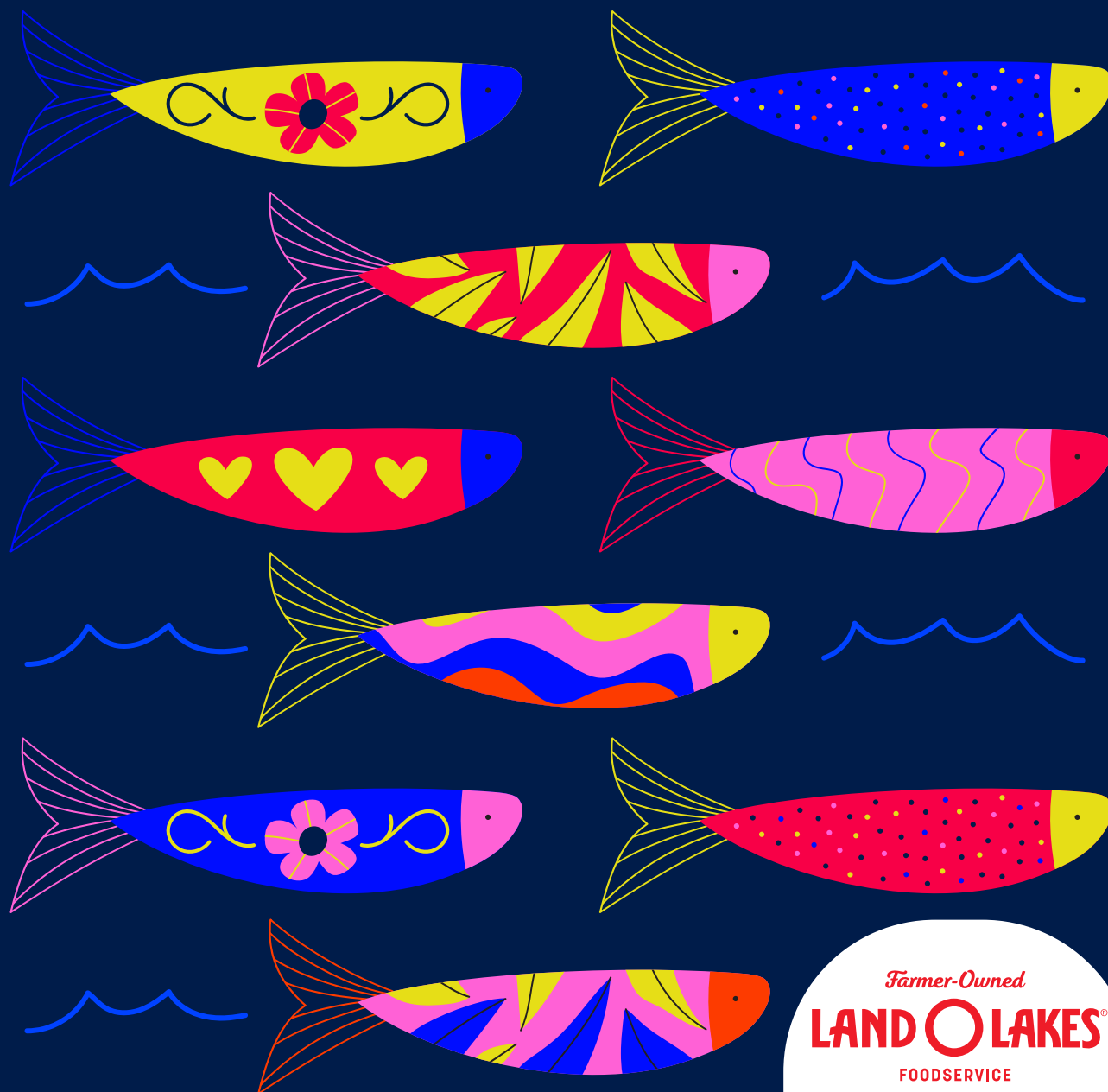


OCTOBER

HOOK, LINE AND LUNCH TRAY

Why serving more fish can
be a win for your program
(and how to do it)

BY DYLAN ROCHE



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erving fish in your cafeteria might feel like a swim in uncharted waters, but it shouldn't—in fact, you might say fish could be the "reel" solution to challenges you have to tackle on the regular. (Okay, we'll stop with the puns now.) Fish is a food that's sourced domestically, it's full of protein and vital nutrients and it's versatile enough that you could probably serve it for every meal and never run out of options.

