

BY DAYLE HAYES, MS, RD



A School Lunch TREND TRIFECTA

Three trend-worthy menu items being adopted, proliferating and appearing *everywhere* throughout K-12 school meal programs.

FOR OBVIOUS REASONS, not a lot of menu innovation went on during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is not to say there wasn't considerable menu creativity, especially when cafeteria teams took on the challenge of product shortages and cancelled orders with an inventive, problem-solving spirit that saw some delicious results make it onto trays (*see this month's bonus web content*). Still, most school nutrition

professionals have spent the last two years operating in emergency mode, focused on getting meals to students by whatever means necessary. And what an amazing job of feeding students (and in some cases, their families) you did!

Now that school meals are back in the vast majority of cafeterias—and some areas are enjoying fuller staffing patterns and fewer supply chain disruptions—many school nutrition operations have begun to flex their creativity with new regular menu options, as well as specialty items for students, staff and in support of varying engagement and educational activities.

The basics of elevating school meals from the #UsualSuspects to #GreatFoodatSchool remain the same as before the pandemic: Capitalizing on trends in commercial foodservice, focusing on popular flavor profiles, customizing to individual preferences, sourcing quality ingredients and, of course, emphasizing eye appeal.

Datassential (www.datassential.com), a data information company specializing in the food and beverage industry, identifies the ingredients, flavors and cuisines to watch. In proprietary work with clients, analysts apply a Menu

Adoption Cycle that has four stages: Inception, Adoption, Proliferation and Ubiquity. In this special Food22 edition of *School Nutrition*, we'll take a look at a trifecta of school meal trends—each at different stages along this continuum: **Charcuterie** bowls and boxes are rapidly moving from Inception into Adoption. **Elote or Mexican Street Corn** has really taken off in the past few years, through Adoption to Proliferation in a variety of forms. Finally, **Spicy Hot Sauces** are now pretty much ubiquitous, also known as found #Everywhere!

CHARCUTERIE

This French word—pronounced *shar-KOO-tuh-ree*—is derived from the words for flesh (*chair*) and cooked (*cuit*). The word was used to describe shops in 15th century France that sold products made from pork. Over time, it came to encompass a wide range of meat products, many of which were cured,



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and now, in the Instagram age, to a food board craze with many iterations (Barkcuterie for dogs!) but consistently featuring small portions of a wide array of ingredients.

The popularity of charcuterie today is part of a long tradition of meat and cheese plates, veggie and dip platters, and even the kid-friendly Lunchables® introduced by Oscar Meyer in 1988. Today’s charcuterie boards are convenient meal solutions suitable for snacking and for easy at-home entertaining—adaptable to any occasion: breakfast, brunch, birthday or holiday party. They can be purchased everywhere from restaurants and delis to specialty purveyors and supermarkets. ALDI, the German grocery chain now popular across the U.S., even has a “Charcuterie Board of Directors” (www.aldi.us/en/products/charcuterie), an online team of pros offering inspiration, tips, tricks and other advice to home cooks and party planners alike.

According to *Flavor & The Menu* magazine, which declared charcuterie one of its Top 10 flavor trends for 2022, pandemic lockdowns prompted chefs and gourmet retailers to package up charcuterie in portable formats to great acclaim and, later, with the return to on-premise dining, operators everywhere, from fast-casual chains to fine-dining restaurants, were embracing charcuterie concepts across all dayparts. “Traditionalists get really mad when you call something ‘charcuterie’ that isn’t meat, but we are seeing breakfast boards and dessert boards—the definition is moving into all kinds of directions,”

said Datassential Trendologist Mike Kostyo in the article.

