

JULY

CREATING YOUR STAR MENU:

From Inspiration to Innovation

There's a lot that goes into planning a school lunch or breakfast menu, from choosing what recipes to include to managing your budget, purchasing products and more. So, the idea of "menu innovation" might conjure a feeling of trepidation—but hopefully at least a little inspiration too! It might feel like a daunting, potentially unnecessary task to some, but keeping your menu fresh and exciting doesn't need to be a huge undertaking all at once. And if you ask your school nutrition peers who stand behind their own innovative menus, most of them will tell you it's well worth the effort.

BY MARI BRAND



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izza soup, pulled pork with homemade mac and cheese, citrus herb baked tilapia, caramel apple parfaits, build-your-own ramen bars, Parmesan roasted asparagus and jalapeño butter—those are just some examples of the innovative and most successful recipes and ingredients you might find on the lunch or breakfast menu at Warrick County School Corp. (WCSC) in Indiana. Shenae Rowe, RDN, food and nutrition director at WCSC, takes pride in offering school meals that are just as delicious, high-quality and appealing as something you could order from a regular restaurant (and not just from the “kids” menu). But that doesn’t mean they were all introduced at once—or that their menu entirely leaves out more of the classic kid-friendly options like chicken tenders, cheese pizza or nachos.

“We always encourage starting with one item you know you can improve.”

—Shenae Rowe, RDN



START SMALL AND LEVEL UP

Whether you’re already full of new, exciting menu ideas or still looking for inspiration, Rowe’s advice is the same: Start small, and go from there.

“We always encourage starting with one item you know you can improve,” she explained. Maybe it’s one menu item that would be a relatively easy shift from heat-and-serve to scratch- or semi-scratch made, or a meal that didn’t sell as well as you expected the first time around that you know could be revamped.

At WCSC, that first item was ranch dressing—from a standard, store-bought version to a new homemade recipe. “Students love ranch, so it was a simple change that made a big impact,” Rowe recalled. “Our version is less processed, more cost-effective and something we’re proud to serve.” Next, they took on a homemade cheese sauce, which then led to homemade mac and cheese, which is still one of their most popular menu items today.

Starting small makes upgrading your menu a much smoother process for everyone involved—directors, staff and students all included. Choosing a single starting point is approachable, achievable and can still have a big impact. Not only will deciding to change too many things all at once be overwhelming for staff, but it probably won’t go over well with your student customers either. No matter how excited they are by something new, kids generally aren’t fans of having too much of their usual routine disrupted all at once, even if the changes are positive.

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Once you've chosen a starting point, break it down into even smaller parts. Which ingredients could be replaced with higher-quality versions? How would a scratch-made version improve it, and would the extra time and effort required pay off enough for that particular item? How can you use the products and ingredients you already have in more creative ways—maybe with different spices, flavors, sauces or by combining two things together into something new and more exciting?

SETTING STAFF UP FOR SUCCESS

Even more important than coming up with new, innovative menu ideas is ensuring staff are fully prepared and comfortable executing them. If the people preparing the food aren't confident they can make a new recipe correctly, the amazing idea you have in your head won't make it to reality.

Rowe's key to successful staff training is developing tested, standardized recipes for every menu item involving two or more ingredients. She emphasizes that before something new is added to their menu, "Every recipe has to be detailed enough that any team member can execute it successfully. That includes specifying equipment, pans, temperatures, fan speeds, holding procedures and how to handle leftovers. Proper training and the right tools are essential." A recipe should be comprehensive enough to produce the same quality, yield and portion size every time, no matter who is preparing it, how

many times they have done it before, and accounting for any differences in equipment if you have more than one kitchen preparing the same meals.

There's no way to pretend like that doesn't require a good amount of effort, not to mention knowledge about how to actually put a recipe into words, steps and measurements that make sense to everyone, not just the person creating it. But the benefits make it very much worth the extra time and work. Not only will you end up with a meal that's consistent across schools and that all staff are able to make successfully, prioritizing standardized recipes for every menu item will also reduce food waste, make it easier to manage food allergies and special diets, allow for more accurate purchasing and inventory management and, in the end, will save you time and money too.

GET INSPIRED AND MAKE IT YOURS

When it comes to finding inspiration for new menu items, the possibilities are endless and all around you. You can take inspiration from students, school staff members, families, social media, other school nutrition professionals, restaurants—really anywhere food is involved (which is pretty much everywhere). Next time you're out to eat and you order something that really stands out, or you see an interesting recipe while scrolling through your social media feed, ask yourself: "Would my students like this?" and "How could I adapt this for a school menu?"



When that type of inspiration strikes, Rowe often tries to go straight to the source if possible. "I attended a conference out of town and visited a specialty bagel shop where I tried a jalapeño steamed bagel. I loved it, so I took a picture of the menu description to identify the ingredients and even talked with the cook about their process. That turned into a new menu item for us," recalled Rowe. "A similar story was that I was at a franchise restaurant and loved the seasoning they had on their vegetables. I decided to ask if I could purchase the special sauce but was told they don't sell it. I talked to the manager to let him know what I was wanting it for, and he kindly gave me the jalapeño honey butter recipe we have now used for over 20 years. If you find something great, it never hurts to ask how it's made."