"Wild-caught fish from Alaska is a natural fit for school meals because it delivers on nutrition, versatility and values," explains Megan Rider, domestic marketing director of Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute (ASMI). "It's high in protein, omega-3s and essential vitamins like B12 and D—nutrients that support brain development, heart health and sustained energy throughout the day."

She also points to the sheer practicality of serving seafood: It has a mild flavor and adaptable texture, so it's easy to use in familiar kid-friendly dishes, whether you're making tacos, sandwiches or bowls. Plus, wild Alaska seafood is sustainably harvested under what she calls "some of the most rigorous management systems in the world."

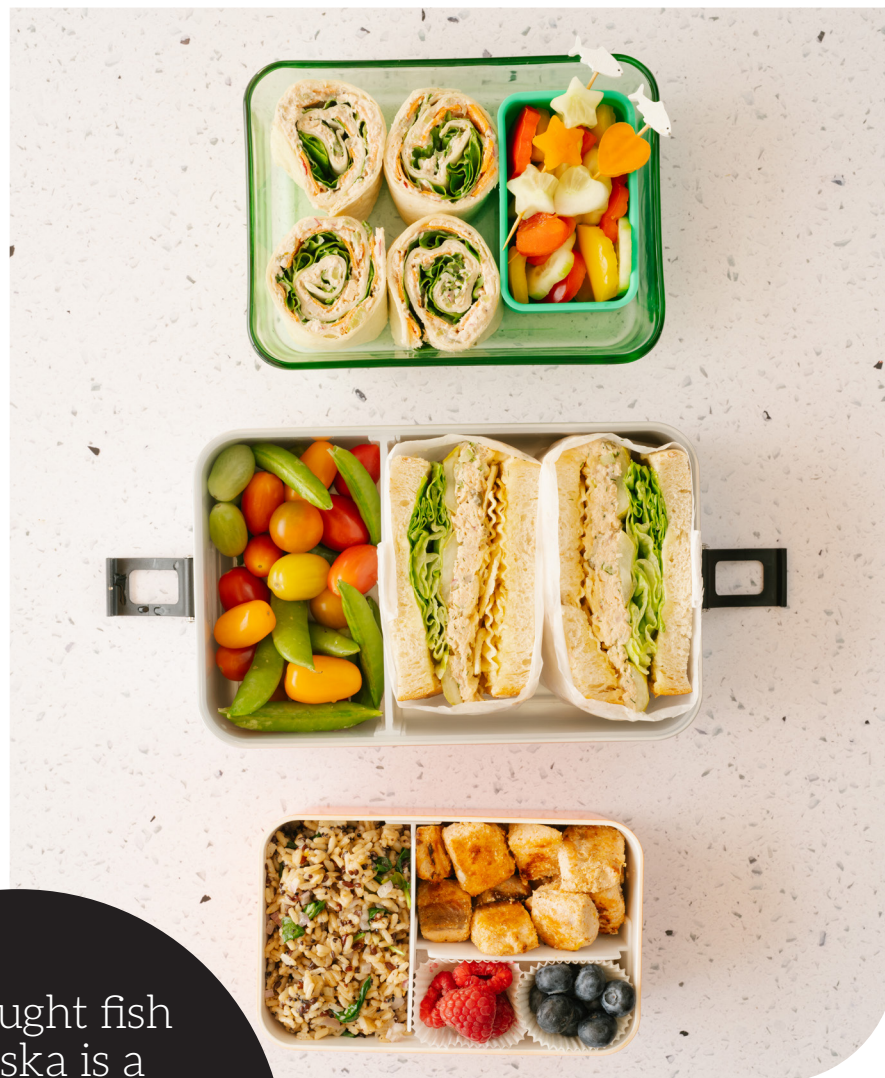
But for all the positives you could say or hear about fish, you still have questions. Don't worry. Navigating fish in the cafeteria doesn't have to be fishy.