Not surprisingly, charcuterie bowls, boxes and boats have been showing up in schools, too. It seems like every week another school district posts photos of their creative designs on social media. In its *SN Plus* digital supplement in October 2021, “The Boxed Lunch Boom,” *School Nutrition* identified the rise of charcuterie-style meal kits. And back in February 2021, TIPS for School Meals That Rock partnered with Fruits and Veggies: Have a Plant on a “Kid-cuterie” Facebook Live session featuring TIPS administrators Jeanne Reilly and Dayle Hayes, along with Chef Rebecca Polson, SNS, (Minneapolis Public Schools Culinary & Wellness Services) and Registered Dietitian Robin Plotkin (www.facebook.com/boardmama). Since many families were still receiving bulk emergency meals at that point, the goal of the event was to offer fun Valentine’s Day suggestions involving children and adults.

Once Jeanne Reilly, NDTR, SNS, had the creative bandwidth and energy to start adding fun items to the menu mix at her own **Windham Raymond (Maine)** School Nutrition Program, she began offering charcuterie bowls to all grade levels (A). At the elementary schools, 65% to 75% of students choose them when offered. At the high school, where the goal is to make them available as a daily choice, 10% opt for them as a grab-and-go, snack-centric lunch. Also in Maine, **York Schools’** Whitney Thornton is another director taking advantage of the charcuterie trend (B).

Reilly notes that charcuterie bowls have been “helpful during supply chain disruptions because lots of substitutions are possible.” But she points to some downsides, including struggles to source enough whole-grain crackers and finding sufficient staff time to add bowl assembly into the workflow. Reilly developed a *Creating Cute Charcuterie Boxes for School Meals* infographic (C) for TIPS for School Meals That Rock that defines step-by-step instructions to make charcuterie a reimbursable lunch option.

Like other boxes and bowls—and their power pack cousins—charcuterie-style menu options are expected to stick around on menus, including K-12, for the foreseeable future, given their adaptability and easy customization. Menu planners are embracing the opportunity to showcase and combine different ingredients, while employing the concept in various nutrition education and engagement activities for students and staff alike.

The **Chelsea (Mass.) Public Schools** Food Service Program has earned a reputation for eye-catching meals and colorful fruit and vegetable displays. In celebration of Dairy as the Harvest of the Month (#HOTM) on the 2022 Massachusetts Farm to School calendar, Assistant Director Veronica Iraheta used a mini charcuterie presentation in a wildly successful culinary activity. Middle school students were served charcuterie plates with mini-servings of four different

cheeses, plus whole grain bread sticks, grapes, berries, pepperoni and apricot preserves. The cheese options (Vermont sharp cheddar, Baby Bel, mini-mozzarella balls and brie) were new flavors being introduced to many of the students who were only accustomed to American cheese slices (D, E, F). According to Director Amanda Muniz, “They loved the presentation and were very receptive to the new flavors and textures.”

The Child Nutrition Program team at **Elmore County (Ala.) School District** used charcuterie boards as the basis for a creative team building and staff training activity in January 2022. It was an opportunity to improve knife skills and understand how to present ingredients and meal components to leverage their visual appeal. They shared this spirited report, along with photos (G, H, I), on social media: “This might sound cheesy, but we think our CNP team is really GRATE! They spent today practicing their knife skills and creating some beautiful charcuterie boards. You definitely work really GOUDA together!”

In South Carolina, Tory Pryor Gibson, Nutrition Services Manager, North Myrtle Beach High School, **Horry County Schools**, is using charcuterie to attract *adult* diners. She has been training her staff to create beautiful charcuterie boxes, with both meat and vegetarian options, for teachers and other staff members (J, K, L). “We sell twice as many staff

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meals when we offer the charcuterie boxes,” Gibson reports. “They love the convenience and presentation.” Next? The team is working to perfect their techniques to deliver proper portions and nutrition to make the charcuterie option available to high school students.

Other school nutrition teams showing off their trend-forward charcuterie efforts include **Chicopee (Mass.) Public Schools (M, N)**, **Buena Vista (Va.) Schools (O)** and **Tullahoma City (Tenn.) Schools (P)**. There are also “Park-cuteries,” the clever brand-centric name for the dish at Wheeling Park High School, **Ohio County (W.Va.) Schools (Q)**.

