SCHOOL NUTRITION

The Official Publication of the School Nutrition Association

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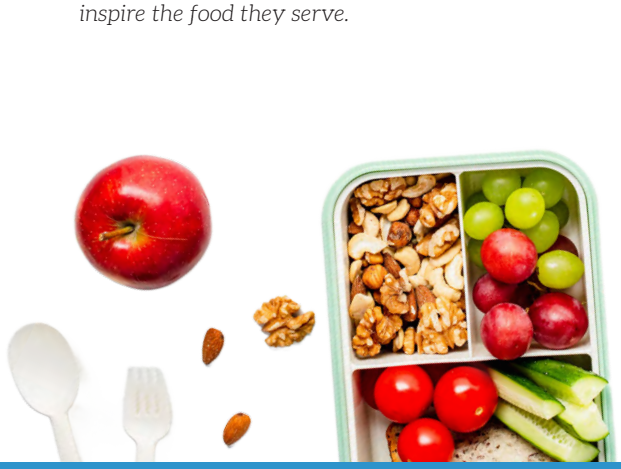
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REMEMBERING WHERE WE COME FROM



Dylan Lynch
Editor-in-Chief

In previous columns, since I joined SNA, I've written about a couple of my own nostalgic memories of school meals, and each time, I am reminded how many stories we carry with us.

We might not think about them in our day-to-day lives, but when we do, it's like a hug that immediately makes us smile. And it's not just a regular smile, but an ear-to-ear one.

As we were planning for this issue, we asked you to share stories about family traditions, recipes passed down through generations and the simple (but very important) influences that made mealtimes so special and that continue to shape the work you do today.

What struck me most as the stories started coming in was how present the memories still are. They might begin at a kitchen table, in a garden where you helped plant flowers or herbs or with a recipe made every holiday, but they are still stored in us when we need them. Those are the memories we pull from to give others that same feeling of support or care. That's what SNA members do every day.

I can't say I've been behind a serving line or planned a menu, but I know that I love food and cooking. And just as we asked many of you where your inspiration comes from, I found myself asking the same question.

I think, for me, it comes down to gratitude. I get that it's a word that's thrown around a lot, but there is something very special about putting care into something, feeling proud of what you've done and then getting to see someone else enjoy it, too.

Personally, I grew up very close with my grandmother. For almost 20 years, every first or second week of December, I would visit to get her prepared for the holidays. She would always make a to-do list and put it on the fridge in time for my arrival. Depending on who you ask, the list was a bit unconventional. The No. 1 item was always to "set up Christmas tree and decorations." Then, aside from "change a light bulb" and "go to the movies," the next item was almost always "lamb chops." And of course, with the lamb chops came the unspoken pairing of asparagus and canned sliced potatoes.

It was something she always looked forward to, and most of all, she enjoyed me making it for her. It quickly became *our* meal. Every single visit.

I don't think either of us thought much about calling it a tradition. But that's the thing about memories… sometimes you don't realize you're making one until years later.

I hope this issue makes you think about one of your own memories and gives you one of those ear-to-ear smiles. Most of all, I hope it reminds you that where we come from can inspire where you go next—especially in the work you do and the students you serve.



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A PLACE AT THE TABLE



Ashley Powell, PhD, RD, FAND, SNS
President, School Nutrition Association

When I think about heritage and family influence, I think about a table.

Some of my most meaningful memories were made gathered around just that: a family table. It was where stories were shared, celebrations were marked and values were passed from one generation to the next. Around that table, I learned lessons that continue to shape how I serve students, treat my colleagues and work with our communities every day.

I grew up in Andalusia, Alabama, in a family that believed deeply in faith, education, service and hospitality. My mother is a wonderful cook, and I still love her angel biscuits and small butter-beans. But what I remember most was how she made people feel.

No matter the occasion, she set a beautiful table and created a welcoming environment. Fresh flowers were almost always a must—many grown in her own yard! Today, my children still talk about eating at "Grammie's house." They know that when they arrive, they will be welcomed, cared for and fed well.

