

LIFE

Parents vent at UNR town hall after photos of raw food, squalid dining conditions circulate

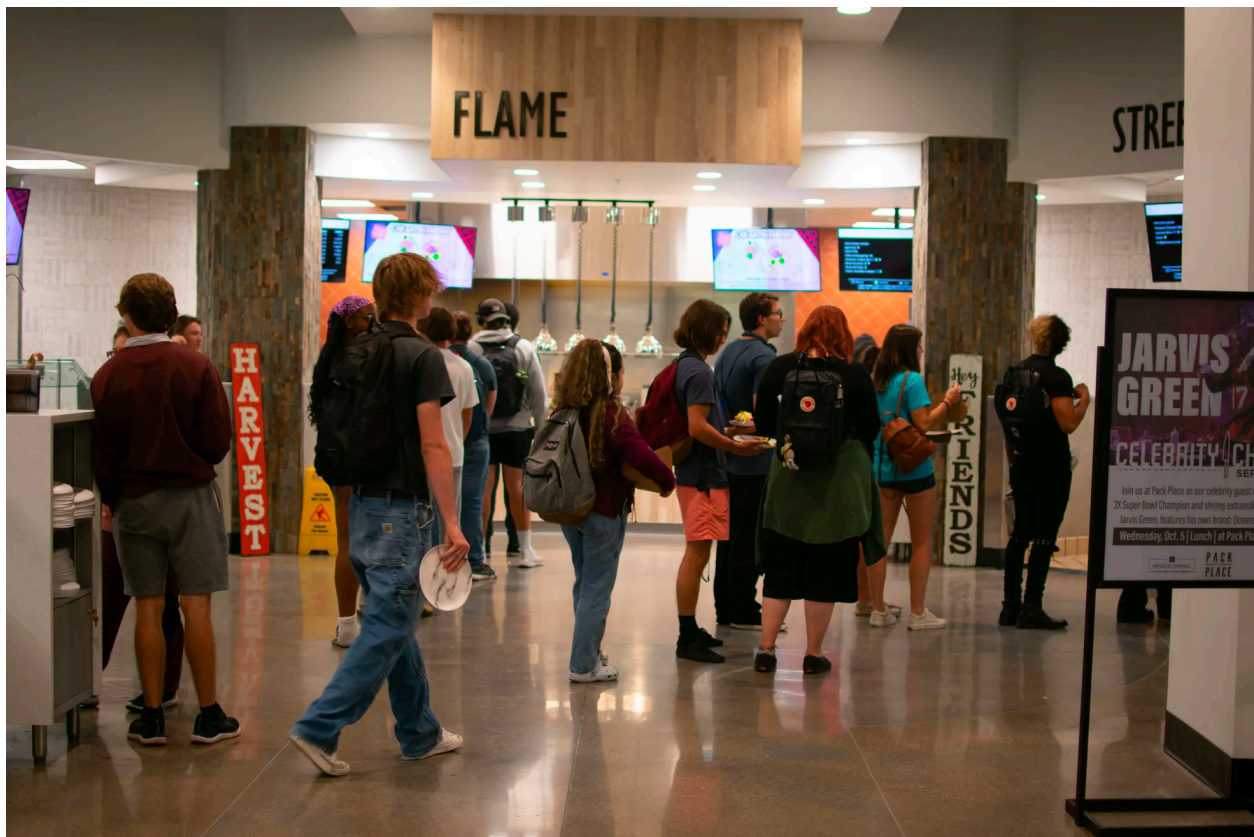


Evan Haddad

Reno Gazette Journal

Images of pink, gelatinous chicken, gristly burgers and stacks of dirty plates have horrified parents in recent weeks as their new college students sent home photos of dining conditions at the Downunder, the University of Nevada, Reno's main dining hall.

The Downunder reopened this summer after a lengthy and expensive remodel of Argenta Hall, the dormitory complex that exploded three years ago. Photos of dining conditions there have since circulated among parents and students on social media and caused such outrage that UNR held a virtual town hall on Sept. 22 to address concerns.



UNR's dining leadership headed the gathering: Dean Kennedy, executive director of residential life, housing and food services; dining staff resident

district manager Debbie Meyer; and Angelo Casiano, director of marketing and guest experience.

For roughly an hour, the dining team addressed questions and concerns about hours of operation, speed of service, food quality and special dietary needs.

The team said that the slow service, which has caused some students to wait up to an hour for a meal, was in part due to the many delays in the renovation of the Downunder. Argenta Hall reopened in August after a three-year remodel that cost roughly \$6 million. It was slated to reopen in August 2021 but was delayed due to labor shortages and other restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Staff had a few days to get trained and prepared before the army of hungry UNR students returned to campus for the start of the fall semester on Aug. 29, Meyer said. She noted that student workers make up 65% of dining staff and, as a result, the dining services can see a fluctuation in staffing levels.