Student input is also huge at WCSC. They have created focus groups to meet directly with students for feedback and new menu ideas, many of which have been very successful, including their Parmesan roasted asparagus—an idea originally shared by an elementary school student council group that has now been on their menu for years. They also conduct taste tests, use surveys and encourage café managers to go talk directly with students during lunch to get feedback. In addition to inspiration from students and outside the school environment, some of the best ideas have also come from WCSC staff, sharing their favorite recipes or recipes that their own kids love.

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—Shenae Rowe, RDN

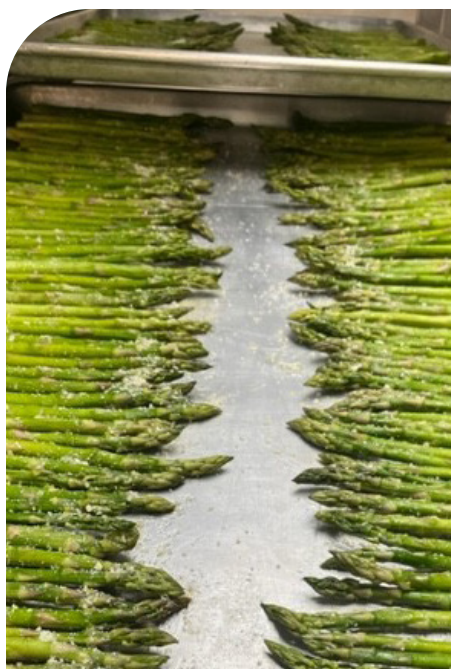
TASTE, TEST, TWEAK AND TASTE AGAIN

Over the years, there have been many successful, innovative additions and upgrades to WCSC's menus, from improvements on components like their homemade or semi-homemade sauces and dressings to entirely new recipes. On top of those mentioned back on page two, some of their most popular menu items have been teriyaki broccoli, buffalo cauliflower, farm-to-school burger patties, pollo con queso, pork tenderloin bites, chorizo and egg burritos, buffalo chicken dip and pizza dip, as well as more "build-your-own" options such as self-serve mac and cheese, baked potato, taco/nacho, pasta, mashed potato bowl and brunch bars.

But, amidst all the successes there have also been some that haven't hit the mark. "That definitely happens," Rowe acknowledged. "We tried an egg roll bowl bar that we thought would be a hit, but it didn't perform as well as expected. The same was true for hot turkey sliders on Hawaiian rolls, a Korean beef bowl and a breakfast egg soufflé inspired by Panera," she gave as a few less successful new menu items.

In some cases, like with their bánh mì sandwich, the recipe came out delicious, but required a lot of prep, so it wasn't feasible to keep it on the menu when it didn't sell well initially. In other cases, Rowe notes that it can be related to the presentation of the meal. "For example, students didn't love how the Korean beef bowl looked, even though the flavor was there."





It's also important to keep in mind that trends and kids' tastes shift over time, which means something that was a top choice for years might become much less popular a few years down the road. WCSC's citrus herb baked tilapia is one of those examples. For years, it was a huge hit. "I once had a parent jokingly call to 'complain' that we had created a problem for her because her child no longer wanted anything from the kids' menu when they went out to eat. Instead, during a family dinner at O'Charley's, he ordered the tilapia!" recalled Rowe. Despite its initial success, after eight years on the menu the tilapia's popularity declined until they eventually removed it from the regular rotation.

All of that is not to discourage anyone from trying new things—but acknowledging that not everything you try will be a major success is just as important as reminding yourself that many of your innovative ideas will be. The things that are an instant hit make it feel worth it, and every less successful attempt should be viewed as an opportunity for improvement, not a total failure. As Rowe said, "When something doesn't work, we listen to feedback, learn from it and move on to new ideas."

If something isn't well-received, go to your students for feedback! Was the presentation the problem? Was there a specific flavor, texture or ingredient they didn't like? Or was it just too out-there for them to be willing to try? You might get specific points of advice you can take back to the kitchen and return with a new and improved version to try again later. Or, you might find out that particular recipe just isn't it, but you'll still learn something about what your students want to see from that too, and you can use

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that to guide your future new ideas. Overall, playing it safe all the time isn't the way to go. School meals can be an opportunity to introduce kids to new foods and flavors with meals that are often more nutritious than the ones they eat at home or at restaurants. Plus, your students are probably more excited to try new things than you might give them credit for. "It's easy to assume they'll only choose pizza, cheeseburgers or chicken nuggets, but we've seen again and again that they're open to more than that," said Rowe. That's not to say those items don't also deserve a place on your menu—everyone loves a classic cheeseburger or a pizza Friday. But your menu can also be much more innovative than what most people think of when they picture a school meal. "Not everything will be a success, and that's okay," Rowe left as a reminder. "The key is to keep trying, keep listening and keep evolving."



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