ELOTE: MEXICAN STREET CORN

Elote and esquites, its cob-free cousin, have been staple street food in Latin America for decades, if not millennia. Considering the importance of corn to the Aztecs and other Central American cultures, elote might even be able to stake a claim as the *original* street food.

Thanks to Mexican immigrants and to U.S. travelers returning home from visits to Mexico—where the carts of *eloteros* (street vendors of the dish) can be found parked in almost any town plaza—these delicious corn-based concoctions, in all kinds of forms and variations, have been showing up on fancy menus and, more recently, along school cafeteria serving lines. The most authentic (and decadent) iteration is boiled or grilled corn on the cob, mounted on a stick or skewer and then covered in creamy mayonnaise (or Mexican crema) and rolled in salty cotija cheese, then seasoned with chili powder or other spicy seasoning like Tajin. Some cooks brush lime juice on the corn before the mayo, while others add a squeeze of lime as a finishing touch. A sprinkle of cilantro is a popular garnish. **(R)**

In 2019, Datassential described the elote trend as being in the “inception” stage; now it has clearly moved into adoption and is on its way to proliferation. One signal of this phase is how often menus find elote being deconstructed as a “flavor system” that is applied to other foods, such as kid-friendly mac & cheese. Another sign of increased acceptance is its appearance on K-12 school menus! Of course, while food





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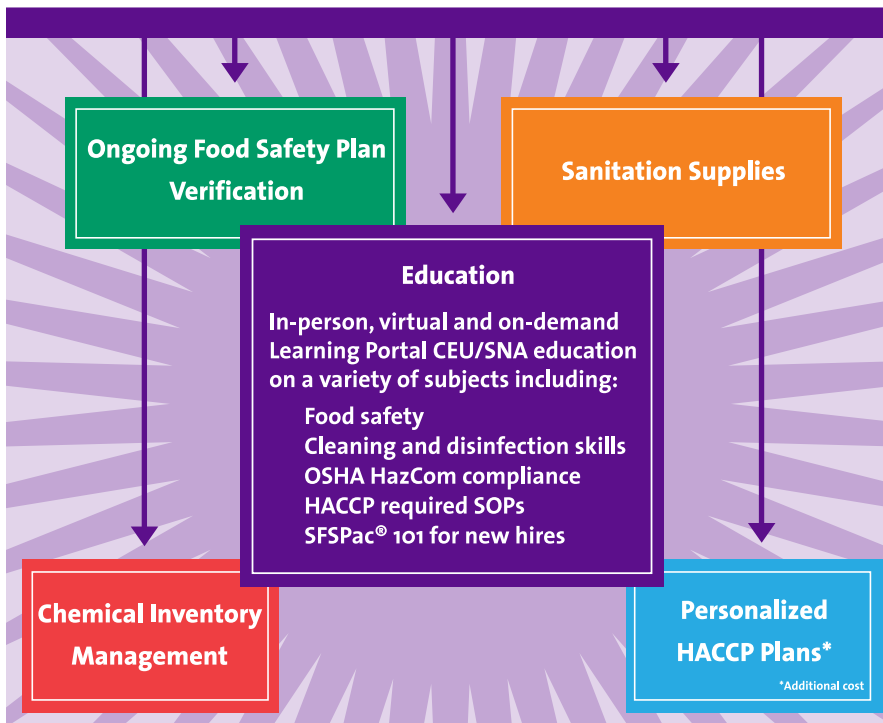
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on sticks is popular at fairs and other special events, sharp pointy things are generally frowned upon in schools, making esquites a more popular format on school menus—even if it's still called “elote.”

Chef Ryan Roderick, from the always on-trend **Windham Raymond (Maine) RSU #14** School Nutrition Program, made elote/esquites a part of emergency meals sent home to students and families when schools were closed. (S) His recipe was featured in *School Nutrition's* June/July 2021 article, “The Cob Chronicles.”

