

MU offers a variety of resources for students with dietary restrictions

MU has a wide variety of dining options, with a total of 23 campus dining locations. However, students with dietary restrictions have reported struggles to find options that meet their needs. Campus Dining Services is tasked with matching students' dietary needs and preferences while working under the constraints of a limited budget and the conditions of mass-producing food.

According to the CDC, [6.2% of American adults](#) have a food allergy, and according to a 2018 [Gallup](#) poll, 5% of U.S. adults are vegan or vegetarian. Dietary restrictions, including allergies, cultural beliefs, lifestyle choices and medical conditions, affect the diets of many students on campus. Approximately 39% of MU undergrad students are currently enrolled in a dining plan. Despite the challenges of being a large-scale food operation, MU provides access to a variety of nutritional resources for students with such dietary restrictions, including [Zoutrition](#), an online tool with campus dining information, and MU [Dietitian Services](#), which can aid students in navigating any restrictions they may have.

Panda Express is one of several restaurant-style dining locations on campus. Some students argue that the food served at these restaurant-style locations is not nutritionally adequate. According to Panda Express worker Laiyi Yi, the food served at Panda Express fails to meet students' dietary needs.

“Working at Panda Express has allowed me to see firsthand that the type of food we serve is mainly fast food and simple meals, that there is not a lot of variety and that the cooking techniques are rather homogenous. Also, the food lacked nutritional diversity. I feel that this could be improved by adding more fresh fruit and vegetable options, as well as offering some whole grain and low-fat meal options,” Yi said.

Despite demand for more access to fruits and vegetables, it can be a challenge for a food service operation like MU Campus Dining Services to do this while having to mass produce food and keep costs low for consumers. According to Elisabeth Glass, a clinical dietitian for Boone Health, it is difficult to provide these fresh foods.

“They try to make sure that there's at least two or three different types of vegetables available to students to eat. Because vegetables have a lot of fiber, vitamins and minerals, and they are not super high in calories,” Glass said. “These are hard to produce for students, especially the cooked versions. Because they don't hold very well, they tend to get mushy or grainy. And they're not appetizing that way. So a lot of times they do rely on raw vegetables, such as a cup of carrots and broccoli and celery or tomatoes.”

Although campus dining attempts to provide students with access to raw vegetables, some on-campus food service workers view the current selection as limited.

“I understand some of the criticisms out there and think they are fair to some extent,” Yi said. “We do need to improve the nutritional value and variety of our food. As an employee, I would also like to see us provide a food service that is healthier and more responsive to the needs of our students.”

Some students report wanting more plant-based alternatives and foods that can accommodate plant-based diets. According to MU student Fei Peng, campus dining can benefit from diversifying the menu.

“The improvements I would most like to see are more vegetarian and vegan options, along with lighter foods, as well as the introduction of a wider variety of whole grain foods and low-sugar beverages,” Peng said. “This would help everyone form healthier eating habits.”

MU Nutrition and Exercise Physiology student Sarah Lacoco has a peanut and tree nut allergy. After having an allergic reaction to eating a sandwich from Wheatstone, Lacoco is cautious about her allergy when ordering food on campus.

“I always make sure to look at the menu...” Lacoco said. “One time, I had a sandwich with pesto on it, and pesto has pine nuts in it, and that's considered a tree nut, and I'm allergic to that. Luckily, I didn't go into anaphylactic shock but I did have a little bit of a reaction. So typically, I'll try to look at the menu on my phone while I'm in line, almost every time I go... If I can try a new sandwich and if it has certain ingredients, then I always let them know that I'm allergic to tree nuts and peanuts, so they carefully handle the food that I'm eating, so nothing gets cross-contaminated and I don't have any sort of reaction.”

MU spokesperson Christian Basi explains how students can navigate any dietary concerns using the online tool [Zoutrition](#) or MU [Dietitian Services](#). If a student's health insurance company does not cover the visit or they do not have insurance, patient financial counselors are available to work with students regarding fees.

“If you are on campus now and you have an allergy, you can go to the website, you can request a consultation, and they'll walk through with you what different food options are available, how they will or will not address your allergy, and kind of help you with that area,” Basi said.