



University of Michigan MDining: Where Student Leadership, Culinary Innovation, and Research Drive Plant-Rich Results

At the University of Michigan, **students** are the main drivers of the shift toward plant-rich dining: they consistently ask for more plant-based options of all varieties. MDining actively engages them through classroom collaborations, internships, and student organizations, ensuring their voice shapes decisions around menus, procurement, and sustainability. Student researchers, for example, compared the carbon footprint of a Sustainable Monday menu — where no red meat is offered — against a regular day and found a 30% reduction in carbon emissions. That finding opened deeper conversations and set MDining on a deliberate path.

Today, led by **Senior Director of Dining Steve Giardini**, MDining operates at the intersection of student engagement, culinary craft, and research — with a commitment to a **55% plant-based menu**: *"students have the opportunity to develop healthy eating habits that can last a lifetime, so offering a menu loaded with plant-based foods seems obvious."*

MDining treats its dining halls as an **innovation hub**. Through the Carbon Neutrality Acceleration Project (CNAP), MDining partnered with the U-M School of Public Health to test behavioral nudges — including plant-based menu defaults and carbon labeling. A recent study with BITE, an organization working with food service operators to increase adoption of climate-friendly foods, found that when plant-based dishes outnumbered meat options **two to one ratio** at a popular station, more students visited and average emissions per serving dropped by half (compared to the business as usual scenario of offering 1

animal protein dish). Collaborations with the Forward Food Collaborative (Humane World for Animals), the Lentil Board, and others have provided staff with hands-on training, new recipes, and the latest culinary techniques for plant-rich cooking. Student organizations like Upgrade Dining keep MDining competitive by bringing student perspectives on industry trends directly into the conversation.

Culinary creativity is also nurtured through the **Global Chef Series**, which brings visiting chefs from places like Kenya, Spain, and Indigenous Sioux communities in Michigan to cook alongside MDining's culinary team. These visits allow the chefs to see food through a global lens, which often have a strong emphasis on plant-rich dishes, empowering them to be creative. Dishes born from these sessions are tested with students and, where feedback warrants, added to the regular menu. As Steve Giardini reflects, *"Seeing our team work together and rally behind this shift is a real highlight of the work."*



MDining's Oven-Roasted Squash.



Next to offering more plant-based options, MDining also tests innovations within its traditional offerings, such as the **Blended Burger** — a 70% beef, 30% mushroom patty that students embraced without noticing any difference in taste. The impact was anything but invisible: in 2025, the switch saved 357,473 kg of CO₂ equivalent, the equivalent of taking 83 cars off the road for an entire year.

For MDining **the financial case** for plant-rich dining is clear. Plant-based proteins offer **real cost advantages**: tofu, tempeh and legumes are cheaper and compare favorably against chicken and ground beef — and unlike animal proteins, plant-based pricing remains stable and predictable. MDining has also committed to purchasing at least \$100,000 of fresh produce annually from the university's **student-operated campus farm**, supporting local agriculture while giving students working on the farm a direct stake in what ends up on the plate.



UMich's fresh produce from farm to dining hall.

MDining's participation in the Menus of Change Research Collaborative has allowed the team to test behavioral nudges and plant-rich strategies in a real dining context — generating findings that peer institutions can learn from and adopt. This network of partners supports MDining through **shared knowledge and mutual encouragement**, making the plant-rich transition not just possible, but sustainable.

Looking ahead, MDining's ambition is to **normalize plant-rich eating** across the entire dining experience — for every type of diner. Rather than concentrating plant-based options at a single station, the long-term goal is to offer them across multiple stations every meal, so that any student can reach for a plant-rich dish without a second thought.

Michigan's journey shows what is possible when students, chefs, researchers, and dining leadership all move in the same direction. **For campuses starting out**, Steve Giardini's advice is straightforward: start with food that's genuinely delicious, involve students from day, pair every new menu introduction with clear and approachable education about plant-based eating, and find partners to learn from. As he puts it, *"the transition can be challenging — but collaborating across departments and learning from what other schools have tried makes all the difference"*.