said he hopes to offer comfort food — with a twist.

Ordinary baked salmon could be enhanced as oak plank salmon with a rhubarb glaze. Meatloaf could become grilled barbecue meatloaf. Fried chicken could be replaced by panko-crusting crispy chicken.

Irion said he would like to bring in more international food: Chinese, Thai, Indian and German.

“We’d like to see,” he said, “how it all goes over.”

Irion said he also wants to bring in a seasonal menu or a menu that

changes weekly.

He said a seasonal menu could feature spring peas, lamb and asparagus in spring; more sauces and root vegetables such as turnips and parsnips in winter; and lighter offerings such as salad and fish in summer.

“The idea that healthy food doesn’t taste good,” Irion said — “we’re going to throw that idea out the window.”

Irion added he hopes to use more fresh and fewer frozen and manufactured ingredients.

Fuller said she would like to bring in more fresh food as well but noted the hospital is also limited by the lack of local agriculture. The hospital’s food, she said, comes from food service.

Fuller said the hospital now serves fresh, seasonal fruit, however — cantaloupe, watermelon, strawberries and grapes.

“No more canned peaches,” she said.

Improvement plans include a room-service-style menu. Irion said this will return to patients some of the control they lose in hospitals.

“Now,” Irion said, “with a room-service menu, they’ll be able to order what they want, when they want, how they want it.”

Hospitals in Casper, Cheyenne and Jackson all provide room service as well, Fuller said.

She said Sheridan Memorial is also joining a trend by bringing in a chef. Because food is tied to emotions and allows patients to feel a sense of control, she said more hospitals are taking this step.

She said chefs are attracted to hospitals because they are tired of working until 1 or 2 a.m. and desire standard hours and benefits.

“I think the patients are going to be pleasantly surprised,” Irion said, “by getting some of the best food they’ve ever had.”