

Designing Menus for Sensory Sensitivities and Selective Eating in Campus Dining

Supporting ARFID, Autism, ADHD &
Sensory Diversity

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- Provide 1-1 virtual nutrition counseling
- Run support groups, and workshops for caregivers, individuals with ARFID and health care providers.



Objectives

- 1.Describe** the impact of sensory sensitivities on food acceptance in neurodivergent college students.
- 2.Identify** environmental and menu-related barriers affecting food access in campus dining settings.
- 3.Apply** sensory-informed strategies to improve menu design and dining accessibility.

Why this Matters

- College dining environments can be overwhelming.
- Loud, busy, unpredictable spaces
- Inconsistent food textures, temperatures, and presentation
- Lots of unfamiliar or overwhelming smells
- Limited “safe” or reliable options

For many students, this means:

- Food is available... but not accessible



Reframing the Problem

This is not just about “picky eating.”

Many students:

- Want to eat
- Are trying to eat
- But cannot access food that feels safe enough

Eating challenges are often environmental, sensory, and systemic



Who this Impacts?

Students who may benefit from sensory-friendly dining:

- ARFID (Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder)
- Autism
- ADHD
- Anxiety / trauma histories
- Sensory-sensitive students (with or without diagnosis)

These needs are more common than we think.

What the Research Shows

Across research on neurodivergence, eating, and food environments:

- Sensory sensitivity strongly impacts food intake
- Predictability increases willingness to eat
- Stress and overstimulation reduce appetite
- Environment shapes eating behavior

Access to food is not just about what is served—
but how

Eating Is Sensory First

Eating is not just taste.

It includes:

- Texture
- Temperature
- Smell
- Visual appearance
- Sound and environment
- Interoception, proprioception and vestibular



These factors can determine whether a food, environment or an individual's body feels "safe" or not to engage with eating.

The Nervous System & Eating

When the nervous system is overwhelmed:

- Appetite decreases
- Nausea or gag reflex may increase
- Decision-making becomes harder
- Avoidance increases

Students may skip meals—not by choice, but by capacity



Predictability=Safety

Many students rely on:

- Familiar foods
- Consistent preparation
- Predictable availability

Even small changes can make a food feel “unsafe”

Predictability supports nourishment.



SENSORY BREAKDOWN



Texture: The Gatekeeper

Texture is one of the biggest drivers of food acceptance.

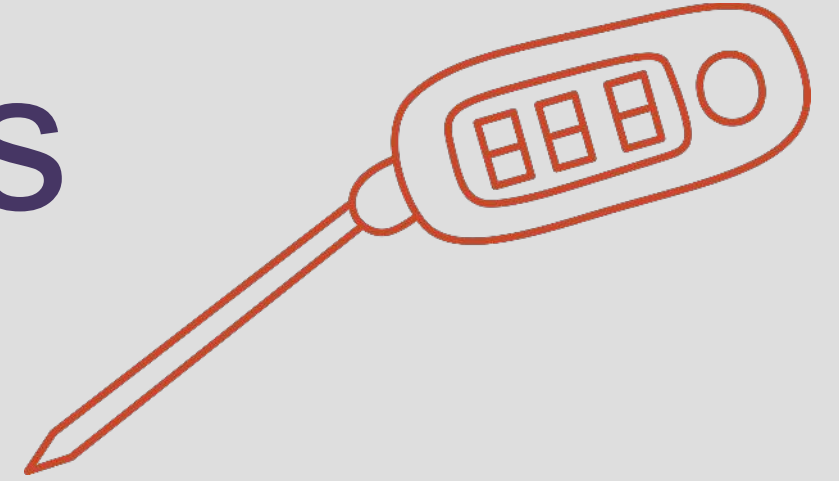
Common challenges:

- Mixed textures (e.g., crunchy + soft)
- Unexpected textures “surprise bites”
- Inconsistency between batches

If texture is off or not what an individual expects, the food may not be eaten



Temperature Matters



Temperature is not neutral.