Looking back, I realize my family was teaching me about service without ever calling it a lesson.

We grew blueberries, strawberries, figs and blackberries, and my grandfather kept an impressive garden. My father and I visited the farmers market for fresh peanuts, which he would boil for football weekends. Today, my husband, Kyle, has become the family expert on boiled peanuts, carrying that simple Southern tradition into another generation.
But perhaps the most important tradition was sharing what we had.

> "Food was never simply food. Food was love."

My parents were constantly sharing food with others. There were countless occasions when my mother handed me a casserole dish to deliver to a neighbor or friend who was ill, celebrating or simply needed encouragement. Even as a child, I recognized the joy in sharing food and meeting a need.

Food was never simply food. Food was love.

That phrase recently came up during an Auburn City Schools Child Nutrition meeting when an employee explained why she does this work: "Food is love." Everyone in the room immediately agreed.

That is what school nutrition professionals communicate every day. We care for students through the meals we provide. We support families. We create welcoming environments. We use food to demonstrate compassion and service.

Another childhood tradition shapes my work today: breakfast. Before heading out each morning, our family sat down together to eat. Now, as a school nutrition professional, I think about students who may not have that opportunity.

Many of the values guiding my decisions today were formed decades ago around a family table—from gardens and shared meals to Sunday dinners and breakfasts before school.

Every day, school nutrition professionals extend that table. We nourish children, support families and provide care, consistency and connection.

Our heritage is more than where we come from. It is reflected in how we serve others and the traditions we carry forward.

For me, it all started at a table.

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BE READY TO RESPOND!



Jodi Batten, SNS
Sr. National Sales & Marketing Director, Red Gold LLC

At SNA's Annual National Conference (ANC) in Charlotte this July, USDA Secretary Brooke Rollins announced USDA's Healthier School Meals Pledge (*fna.usda.gov/schoolmeals/healthier-pledge)* during the closing general session. Shortly thereafter, USDA released additional information about the pledge, along with a message encouraging state governors to support the effort.

SNA and its industry partners view the pledge as the clearest signal yet of where the next proposed rule may be headed. Many items in the pledge are already common practice in schools and have been for years. The real work for industry will be identifying the changes most likely to create operational, manufacturing, cost, procurement, and student-acceptance challenges.

- Could "Prioritize Whole Fruit" lead to a reduction or elimination of fruit juice?
- Could "Serve Only 100% Whole Grain Products" bring back familiar challenges from the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) 2010 implementation, including student acceptance and reformulation costs?
- Could "Replace Breakfast Pastries with Whole Food Breakfast Options" signal a stronger focus on protein at breakfast? If so, industry should be prepared to show how products can support that goal, offer variety, and demonstrate progress already made in reducing added sugars.

As a longtime SNA Industry Partner involved in the HHFKA 2010 response, I know how important it is for industry to engage early and thoughtfully. The next proposed rule is anticipated in fall 2026, so we must be prepared to act swiftly. Every company will experience potential changes differently, which is why individual, specific, and business-focused comments will matter.

This article is a call to industry colleagues to get involved, get educated and begin preparing now. The ideas and questions below are intended to help industry partners start shaping their own responses and collecting the information they may need when the comment period opens.

INDUSTRY ADVOCACY NEXT STEPS AND GUIDELINES

1. **Get involved now.** Notify your government relations team about what may be coming. Review the pledge—and the Proposed Rule, if released—and identify how potential changes could affect your business.
2. **Prepare your unique comment.** The most valuable comments will be specific, individual, and grounded in real business experience. Consider what only your company can explain, including product impacts, manufacturing realities, student acceptance, cost pressures, and procurement challenges.
3. **Coordinate with SNA's Government Affairs team.** Reach out to understand shared priorities and ways to reinforce common messages while still submitting your own unique comment.
4. **Register and follow SNA through the Action Network.** The Action Network and Quorum tools make it easier to submit individual comments. For comparison, HHFKA generated approximately 381,000 comments; our goal should be a much higher number of unique, substantive comments.
5. **Engage members of Congress who represent your company and plant locations.** Identify elected officials willing to understand and support industry concerns, especially around unfunded mandates and the gap between new requirements and available reimbursement.
6. **Build relationships with members of Congress.** Consider how members of Congress can help support a feasible rule and leverage all legislative vehicles to meet our policy goals.