RICH IN NUTRIENTS

For all its health benefits, fish can be greatly underappreciated, especially in school meals. *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* suggest eating fish or other seafood two times per week, which would be about 8 ounces total per week. But according to a [report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office in 2022](#), seafood represented about 2 percent of animal proteins the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)

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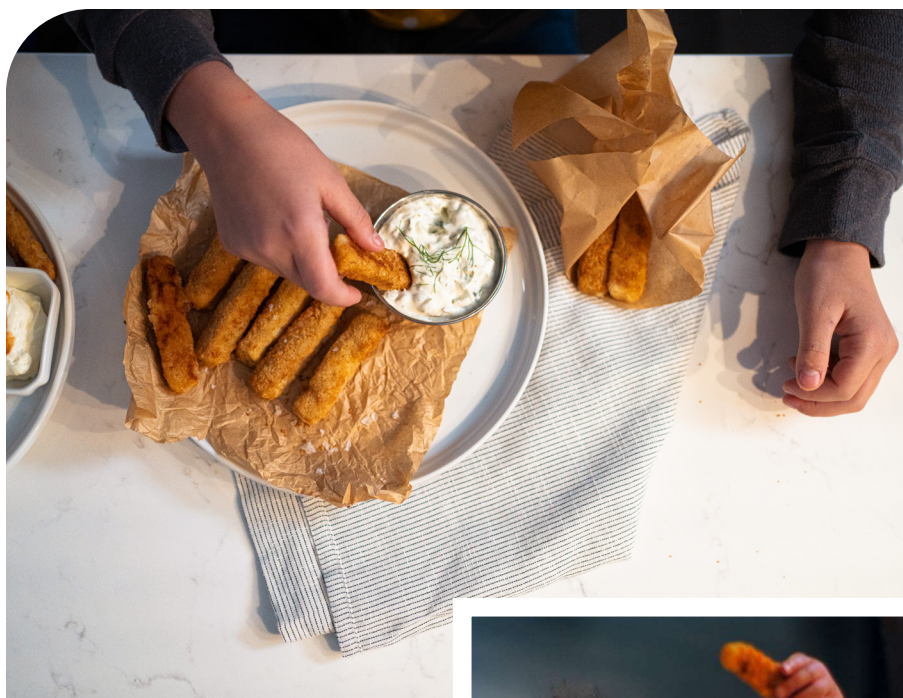
—Megan Rider



bought for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). The average student was eating about 3 ounces of seafood per

year—not per week, but per year.

The amount of fish the USDA buys for the NSLP is increasing (more on that in the section *An Eco-Friendly Choice*), and that's good news, because that likely means bumping those serving numbers up a bit for students. Depending on the type, fish has between 20 and 30 grams of high-quality protein per 4-ounce



serving, plus vitamins A and D for eye health and bone development. In fact, a single serving of salmon can meet your daily vitamin D needs! Vitamin D aids in calcium absorption, so it can help young bodies build strong bones—something that can be especially important when they're roughhousing on the playground or engaging in high-impact activities.

Like meat and poultry, fish is a powerhouse source of iron, which our bodies need to provide oxygen to every cell in the body. When kids get plenty of iron, they have the energy they need—both physical and mental—to engage in all their daily activities. Plus, healthy iron levels can boost their immune systems and help them ward off colds and illness during those high-risk times of the year when it seems like something is always going around the school.

But there's one other nutrient fish is known for, and that's omega-3 fatty acids. These unsaturated fats are especially important for young minds and bodies. The American Academy of Pediatrics points to a specific type of omega-3s known as docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) that are essential for a developing brain and nervous system, so they are good for cognitive function, motor skills, memory, learning and mood regulation. This might explain why studies show that children who eat fish rich in omega-3s tend to get better grades, have better spelling skills,



retain information they've learned better and have higher IQs.

Beyond brain power, fatty fish might help students focus and socialize better in the classroom, as a 2014 study published in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* found that omega-3s reduce behavior problems and aggression in children.