- Too hot / too cold = unpreferred or distressing
- Buffet systems often create inconsistency
- Foods may not match expectations

Temperature impacts both comfort and safety and access to eating



Smell & Environment

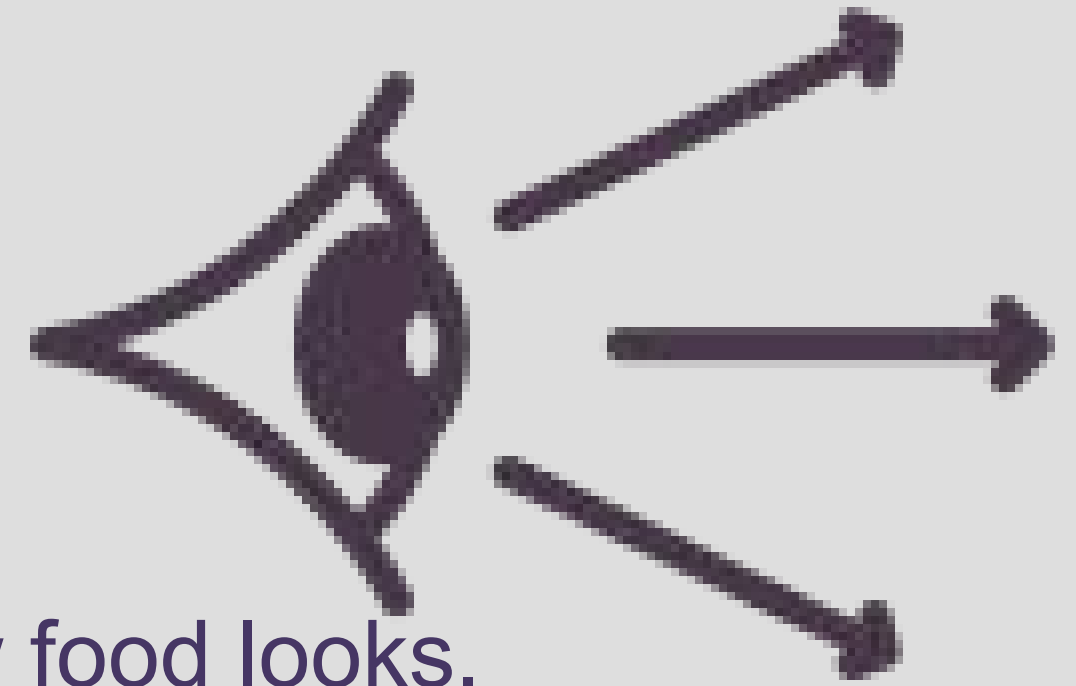
- Smell can quickly shut down appetite or induce gag response
- Strong or lingering odors
- Open kitchens
- Mixed food smells



Even “good” smells can be overwhelming



Visual Predictability



Students often decide whether to eat based on how food looks.

- Mixed foods vs separated foods
- Visible vs hidden ingredients
- Consistent appearance
 - why packaged foods tend to be preferred

If it looks unfamiliar, it may not be tried

*Each student may have different sensory preferences/needs



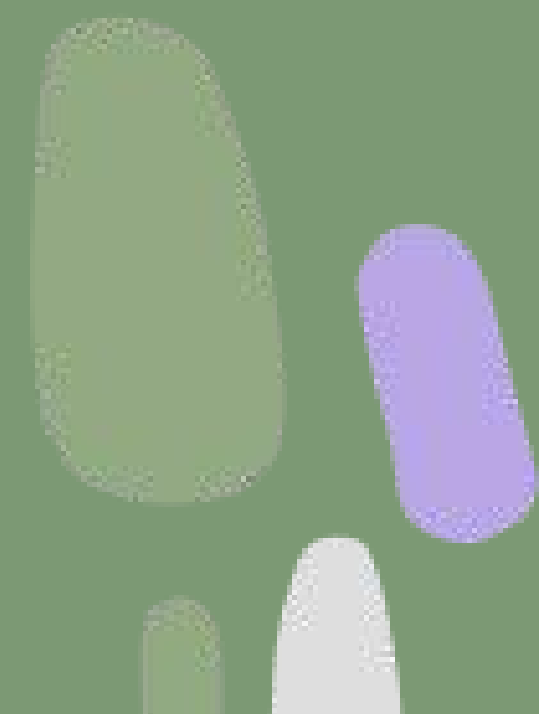
A cluster of abstract, rounded shapes in shades of purple, green, and white in the top left corner.

REFRAMING THE GOAL

Instead of asking:

- “How do we get students to eat more variety?”

Ask:

- “How do we make eating possible?”
- 
- A cluster of abstract, rounded shapes in shades of green, purple, and white in the bottom right corner.