Questions to Help Prepare Your Comment

1. How would tightened standards create challenges for your products?
2. What would compliance cost?
3. How much lead time would you need?
4. What investments would compliance require?
5. What flexibilities would make a higher standard workable?
6. What can you show from the last round of standards changes?

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This Year's Biggest Food Trends

It's hard to believe we're already more than halfway through the year, but in just four months we'll be saying goodbye to 2026 and welcoming a brand-new year. And with the start of every new year come new predictions for what trends the year ahead will hold—including those related to food.

So, eight months in, how accurate were our 2026 food trend predictions, and what unanticipated trends have we seen so far instead?

In the November/December 2025 issue of *School Nutrition*, we suggested that high-fiber, healthier, more exciting frozen/instant meals and mindful, naturally sweet treats would all be trending this year, based on assessments from Whole Foods Market's annual Trends Council—and all of those hit the mark in some way! But there have been just as many food trends this year so far that we might not have seen coming.



BANANA—THE FLAVOR OF THE SUMMER

Most years, there will be an ingredient or flavor that appears to dominate restaurant menus, trending social media recipes and food products for that particular year or season, and so far this year, it's bananas. What began with an influx in banana-themed recipes being shared—from unique banana pudding variations to banana bread syrup—has now led to new and limited-time banana-centric menu items at restaurant chains. Starbucks has its new banana protein cold foam and banana bread-themed drinks, and Dunkin' launched a full lineup of its own take on banana-flavored lattes, refreshers and matchas.





DIRTY SODA AND FUNCTIONAL FIZZY DRINKS

These two drink trends are about as far apart on the healthiness spectrum as you can get, but both have been equally prevalent so far in 2026. On the healthier end, we have "functional" beverages such as pre- and probiotic sodas, low-sugar drinks made with only natural sweeteners, and even beverages with added fiber and protein. And all the way at the opposite end, we have a drink trend straight out of the reality TV show *The Secret Lives of Mormon Wives:* dirty soda. Start with your favorite soda; then add cream, flavored syrups and fruit juice, and you have a dirty soda. Initially, the concept seemed disgraceful to many people unfamiliar with Utah's favorite beverage, but now, it seems like everyone's on board, with people making their favorite dirty soda combinations at home and fast-food restaurants like Dunkin', Sonic, Taco Bell, McDonald's and more adding dirty sodas to their drink menus.



FIBER IS THE NEW PROTEIN

This isn't to say that the high-protein craze has died out, but now there's a new trending nutrient in town: fiber. Fiber is important for digestive health, and a diet high in fiber can also help stabilize blood sugar levels, lower "bad" cholesterol levels, reduce the risk of certain cancers and support weight loss or help maintain a healthy weight. Similar to the protein trend we've all seen by now, high-fiber recipes and guides on how to get more fiber in your diet are prevalent across social media, and food and beverage products with added fiber are having more and more of a presence on store shelves.



HIGH-CLASS MAC AND CHEESE

A variation on our predicted trend of healthier or more exciting instant meals, boxed mac and cheese products have been seeing major flavor and nutrition upgrades lately. If you visit the pasta/instant meal aisle in your grocery store, you'll see boxed mac and cheese with flavors like jalapeño, smoked gouda, truffles, cacio e pepe and many more beyond the classic orange or white cheddar. On the healthy side, you'll also find boxed mac and cheese advertised as high-protein or high-fiber, whether it's a reformulated recipe from familiar brands like Kraft and Annie's or a brand that specifically uses higher-protein pasta that's often made from legumes like chickpeas, beans and more.

