Refresh Your Menus the Crazy-Easy Way

By Sally Spero, SNS

Is your district large or small? Located in a bustling big city or a homey small town? Is it affluent or budget-constrained? Do the students arriving in the cafeteria represent countries from all over the world, or are their family trees firmly rooted in the community? No matter the answers, we all face the same challenges when we enter our school kitchens and offices every morning: How can we provide the highest-quality and most-attractive meals while doing it as efficiently and economically as possible?

Well, they say you must be little crazy to work in our field, right? So, let’s use that attitude to our advantage by going crazy easy. What does this entail, exactly? “Crazy easy” involves making small changes to your procedures and your menus that will pay off big in program improvements.
homa Onion Burgers, Alabama White BBQ Sauce and California Fish Tacos are examples of unique foods that are familiar in specific areas of our country. None of these would be difficult to reproduce in your kitchen with just a little experimentation. And now you've created a whole new class of recipes the crazy-easy way!

CRAZY-EASY MONEY SAVERS
You would be crazy indeed to overlook all the ways that USDA Foods (commodities) can help you in your program, especially with cost control. Processing opportunities abound for yielding excellent products, but don't overlook the role that brown-box foods can play in your overall menu plan. Doing something as simple as making fresh quesadillas by placing commodity shredded cheese on half a tortilla, folding it over and heating it until the cheese melts will cost only a few cents, and let you put food budget dollars toward other ingredients.

Using commodity cheeses for sandwiches and salads are a no-brainer, but they can also be used to make sauces for pasta; to top nachos, chili and soups; slices with cinnamon and sugar and roast the same way. They can be served either hot or cold, which has just doubled your variety. Now you have many more side dishes than you had before! You can also do a crazy-easy internet search for more roasting ideas for practically any fruit or vegetable by typing in its name followed by the words “board” or “commission.”

Breakfast is a crazy-easy—and highly popular—meal, so why serve it only in the early mornings? Breakfast for lunch is sure to get attention—and a breakfast sandwich is easy to make, whatever the hour. It can be open-face or inside a bun, biscuit, English muffin, croissant or any other whole-grain bread item. Cheese slices, sliced ham, egg patties, bacon slices and sausage patties can be used to make numerous combinations, from a Cheese and Egg Croissant to a Turkey Sausage Biscuit.

Serving regional specialties—especially those from outside your part of the world—is a crazy-easy way to attract more students to your cafeterias. While you might have to leave Maine lobster dinners for the weekend, Oklahomans are examples of unique foods that are familiar in specific areas of our country. None of these would be difficult to reproduce in your kitchen with just a little experimentation. And now you've created a whole new class of recipes the crazy-easy way!

PUTTIN’ ON THE RITZ
When making crazy-easy changes, start by considering simple ways to add pizzazz to reliable favorites. You already have success with items like ranch dressing, raw veggies and breakfast staples, so just imagine how you could extend their popularity with a few small tweaks.

For example, you know that just about every kid already loves ranch dressing, but did you realize you can easily pump up that flavor by adding different ingredients? To create new dressings or dips, start with your packaged ranch dressing and simply stir in barbeque sauce, chopped fresh herbs (cilantro, basil, chives, etc.), chopped jalapeño peppers or roasted garlic. Then, use these different dressings to amp up your sandwiches and chef salads. With one quick addition, you can now offer multiple on-trend menu items, like BBQ-Ranch Turkey Sub, BBQ-Ranch Pasta Salad and BBQ-Ranch Chicken Sliders.

You can also enhance your menu offerings by creating new varieties of classic side dishes. One crazy-easy thing to do is to roast the vegetables that you commonly serve raw, including carrots, cherry tomatoes, cauliflower, garbanzo beans and so on. Toss them with some oil, salt and white pepper, and then put them in the oven. There is no right or wrong way to do this—just roast them until you think they look good.

Want a new sweet treat? Toss apple slices with cinnamon and sugar and roast the same way. They can be served either hot or cold, which has just doubled your variety. Now you have many more side dishes than you had before! You can also do a crazy-easy internet search for more roasting ideas for practically any fruit or vegetable by typing in its name followed by the words “board” or “commission.”

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and to fill in part of the meat/meat alternate requirement in many other hot entrées. USDA Foods offers frozen egg mixes, which are perfect for scrambled eggs, quiches and frittatas. And commodity diced chicken can be added to casseroles, salads and sandwiches.