SYSTEM-LEVEL SOLUTIONS



Designing for Sensory Accessibility

Sensory-friendly dining is not a “special menu.”

It's:

- Inclusive design
- Flexible systems
- Predictable options

Supporting more students without singling them out.

Build Reliable “Safe Foods”

Offer consistent, familiar options:

- Same foods available daily or on a weekly rotation
- Minimal variation in preparation
- Reliable backup choices or bases
 - i.e pasta, baked plain chicken etc.

These foods often make eating possible



Keep It Simple & Flexible

Design meals that allow choice:

- Plain base options
- Sauces on the side
- Deconstructed meals
- Simple seasoning

Flexibility supports autonomy



Clear labeling reduces uncertainty

- ✓ List ingredients
- ✓ Share texture information
- ✓ Preparation style
- ✓ Allergens
- ✗ Vague or “creative” names



Offer Customization

Build-your-own options can be powerful:

- Grain bowls
- Sandwich stations
- Pasta bars

Students can control:

- Texture
- Flavor
- Combination



Dining Hall Environment

Food access includes the environment.

Consider:

- Quiet or lower-stimulation areas
- Predictable layouts
- Takeaway options

Not all students can eat in busy spaces



What Colleges are Already Doing

- Landmark + Chartwells → sensory-designed dining spaces
- UConn → flexible access (to-go, call-ahead, prep closer to pick up time)
- UW–Madison → sensory-friendly dining environments
- Princeton → individualized support with dietitians and chefs





Case Study



Case Study: Alex

Alex is a first-year college student.

- Diagnosed with ARFID and autism
- Sensitive to texture and smell
- Relies on a small number of familiar foods

In high school:

- Ate consistently at home
- Had access to preferred foods



Dining Hall Experience

In the dining hall, Alex experiences:

- Long lines and loud noise
- Foods that look different each day
- Mixed dishes with unclear ingredients
- Limited familiar options

Result:

- Doesn't go to the dining hall
- Relies mostly on snacks in his dorm room
- Eats very little
- Increased stress around food

What helped

Small changes made a big difference:

- Consistent availability of plain pasta and grilled chicken
- Sauce offered on the side
- Clear labeling of ingredients
- Option to take food to a quieter space or in a take out container to room
- Clearly communicated “quiet hours”

Outcome:

- Increased meal consistency
- Reduced stress
- Greater independence



IMPLEMENTATION

Working with Culinary Teams

Focus on:

- Small, high-impact changes
- Consistency over constant change
- Collaboration, not restriction
- Student feedback surveys and lived experience input



This enhances both access and satisfaction

Quick “Wins”

- Start with high volume staple foods
- Add one plain/prepared-simple option at every meal
- Keep at least 1–2 predictable staples available daily
- Improve labeling around textures/spice level
- Create quieter seating options during peak hours
- Train staff on neutral/non-pressuring language
- Offer sauces/toppings on the side
- Use consistent placement for commonly used foods



Staff Culture Matters

Students notice how staff respond.

Support looks like:

- No judgment
- Clear answers to questions
- Respect for preferences



Feeling safe matters as much as food itself

Supportive Language for Staff

- “Would it help to see the ingredients separately?”
- “We can modify that.”
- “Would a more predictable option feel easier?”
- “Let me show you a few simpler options.”
- “Would it help if sauces or toppings were on the side?”
- “We can keep foods separate if that’s easier.”
- “What textures or foods usually feel safest for you?”
- “Would seeing the menu ahead of time help with planning?”
- “Let’s figure out what works best for you.”
- “You don’t need to explain or justify your food preferences.”



This Benefits More Than You Think

Sensory-friendly design supports:

- Neurodivergent students
- Students with anxiety
- International students
- Athletes with routine-based eating
- Many others

Can help with

- student retention
- number of students using dining hall plan

Sensory-Friendly Menu Audit

Dining Hall Accessibility Questions

- ✓ Are there predictable options daily?
 - ✓ Are mixed foods avoidable?
 - ✓ Are textures clearly identifiable?
 - ✓ Are ingredients visible/listed?
 - ✓ Is there a lower-stimulation eating area?
 - ✓ Can students customize meals without penalty?
 - ✓ Are accommodations normalized rather than singled out?



Key Takeaways



When we design with sensory needs in mind,
we make nourishment possible for more students.

Questions?



Ways to Connect!

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Resources

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