Toronto has some of the best restaurants of all stripes and for every budget, many of them full at any time of the day, a sure sign of a city falling in love with its food scene. Perhaps not quite going gourmet yet, care facilities like St. Michael’s Hospital and North York General Hospital have made impressive strides in improving the quality and presentation of the hospital food.

St. Michael’s Hospital recently partnered with George Brown College to increase the local food items on the hospital menu, and has since implemented some of the recipes developed for patients.

“The partnership resulted in increased patient satisfaction and gave our staff the opportunity to learn the recipes and produce the items consistently,” said Melani Ragnitz, manager of Food Services at St. Michael’s Hospital. “The training resulted in recipe development. We currently have a number of recipes on both the community groups’ and the patient menus. The goal of teaching our staff--with the help of the skilled chefs at George Brown--the skills to prepare the recipes was a success.”

The project was funded by Greenbelt through its Broader Public Sector Innovation Fund, and hinged on creating meals that were based on local, seasonally available ingredients. From there, students of George Brown’s Food Innovation and Research Studio developed recipes that could be utilized in the hospital kitchen for patients, and then trained hospital staff to make the foods themselves. During that training process, students and faculty worked closely with hospital workers to fine-tune recipes so that meals would enhance patient recovery in addition to tasting and looking good. The project marked a departure from the bland, unattractive meal options that hospitals tend to be known for, and patients were quick to voice approval.

“The response we’ve seen from the patients and the hospital staff was overwhelmingly positive,” said Winnie Chiu, director of the Food Innovation and Research Studio at George Brown. “For example, the patients rated the new carrot and parsnip side dish as very good, and the Ontario apple cake was rated as excellent. When we did the training, we had a professional chef to show the professional presentation of the food, and we have developed a procurement guide and a training menu for the staff.”

Collaboration between the city’s institutions, large and small, has recently led to the launch of the City’s Food Starter incubator that focuses on helping early-stage food processors commercialize and scale the development of their food products. Dana McCauley, executive director at Food Starter, says there already is a board of directors in place who will work in an advisory capacity, and a training program to help the new participants get the most out of food.

“Every week, our participants have at least four hours of training, often facilitated by George Brown and Conestoga, our training partners,” said McCauley. “The program participants will receive an introductory lesson on food product development, learn creating a founder’s board for the business, about IP and how that affects the value of the company, and of course the commercial equipment safely. We have something happening every week.”

Tight relationships between hospitals, incubators, the City, students and colleges reflects the crucial trend of cross-sector innovation to help everyone make better food, from local food entrepreneurs to patients and kitchen staff. Now more than ever, healthcare facilities are recognizing that the quality of food is central to people's health. One day, local hospital recipes might just make their way into local cookbooks. If not, perhaps the sight of an apple pie made with fresh, local ingredients will make a patient’s day just that tiny bit better.