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KIDS THESE DAYS:

Listening to Students
for Menu Inspiration

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The phrase "kids these days" is a saying we used to hear our parents say when talking about the differences in younger generations compared to their own. Now we're the generation talking about "kids these days." The tables have turned, and trying to keep up with menu trends and inspiration can be challenging. Korean flavors have become popular with the rise of K-pop music and movies. Even the lingo of trending foods can sound unappealing, like a "trash can dish" or "puppy chow." Students are more adventurous eaters, and their palates have been exposed to a variety of foods at their friends' dinner tables, local restaurants and through the rise of social media recipes.

Keeping up with trending foods and staying ahead of what is coming next is a full-time job. Between keeping up with updated regulations and challenging staffing shortages, there isn't much time to juggle researching what's new in food. However, in order to keep our students nourished, we must provide them with appealing meals that keep them coming back to the cafeteria day after day and meal after meal. A lot of time, the answers are right in front of us. Learning about what is important on a student's plate can sometimes be as simple as listening.

While working in Baltimore County Public Schools in Maryland, I was visiting a school that had a surplus of garden radishes. To prevent waste, they were placed on the serving line with the other vegetable offerings for lunch. Students were coming through the line surprised and excited to see the radishes. They explained that radishes were often

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part of their dinner meals at home, served with tacos and other Mexican dishes as an accompaniment to the meal.

The excitement that the students had in seeing something familiar and explaining its familiarity was contagious. This school has a large Hispanic student population, and the surrounding community bustles with Hispanic markets and taquerias. I had never ventured into the community to explore, but wanted to learn more.

I visited a taqueria and found a condiment bar full of red and green salsas, limes, chopped cilantro, diced onions and sliced radishes! The tacos were filled with shredded beef, slow-cooked pork and seasoned chicken. I was so pleased that I could try the foods the way the students had explained them to me earlier. I tried so many tacos filled with different meats and had so much fun trying the different salsas, toppings and, of course, the radishes!

They were so crisp and bright and helped to bring a textural contrast to the tender meats, a cooling effect to spicy salsas and acted as a palate cleanser when I wanted to change up the flavors. I thought back to our school menu with the traditional seasoned ground beef and shredded cheese tacos and knew that I could do more.

Because of this experience, I've created school nutrition-friendly recipes for al pastor and shredded beef tacos, as well as flavor-forward salsas using tomatillos, a more traditional tomato-based salsa, and pico de gallo. I realized that the traditional school taco is a classic, but our students are eating more complex flavors outside of the cafeteria, and I can bring those complex flavors to our school kitchens.

Now I teach how chopped cilantro is more than a garnish; it's part of the

flavor-building process. Student inspiration doesn't always come in the form of a student suggesting a recipe. Sometimes it comes from recognizing a food they already know and asking yourself what that tells you about the meals you're serving and what you could be doing differently. Sometimes students will tell you exactly what they think when you give them the opportunity. Montgomery County Public Schools (Maryland) and Richmond City Schools (Virginia) host large-scale taste tests once a year for their students. Students are transported to a central location where K-12 vendors spotlight new items and the district chef can test out new recipes.



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Montgomery County Public Schools uses a QR code so students can give immediate feedback on what they've tried. Shannon Ebron, MS, RDN, LD, food-service director at Richmond City Schools, and her team came up with the stoplight-themed coin system where red represented a pass on this item, green represented that they liked this item and the gold coin meant that it's a top pick.

Taste tests can require coordination from multiple departments, K-12 vendors and foodservice staff. Students understand the importance of providing feedback on these new items because they know that their vote impacts the menu. Successful items are brought to the menu, and foodservice staff have confidence in the success of the menu because they know that students have already given the thumbs up to the new items.

These large-scale taste-test systems are a great way to get feedback on multiple ideas at once, but taste tests don't always have to be grand. I've completed taste tests in a corner of the cafeteria, passing out samples and hearing honest feedback. I've led focus groups as small as 15 students, tasting and talking. I have even partnered with marketing and culinary teachers to allow me to pop in on a class and share new offerings.

Gathering student opinions can be as informal as chatting on a serving line or as formal as a student advisory group. You can't have a student-centered program without talking to students.

Incorporating students and their ideas into your school meals program is an important part of the work.

Often the most useful question to ask students isn't "What do you want us to put on the menu?" Instead, it's "What foods and flavors are already part of your life?" This question opens the door to family traditions, cultural foods, neighborhood restaurants, foods seen on social media and in movies and regional differences.

From the work I've done around the country, I've realized that flavor is cultural, emotional and learned. The meals we share and the foods we eat are part of who we are. And where we are influences how we eat.

For example, in the Carolinas, vinegar is part of the flavor profile of BBQ sauce, while in Memphis, a dry rub is all the flavor you need. In Texas, chili without beans is usually eaten with cornbread, while in the Dakotas, chili is made with beans and is served with a cinnamon roll.

To find the nuances of your students and what they prefer, chat with them about what's in their food cultures. You may be surprised by the answers.

Listening to our students is only part of the job. Translating those observations into school nutrition-appropriate meals is how we make magic happen for our

students every day. Hearing that our students like something that we've never tried or even heard of before isn't the time to get discouraged. It's the time to lean into our superpowers of creating delicious meals that students enjoy.

The goal isn't to recreate an exact restaurant or family meal in a school cafeteria. It's to capture the flavors, familiarity and experiences that make the food meaningful to students while working within the realities of school nutrition. It may include finding ways to reduce sodium and added sugars while maintaining the flavors and essence of the dishes. There may be a need to swap out refined grains for whole grain-rich grains, which may give a more earthy, hearty flavor than the original version.

The things that we do daily to provide the meals our students enjoy while also meeting our nutrition standards are an important part of what makes school nutrition special. When looking for your next new menu item, finding inspiration for student-inspired meals doesn't have to be hard. There are clues all around us. Sometimes the clues are on the serving line in the form of a radish.



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