You already know that the pickiest eater in school will reconsider their position on your lunches when a cookie is included on the tray. If you don’t currently have a baking program, you may have not been keeping up with all the new flours, yeasts, doughs, batters and mixes that have been formulated specifically for school meal programs to help us meet whole-grain requirements. And you don’t need to be an accomplished baker to prep banana bread or brownies—these can be made by anyone who can follow a simple recipe. But don’t overlook opportunities to take these mixes to a new level! Plain yellow cake with frozen USDA Foods strawberry slices on top? Your students will go crazy for it!

**MEAT YOUR MATCH**
You may think me crazy to bring up the topic of raw meat: After all, in numerous school districts, it has been years since anyone has used it—and some are restricted by local policy or regulation from doing so. But many school nutrition operations do find that working directly with raw meat works for them. Mening entrée items using raw meat translates to fewer highly processed items in the menu rotation, an important goal for most of us today. Raw meat is an incredibly versatile ingredient, and very few allergens are present, which extends its use among your diverse customer base. And, of course, the taste, texture and aroma of freshly cooked meats can add a great deal of value to your program.

Don’t be intimidated by raw meat. Believe it or not, with proper HACCP procedures in place for food safety, there are many crazy-easy ways by

Go to: [www.schoolnutrition.org/OnlinePDAs](http://www.schoolnutrition.org/OnlinePDAs)

**“Refresh Your Menus the Crazy-Easy Way”**
Completion of this test, with a passing score, will count as 1 Continuing Education Unit (CEU) in Key Area 1, Nutrition, Code 1140

(Please Print)

Name: ____________________________________________________________

SNA Member Number: ______________________________________________

Address: __________________________________________________________

City/State/Zip: _____________________________________________________

Email: _____________________________________________________________

1. To capitalize on the popularity of ranch dressing, add ___ to pump up the flavor.
   - barbecue sauce
   - fresh herbs
   - roasted garlic

2. You can roast vegetables, but never try roasting fruits.
   - True
   - False

3. ___ is a regional favorite that could be adapted in any part of the country.
   - New Orleans Clam Chowder
   - Indiana Fish Tacos
   - Oklahoma Onion Burgers
   - All of the above

4. ___ is the current name for agriculture commodities available for school lunch programs.
   - USDA Foods
   - USA Foods
   - FDA Foods
   - None of the above

5. Frozen egg mixes are perfect for ___.
   - scrambled eggs
   - quiches
   - frittatas
   - all of the above

6. A school baking program is a waste of time and labor.
   - True
   - False

7. Use of ___ is a crazy-easy way to work with raw meat instead of processed products.
   - filet mignon
   - mahi-mahi filets
   - chicken drumsticks
   - none of the above

8. The School Nutrition Professionals group is a great resource on Instagram.
   - True
   - False

   - Richmond
   - Richland
   - Richfield
   - none of the above

10. In 2019, SNA will offer its ___ annual Virtual Expo.
    - first
    - second
    - third
    - fourth
MANY HANDS; DELICIOUS WORK

You don't have to go crazy alone. Local, state and national SNA meetings are opportunities to share, ask questions and get ideas from your peers. On social media, the School Nutrition Professionals and TIPS for School Meals that Rock groups on Facebook have become two fantastic resources for sharing and receiving. Web searches are valid sources, too. Do an internet search for “Richland Schools Chili Recipe,” and you will discover a crazy-easy entrée (served with a cinnamon roll!) that has become so popular, you’ll find multiple links.

Your vendor partners can also provide a helping hand. Their staff have often gone crazy, too, developing numerous menu concepts that highlight their product in order to demonstrate its versatility in school meals. There are many ways to tap into that expertise: Ask your distributor or manufacturer’s rep for advice and recommendations, visit websites and attend food shows, especially at state and national conferences. This winter, SNA will host its third Virtual Expo, free to Association members and a great way to keep up with the latest products. (Visit www.schoolnutrition.org to learn more.)

Why don’t you start going crazy with a recipe or concept you are excited about? Find the people on your staff who are willing to be a little creative like you, and together you can start experimenting. You will probably have to run two or three test batches to get things just the way you want them, both in terms of taste and nutritional analysis. But, if you take that first step, you will be ready to take the next one and be on your way to being crazy…the easy way!

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Sally Spero, SNS, is child nutrition director, Lakeside Union (Calif.) School District, and the 2018 FAME Silver Special Achievement Award winner. This article is adapted from Spero’s 25 Crazy-Easy Scratch Recipe Ideas presentation at ANC18. The full presentation can be found at https://tinyurl.com/crazy-easy-SNmag.