What's more, even though fish offers nutritional benefits for all ages and stages of life, many people don't get regularly exposed to seafood until they're much older, if at all. On the other hand, a young seafood eater is likely to become a regular seafood eater for life. And children who eat fish from a young age could be at reduced risk of allergies, asthma and eczema, per the American Academy of Pediatrics.

You might be worrying, **what about mercury?** Mercury levels in fish is a cause for concern for adults, but it can be an especially valid worry when it comes to children who eat fish, as their developing bodies are more vulnerable. When mercury settles in natural bodies of water, it can build up in fish—especially fish that



eat other fish. When we consume mercury via the fish we eat, it could negatively affect our nervous system. To avoid this, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends not serving high-risk fish to children. This includes marlin, swordfish, King mackerel and shark—fortunately, not fish you'd likely be serving in the cafeteria anyway! Instead, focus on safer options like tuna, salmon, trout, herring and pollock.

AN ECO-FRIENDLY CHOICE

Remember that part about how the amount of fish the USDA buys for NSLP is increasing? That's because last year, the USDA made a commitment to buy more fish for NSLP and solicited bids from domestic providers—these include products like:

- > Catfish fillets
- > Oven-ready catfish strips
- > Canned pink salmon
- > Salmon fillets
- > Alaska pollock fillets, surimi and sticks
- > Atlantic pollock fillets
- > Haddock fillets
- > Ocean perch fillets



Why is this such great news for schools beyond the nutritional benefits? Even among domestic animal products, fish is a great choice for the planet, as Rider explains. "Compared to land-based proteins, wild Alaska seafood has far lower carbon footprints and require no freshwater, feed or farmland to produce," she says. "Schools can further reduce waste by using frozen formats, which stay fresh longer and can be portioned as needed. Canned salmon, in particular, is a sustainability star—shelf-stable and portion-flexible."

She points out that Alaska seafood sets the "global standard for sustainability." Since the 1950s, under the law, fisheries have harvested below what science says is sustainable, which means there's always a healthy fish population the following year.

In fact, the National Ocean and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) describe fish as "the most environmentally efficient source of protein on the planet." This is because even though fish farms once faced environmental issues in the past, science-based regulation has helped these wild-capture fisheries manage plans that prevent overfishing, rebuild depleted stocks, conserve fish habitat and other important practices.

Really, who can say no to that kind of efficiency?

FOOL-PROOF FISH

I asked Megan Rider, domestic marketing director of the Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute (ASMI), "**What are some foolproof fish recipes that you would expect to be a hit with students?**" and here's what she told me:

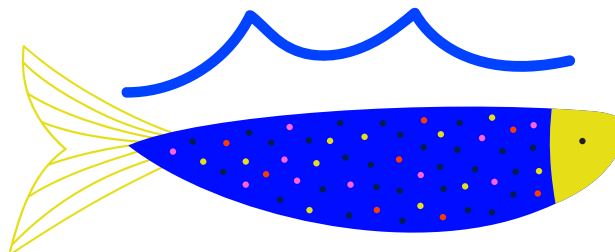
The biggest school lunch wins are dishes that feel familiar but introduce seafood in a fun way.

- > **Pink Salmon Dip Pinwheels:** A playful, bite-sized twist on wraps—creamy salmon filling rolled up in whole-grain tortillas for a fun, handheld option that's easy to prep and serve.
- > **Double Crunch Pink Salmon Sandwich:** A crisp, hearty sandwich that feels classic but adds a flavorful upgrade with wild Alaska salmon, offering a nutritious alternative to traditional deli fillings.
- > **Alaska Pink Salmon Fresh Rolls:** A colorful, global-inspired take on a familiar favorite—fresh vegetables and tender salmon wrapped together for a light, refreshing meal.

For older or more adventurous eaters, try dishes like [pink salmon onigiri](#), [seafood grain bowls](#) or [curry-inspired plates](#).

With fish becoming more common and accessible for school meal programs, there are plenty more sources you can turn to for K-12 approved fish recipes. To get started, give these recipes from Land O'Lakes a try on your next menu:

- > **Cheesy Sockeye Salmon Pasta:** A hearty pasta dish featuring penne, salmon and a warm, white cheese sauce that will still appeal to more hesitant students.
- > **Tuna Salad:** Use this tuna salad recipe for wraps, sandwiches or serve it as a dip for crackers, celery, carrots or other vegetables.
- > **Creamy Chimi Sauce, Cilantro Lime Crema & Creamy Tomatillo Dressing:** A trio of flavorful sauces perfect for serving alongside fish tacos, fish sticks or fish cakes.