As previously noted, traditional elote is made with cojita cheese, an aged cow's milk Mexican cheese. School-ified versions are more likely to feature feta and/or parmesan cheese, which are generally easier for schools to source. When Shawna Van Antwerp Longie, Food Service Manager, **Manhattan (Mt.) Public Schools**, decided to leverage the popularity of the elote trend, she did what most of us do. She Googled the recipe and then adapted it to items she had on hand: feta cheese and sour cream instead of Mexican crema or high-fat mayonnaise. Served as a side when they menu taquitos, her esquites add flavor and texture to meals and are very popular with older students and staff. (T)

Chynna Paige Silvernale, Director of School Nutrition, **Brooks County (Ga.) School District**, reports fond memories of Mexican street corn from her youth in Los Angeles. Three years ago, she started serving Mexican Street Corn Salad with chicken or steak quesadillas. Although the Latin students in her small, rural district loved it from the start, others were initially skeptical.



Now, they run out of this side whenever it is served! Silvernale also adapts her recipe to comply with school nutrition standards, product cost and availability, notably swapping in feta cheese or powdered Parmesan. (U)

Jennifer Miller and her Student Nutrition Services team at **Garland (Texas) Independent School District** are well-known for their creative menus. So, it's no surprise to learn that Miller is on the leading edge of the elote trend, applying its elements and flavors to reinvent menu favorites, notably the Elote Mac & Cheese, (V) "We were brainstorming ideas for a new modern take on mac & cheese—and elote just seemed like a natural," says Miller.

When **Alhambra Elementary School District** in Phoenix, Ariz., returned to in-person learning in August 2021, the school nutrition team wanted to alert families about the availability of free meals for all students and generate menu excitement. They did this with a new elote recipe, served with a whole-grain crispy chicken drumstick, homemade roll, fruit and pasta salad (made with lentil noodles for added fiber and protein). Alhambra's elote was served on the cob with traditional toppings—but minus any sharp sticks. (W)

Meghan Martinson, MS, RD, LD, Child Nutrition Dietitian at **Eagle Mountain-Saginaw (Texas) Independent School District**, is partial to cob-free elote. The team's recipe is Smart Snacks-compliant, using frozen corn, a mixture of sour cream and mayonnaise, a little Parmesan, cilantro, chili powder and garlic powder. It is a popular snack cup, especially when sprinkled with more chili powder and adding a lime wedge. (X)

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SPICY, HOT SAUCES

Third in our trifecta of trends is spicy sauces (and sides). Since some type of heat is now found on almost every menu across cuisines in the U.S., it might be more appropriate to view spicy sauces as a flavor *shift*. There is no doubt that Americans are eating more spicy foods and that the ‘heat’ of those foods is increasing among young people, as well as adults. Have you tried Flamin’ Hot® Cheese Flavored Snacks? These seriously hot snacks were introduced by Frito Lay/PepsiCo back in 1989 and may serve as an informal benchmark of the time—the 1980s and ‘90s—that many food experts believe we collectively had a palate adjustment, forsaking bland for more flavorful.

All of the school nutrition leaders interviewed for this article underscored the trend toward spicier and hotter foods on their menus, with Mexican salsas, Sriracha sauce and Buffalo chicken being among the most frequently cited items. Many confirmed that spicy condiments, spice blends and jalapeño peppers (both fresh and pickled) have become a daily offering, especially for older students, and that customers tend to put them on *everything*. Indeed, rumor has it that some students in Texas school districts come to school with bottles of their preferred hot sauce in their backpacks and share them liberally with friends at meals! (Y)

As usual, school meal operators are responding to what their young customers are choosing *outside* of the cafeteria. More fast-casual chains are marketing familiar foods (handhelds, fried chicken) with spicy profiles that reflect a world cuisine (Asian and Latin, especially) or regional (Nashville Hot) influence. An internet search reveals several research studies predicting no slow-down in the rapidly rising global hot sauce market.

