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Susan London recently had a fancy meal: wild-rice soup, skewered marinated vegetables, chateaubriand with a dry California wine and the chef's special cheesecake.

The place? Mt. Sinai Hospital in Minneapolis, where Mrs. London spent two weeks for arm surgery and related complications. "I was very surprised," says Mrs. London. "Most hospitals don't have very good food; everybody knows that."

These days, more and more hospitals across the country are offering gourmet dining programs. Some hospitals use them for patient therapy. United Hospital in St. Paul, Minn., for example, arranges for stroke patients to dine with family members and nurses to help raise patients' spirits. But most of the programs are a marketing ploy that hospitals hope will help them in the fierce competition for patients.

"We like to believe some people come here because of the food," says Paul Marki, food-service director at St. Joseph's in Fort Wayne, Ind. St. Joseph's offers seven-course gourmet dinners for \$20, and in the first quarter of this year its profits on the program quadrupled.

Brentwood, a 195-bed osteopathic hospital in suburban Cleveland, has one of the most ambitious programs. Four months ago it started offering a menu with 27 entrees, including frogs legs and live lobster, and a choice of domestic or imported wines. The chef, Stephen J. Rakoczy, is a Hungarian emigre who has worked at country clubs and fashionable restaurants in the area.

Mr. Rakoczy takes his work seriously. "One wrong spice could possibly kill somebody," he says. He mixes herbs as a substitute for salt and pepper. And he modifies his duck a l'orange by covering it with ice after it's cooked, to draw out the extra fat.

Dr. Robert DeRue, a cardiologist at Brentwood, is a cautious supporter of the program.

"From a therapeutic standpoint, it's good that food is becoming more palatable and enjoyable," he says, remembering the days when the food used to taste "kind of like dust." But he disapproves of hospitals that distribute glossy brochures advertising services like gourmet dining. "That is not what hospitals are here for," says Dr. DeRue.

The patients seem happy enough with the trend. Mr. Rakoczy says he receives fan letters. "I even got a note saying, 'I love the food but I wish you could give me more.' I tell him, I have to give you what the doctor says," says Mr. Rakoczy.