Each serving connects students to a story that's bigger than their plate—one of wild, responsibly managed fisheries and hardworking people who care deeply about the future of food.

—Megan Rider

ENDLESS OPTIONS

Fish is good for your students' growing bodies and it's good for our fragile planet—and you'll be happy to know it's also good for your program. Fish is a wildly versatile food that lends itself to all kinds of cuisines that kids love. As Rider explains, the biggest choice you have to make is what type of fish you're going to use when developing a dish—you want to find something that's the right flavor, texture and cost. Great options for your cafeteria might include:

- > **Pollock:** It has a mild flavor and tender, flaky texture. Pollock is especially popular in schools because it's budget-friendly and works well for favorites like fish sticks and fish sandwiches, as well as slightly more adventurous options like fish tacos.
- > **Salmon:** Salmon has a richer flavor and more vibrant color than pollock, so it's good when you want to make something a little bolder—in other words, when you use salmon, you're going to have a dish that's more colorful and flavorful. It's great for global-inspired dishes, and it's high in protein.
- > **Cod:** Cod has a mild flavor, and its firmer texture holds up well when the fish is prepared and added to recipes. This combination of taste and texture makes it good for pairing with sauces, grains and vegetables.

When you order fish, you'll likely receive it either frozen or canned. By looking for "Alaska" on the label, you can be assured it's wild-caught, sustainable and responsibly harvested—and it was frozen right after it was harvested for peak maintenance of freshness and flavor.



Freezing also reduces the stress on you and your team to use it right away. The Seafood Nutrition Partnership explains that frozen seafood will keep well when kept in an airtight package at 32°F. Just make sure there's no discoloration, no ice crystals and no stale odor when you receive it.

If you're buying canned instead of frozen, the Seafood Nutrition Partnership recommends storing the cans between 50 and 70°F, though you can chill unopened cans of tuna for cold tuna sandwiches and salads right before preparation. Cooking with fish isn't any more difficult than cooking with meat or poultry. In fact, you might find it's easier! Handle raw fish the same way you would handle raw meat, observing good handwashing between handling and cleaning surfaces and utensils to avoid cross-contamination. Fish cooks much more quickly and could reach the necessary internal temperature of 145°F in between 10 and 15 minutes, all while keeping its moisture and flakiness.

FINAL BITE

The combination of responsible sustainability and high-quality nutrition makes fish an obvious choice for your program—and even though you might be introducing students to a food they've never tried before, that's your opportunity for culinary experimentation (see the sidebar on page 4 for recipe ideas). Fish lends itself to practically every kind of cuisine, all around the world, for all occasions, from simple to fancy.

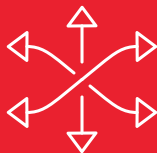
"Each serving connects students to a story that's bigger than their plate—one of wild, responsibly managed fisheries and hardworking people who care deeply about the future of food," Rider says. "It's a simple way to nourish both students and values at the same time."



Dylan Roche is a Contributing Editor for *School Nutrition* magazine.



A collection of Land O'Lakes cheese products is displayed against a solid red background. On the left, a white bowl is filled with macaroni and cheese. Next to it is a bag of Land O'Lakes Ultimate Reduced Fat Mild Cheddar Cheese. In the center, there is a bag of Land O'Lakes Ultimate Colby Jack Cheese and a large bag of shredded Land O'Lakes Ultimate Mozzarella Cheese. To the right of the mozzarella bag is a bag of Land O'Lakes Ultimate Jalapeno Cheddar Cheese. Further right are two tubs of Land O'Lakes Ultimate Cheddar Cheese Dip, one in its original packaging and one in a blue and white 'Spreadable Cheese' container. On the far right is a large bag of Land O'Lakes Ultimate Creamy White Cheddar Cheese. Each product features the Land O'Lakes logo and detailed nutrition facts.



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