In schools, however, the trend leans more toward *housemade* spicy sauces, both to reduce the amount of sodium found in commercial products and to develop a signature “brand.” For example, Ron Jones, Director of Food Service, **Spartanburg County (S.C.) School District 6**, and a home hot sauce creator, is eager to expand the district’s current offerings beyond Sriracha and pickled jalapeños. He

has a dream of combining fruit from 400 organic blueberry bushes (found on the district’s own farm) with serrano or jalapeño chiles for a sweet-hot sauce specifically crafted with his student customers’ tastes in mind.

It’s no surprise that the cafeterias throughout **San Diego Unified School District** have hot salsas and other spicy sides on the menu every day, given their 20-mile proximity to the U.S.-Mexico border. Juan Zamorano, Food Services Program Specialist, explains that their speed scratch salsas (using canned tomatoes and tomatillos with fresh cilantro, onions and garlic) are “very, very popular with students and staff. We make our salsa fresca and salsa verde in large volumes while maintaining authentic flavors.” Students enjoy side portions of salsas along with pickled jalapeños on #Build YourOwn bars (for nachos, tacos and burgers), as well as Sriracha and other hot sauces. According to Zamorano, their most popular extra (as a side or a condiment) is a red-orange vegetable: housemade spicy carrots. (Z) Fresh or canned carrot slices are marinated in the vinegar from pickled jalapeños, along with onions, garlic, olive oil and a little salt. “Our customers put these spicy carrots on anything and everything,” notes Zamorano.

Those in the know describe boom sauce as a magical combination of mayonnaise, hot sauce, sweet chili sauce, yellow mustard and tomato ketchup—with varying amounts of garlic powder, onion powder, salt and pepper to make it even more craveable. Also known as boom boom, mambo, mumbo and yum yum sauce, boom sauce is popular from Chicago to Washington, D.C., and many locations further south. The reddish-orange sauce, with a flavor like a sweeter, spicier and sourer barbecue sauce (if you can imagine that), is great for dipping veggies and considered perfect on shrimp, burgers, rice, stir fry and chicken!

As part of a current goal to reimagine the opportunities provided by the central kitchen at **Jefferson County (Ky.) Public Schools**, maximizing ingredient versatility on the menu and continuing to work to elevate perceptions of the school nutrition program, Dan Ellnor, SNS, Assistant Director,

School and Community Nutrition Services, has been looking at development of versatile sauces that could be used three ways on three different days.

In the course of this development, the district ordered a truckload of mayonnaise to ensure that supply chain disruptions did not impact their popular housemade ranch dressing. They ultimately found themselves with more mayon-

naise than they could use before it expired, but department culinarians went to work and 502 Boom Sauce was born! (AA) They added hot sauce, garlic, Worcestershire sauce, pepper and some sour cream to lower the viscosity, Ellnor explains. At press time, the signature sauce was wrapping up its initial test cycles, and gaining student feedback, while staff continued with the development of a lower-sodium version.

Add "Trend-Watching" to Your To-Do List

So, what will *your* school kitchen try next? Maybe a charcuterie bowl featuring cheese, local veggies and a signature berry preserve from the harvest of your school garden? Remember that elite flavors can differentiate and elevate familiar foods that might benefit from a little kick, such as a salad, mac & cheese or flatbread pizza. And when it comes to spicy sauces, the sky is the limit! Chiles of all varieties and heat levels can be combined with almost any fruit and/or vegetable.

Be sure to connect with staff and students when it comes to tracking trends. Use different survey or feedback approaches to gather input on what *they* are craving. Don your foodie brainstorming hat, imagine the possibilities and begin a little flavor exploration! **SN**

Dayle Hayes is a well-known school nutrition cheerleader based in Bozeman, Mont., a founder of the School Meals That Rock social media brand and a longtime contributor to SN.



BONUS WEB CONTENT

A School Lunch TREND TRIFECTA

Select K-12 recipes shared with *School Nutrition* by a few of the districts highlighted in this article are available as part of this month's online exclusives. In addition, discover how some school nutrition teams turned a supply chain disadvantage into delicious menu success.

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