

## The new seniors home: spa, pub, filet mignon

TRALEE PEARCE

From Tuesday's Globe and Mail

August 18, 2008 at 9:22 PM EDT

Sylvia Camilleri remembers the first retirement home she visited when she was thinking about a move.

“There were these poor women sitting there,” she says, imitating their slouched posture. “I thought, ‘I’m never going into one of those.’”

The Toronto resident bought a condo instead and held tight for three years. But, finding herself increasing lonely, she decided to look again. This time, the retirement living industry wooed her with a drastic makeover.

Now, as she sits in the lobby of her new Toronto retirement home, she might as well be holding court in a trendy boutique hotel. Past the granite concierge desk is a seating area decorated in modern earth tones and a full-service restaurant, complete with crisp white Parisian tablecloths.



Sylvia Camilleri, 78, enjoys fine dining and the attentive service of Domenic Treglia at the restaurant of her Toronto retirement residence. (Simon Hayter For *The Globe and Mail*)

Tunes play gently in the background, on a player piano hooked up to an iPod. There is a slick pub with a full bar and a screening room complete with a Wii golf simulator. Around the corner are a poker room, a library, a spa, a fitness centre and a salt-water pool.

“It’s like living in a five-star hotel,” says the petite brunette 78-year-old, who was the first to move into the newly built Tapestry at Village Gate West in April.

Catering to septuagenarian Eloises with upscale amenities and services has become de rigueur in the newest wave of North American retirement development. Even Donald Trump is getting in on the action, with an haute retirement community outside New York for the over-55 set.

For one thing, there is plenty of demand from affluent elders who want to “skip the condo phase,” as Toronto seniors' consultant Jill O'Donnell puts it, and move directly into a chore-free, pampering environment.

The trend also amounts to a massive test-marketing campaign aimed at the baby-boom generation. This crowd, even more than the parents they escort on tours, are used to the good life and, frankly, unaccustomed to thinking of themselves as old.

“We're now building with a vision of what the boomers will be looking for in the next 10-15 years,” says Susan Gerard, vice-president of marketing and communications for Amica Mature Lifestyles, another Canadian developer of upscale retirement homes. “It's going to be that luxury, ‘Do everything for me. Let me enjoy it, travel.’ It's a secure, worry-free lifestyle.”

Amica has seven new Canadian homes in the works, in cities including Ottawa, Whitby and Windsor in Ontario.

As Tapestry's general manager Catherine Wallbank puts it, “The boomers think, ‘If this is the face of retirement, I'm okay with it.’” (Tapestry accepts residents aged 62 and up.)

Don't expect to see any paisley at Tapestry, she says as she gives a tour of the 168-unit building. In place of the typical dusty landscape paintings are modern artworks in subdued tones.

The decor choices are a shorthand for new thinking about the needs and tastes of an aging population. At new retirement homes such as Tapestry, several services match those in many retirement homes – weekly housekeeping, social activities and a medical staff on call. But the medical clinic is called a “wellness centre.” And instead of mandatory set mealtimes and fixed menu choices, residents have a \$400 credit for the restaurant to spend à la carte. They can blow it all on a few filet mignon dinners or stretch it out with less expensive fare. Residents with cars enjoy valet parking. Pet care is available, too.

While prune juice may be on offer, cocktails are front and centre. The pub hosts martini contests and boasts an impressive wine list. Residents can ask that their own wine collections be cellared in the restaurant. And a TV-worthy kitchen demonstration area is used for classes, but can also be booked for wine tastings and private dinners. Prices range from about \$3,000 for a studio apartment to \$6,000 a month for a two-bedroom unit.

Included in Ms. Camilleri's one-bedroom rental is two hours a month of concierge services, such as a private car with driver to take her to the theatre or shopping. She takes fitness classes as well as a computer class in the “brain centre” to beef up her memory.

“I can remember names much better, now,” she says, before heading off to lunch and a visit with chef Michael Howell, whose résumé includes stints at Toronto's Auberge de Pommier, Moishes Steakhouse and the Four Seasons.

Likewise, retiree Joan McLeod, 82, has lived in a Vancouver Amica residence for 31/2 years and is now accustomed to regular fitness programs, shopping and cultural outings, and afternoon hors d'oeuvres parties.

“It's a cross between a five-star hotel and a cruise ship,” she says.

Still, experts on aging caution that there's still a big question mark regarding how the next generation will age. University of Alberta gerontology professor Norah Keating says it makes good business sense that luxe retirement homes are already reflecting boomer interests.

“But we really don't know what that generation's going to look like in very old age,” she says. People's interests and needs at 85 are very different from those at 55, she adds.

She suggests boomers would do well to remember there may be a next step after the funky independent living of a place like Amica or Tapestry. They may want to make sure there's money left over for long-term medical care, too.

“Some people in the baby-boom generation will end up with high levels of health problems or dementias and some of them will not,” she says.

“There is a vision of a seamless transition. I think the seams are a little frayed.”