"We had more of a theory of what we were going to do," Meyer said of the opening weeks of service.

UNR began recruiting four months before classes started "using all avenues and outlets," Casiano said.

To attract workers, he said, pay rates were adjusted up four times.

Food quality

The photos circulating online were perhaps the most anticipated topic of the town hall. The university at turns accepted fault and shifted blame for the conditions. For example, parents were told that the stacks of dirty plates were the result of a broken dishwasher.

"We simply did not respond to it fast enough," Casiano said.

Meyer said that dining leadership was not aware of the social media pages sharing many of the pictures. She said staff had only seen the photo of a raw chicken sandwich — which had been circulating for weeks — a few days ahead the town hall.

"Every request is reviewed by a member of our dining team, and we are committed to responding within a timely manner," Kennedy told the RGJ in a

follow up email. "Unfortunately, we don't have access to some of the Facebook groups that were recently referred to at our town hall meeting and recommend that parents with concerns reach out to us [via the contact information on the dining hall website]."

During the meeting, parents learned that some of UNR's dining services are outsourced to contractors such as Chartwells Higher Education Dining Services, a New York-based company that serves some 300 colleges and universities across the country.

Currently, 13 dining locations on campus are operated by Nevada Dining via Chartwells with "additional dining locations on campus are overseen directly by the University," Kennedy told the RGJ.

"Like many other businesses locally and across the country, Nevada Dining is facing unprecedented labor shortages that have made hiring challenging," Kennedy said. "Chefs on the Fly is a professional culinary staffing agency that Chartwells has hired to temporarily source culinary talent while we continue to actively hire culinarians. We have also used other temporary staffing agencies to assist."

But hearing that UNR's dining halls are serviced by large, profitable companies caused further anger in some parents who had previously found excuses for the poor service.

"I was under the impression that it was run by a couple of local people helping out the students," said George Cole, a Las Vegas resident whose son attends UNR. "My tune changed when I realized these are billion-dollar companies."

Cole was less concerned with the food photos on social media than with the "tangible evidence" of things gone wrong: misleading hours of operation and limited meal trades, which allow students to swap a dining hall meal for food at a campus retail location.

"When you start arguing about whether food tastes good," Cole said, "they get off the hook."

Cole knew his son wouldn't be a regular at breakfast; but he took comfort in the fact that, in theory, the meal plan would allow for late-night meal trades at places such as Sierra Subs, or the use of "food bucks" at Baja Fresh. But Cole's son found those places closed despite the hours of operation posted on the university website.

Stephanie Lewis, a parent of two UNR freshmen, echoed Cole's frustration.

"Our children are famished after evening classes end and nobody is open to serve food," Lewis told the RGJ. "This was not what was described to us when we all paid thousands of dollars for meal plans that are mandatory for incoming freshman."

Mandatory meal plans: Scams or salvation?

Most large universities, including UNR, require incoming freshmen to purchase meal plans. The pricy meal plan is staple of the college experience and, every year, some parents and students contest its necessity — particularly when food-related trouble arises.

UNR offers freshmen three types of meal plans. The Silver plan, which costs about \$6,000 per year, includes unlimited weekly meals and various meal trades and guest passes. The Gray plan — the cheapest option at roughly \$4,600 — includes 12 weekly meals, limited meal trades and no guest passes.

"It is our desire ... that there is a full year that students have healthy food close to where they're at," Kennedy said. "Students tend to do better if they don't have to think about food. Data shows that."

But some students told the RGJ that they're often thinking about food.

UNR student Samantha Garcia recalled a disappointing meal she received during Nevada FIT, an academic bootcamp to introduce incoming students to the rigors of college life.

"They gave me a vegetarian option of two pieces of bread with lettuce, tomato peppers and cucumber in it for my meal for the day," Garcia said. "That was all I had. And I don't see any improvement."

Another freshman, McKenna Jones, encountered what she described as undercooked hamburger meat.

"When I went to sit down and eat it, I realized that the whole patty was pink on the inside," Jones said. "When I went back to ask if they could give me another one cooked, they said that they would have to wait because all the patties were cooked the same way."

Freshman Rachel Fenton described conditions more bluntly.

"It's absolutely disgusting," Fenton said. "The meat is never cooked right and the place is filthy and unsanitary."

What's ahead for dining services

In response to a parent's question about compensation for missed meals, Meyer said the university doesn't have a plan for issuing refunds but is organizing "special events" to recoup some of the loss.

As to whether the university would issue refunds for missed meals, Kennedy told the RGJ that UNR was "taking these considerations on a case-by-case basis."

As for re-instilling confidence in the dining services, Meyer accepted that as the university's burden.

"We just have to continually do it right," Meyer said. "And I know this team can do it."

Follow @HaddadEvan for timely, relevant and compelling reporting on food, drinks and city life in Reno.