

DESIGN (/DESIGN)

# Not 'just a tent,' The Eatery at Norman Field is more than temporary; it's awesome

University of Florida's solution for feeding students in the midst of construction of a new dining hall has turned out so well, it will almost be a shame to see it go.

By *Tara Fitzpatrick* (</profile/tara-fitzpatrick>) on Apr. 25, 2024



The Eatery at Norman Field offers students a variety of food options while a nearby dining hall undergoes a renovation. |Photos courtesy of Florida Fresh Dining

When a college dining hall gets a remodel or new construction, that's obviously great news. State-of-the-art equipment, modern décor, new concepts and more opportunities to serve students and faculty are all in store. But what happens in that awkward in-between time?

The in-between time is happening right now for the University of Florida (UF) and its dining partner, Florida Fresh Dining, with The Eatery at Broward closing to make way for an expansion. But it's been anything but awkward, since Director of Food & Beverage Services Matt Mueller and his team have made some solid decisions for a temporary place to feed more than 1,000 students each day.

The main thing Mueller has been telling people in the community with questions? The temporary structure is not "just a tent." Rather, "it's a mini dining hall," Mueller says. The Eatery at

Norman Field is a climate-controlled, ADA-accessible structure that's not only bridging the gap but may have also played a part in a recent increase of meal plans.

## Location search

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"We originally thought 'Let's scatter everything around campus'," Mueller says. "But then we stepped back. What's most important is to not disrupt our students' semester. How do we support our students and give them the right solution. And then, how do we give them the right solution."

Once that decision was made last spring, the hunt for the best location was on. "It was hard to find a space since the university has numerous other construction projects going on," Mueller says. "We looked at four or five different sites and kept coming back to a recreational sports field next to the College of Education's Normal Hall that had been taken off the schedule. It was flat, and not being used."

Next, Mueller timed himself walking to the field at a normal pace from seven different residential halls, and found the walk to be between three and seven minutes, the longer time due to a traffic light along the way.

Through Chartwells Higher Ed, a temporary tent company was contacted to check out the land, which was muddy from torrential rains, so the structure would have to be raised. This being Florida, the structure also has to be tough enough to withstand hurricane winds. In addition, it also must be accessible with paved walkways, temperature controlled and sustainably built as well.

## Temporary, but not a quick fix

After adding electric and plumbing, restroom trailers (and 35 dump trucks full of dirt), The Eatery and Norman Field became home to a full bank of cooking equipment, a dish machine, hot holding units, a full beverage station with lots of menu options, including the "Pure Eats" station, which avoids gluten and the top non allergens.

When students came back at the beginning for the year for a new semester, The Eatery at Norman Field was ready to serve, but faced some skepticism at first.

“We opened on the Saturday of move-in, and on parents’ Facebook pages, rumors were flying,” Mueller says. “Everyone thought it was a tent. It’s not a tent.”

Soon the rumors of “roughing it” or camping-style cooking were squashed. “The first student walked in and said, ‘OMG I can’t believe all the food options you have! They expected just one items, but we have four lines, including the allergy-safe concept,” Mueller says, adding that compostable dishes are being used and bins for pre- and post-consumer waste are there, too.



Gator Fire Grill is one of the many food stations offered to students at The Eatery at Norman Field.

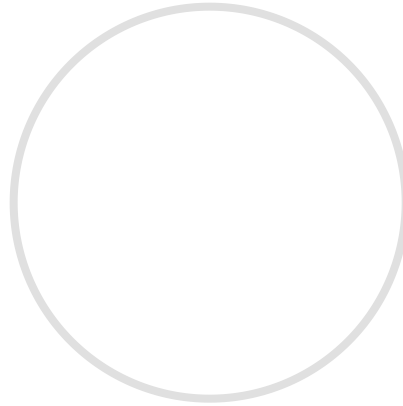
A shrimp boil celebration dinner officially kicked off The Eatery at Norman Field, and since then, it’s been a total success, serving 850 students a day on average, “a little less than the old Broward,” Mueller says. “But we didn’t lose a single meal plan holder because of not having the right solution. We have all volunteer meal plans, and we sold more in the spring than in the fall. And the fall was already up from the previous year. It verified that we gave the students the best solution.”

The new dining hall is set to open in August, and while that’s exciting, “it will be a little sad to see it come down,” Mueller says.

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