Read more about what's trending in 2026 here: *bit.ly/SNMag-2026-Trends*

Name That Food Town (Literally)

The United States is home to its fair share of uniquely named towns, including plenty named after unexpected, seemingly random foods. They might not be as wacky as Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, or Unalaska, Alaska, but they still make for an unusual roadmap through U.S. food culture and history.

EGG HARBOR, WISCONSIN

Like Oatmeal, no one is 100% clear how Egg Harbor, Wisconsin, got its name, but one theory stands out as the funniest (and messiest) story by far. According to a journal kept by a woman named Elizabeth Baird in 1825, two competing groups of fur traders began throwing hardtack (a tough biscuit used as food supply for ships) at each other—until someone suggested they switch to throwing eggs instead of throwing away that night's dinner. Apparently, the egg battle continued at camp until there were no eggs left, and seeing the egg shells scattered along the shoreline the next morning inspired the name Egg Harbor.



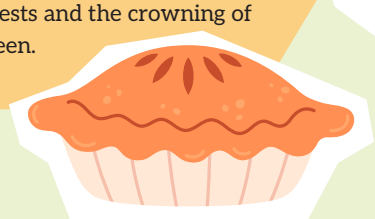
BREAD LOAF, VERMONT

This small community in the middle of Vermont takes its name from the neighboring Bread Loaf Mountain. Why bread loaf? According to local history, the mountain was named because from afar, its profile resembles a loaf of bread rising above other mountains in the area. Today, Bread Loaf is home to the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference—a Middlebury College program named "the oldest and most prestigious writers' conference in the country" by *The New Yorker* that has been held at the Bread Loaf Inn every summer since 1926.



PIE TOWN, NEW MEXICO

It's definitely the sweetest name on this list, and Pie Town's origin story and pie-making culture today confirm it's worthy of its delicious, dessert-themed namesake. The story goes that in the 1920s, World War I veteran Clyde Norman started selling dried-apple pies from a roadside station to travelers passing through the not-yet-named Pie Town. Today, the small town has multiple pie shops that serve delicious, seasonal pies throughout the year, pie-themed street names like Key Lime Lane and Berry Boulevard, and each September locals hold the Pie Festival with pie-baking contests, pie-eating contests and the crowning of the Pie King and Pie Queen.



OATMEAL, TEXAS

There are a couple theories on how this town got its name. One is that it's a variation or misspelling of "Othneil," the name of a local mill owner back when the town was founded, while another theory says it's taken from "Habermill," the surname of a local German family that roughly translates to "oat mill" in English. No matter how its name truly came to be, the only 20 or so residents who call Oatmeal home today embrace the food theme, with a water tower painted to look like a box of oatmeal and the Oatmeal Festival, celebrated annually in the community since 1978.



Discover more wacky food-themed towns here: *bit.ly/SNMag-Food-Towns*



For Teens, Breakfast Is a Big Deal



A new study led by a doctoral student at the University of Texas and presented at Nutrition 2026, the American Society for Nutrition's annual meeting, aimed to answer the question: What happens when teenagers who normally skip their morning meal start eating breakfast every day?

We already have data to support that school breakfast programs make a big difference for students in terms of higher test scores and fewer absences per school year, and this new study goes further to show how a healthy breakfast sets kids up for success throughout the rest of the day and long-term.

In this study, researchers divided participants (aged 14–21) who reported skipping breakfast at least six times a week into three groups: one that continued skipping breakfast, one that ate a normal-protein breakfast (around 15 grams) and one that ate a high-protein breakfast (30 grams). The research team prepared more than 18,000 breakfast meals including burritos, quesadillas, egg scrambles and smoothies for the participants to eat during the study. Beyond breakfast, participants could eat whatever they wanted, and any amount of food, throughout the rest of the day and were asked to report what they ate over each 24-hour period.

After the study concluded, researchers found that both the normal-protein and high-protein groups consumed fewer desserts, sweets and candy throughout the day compared to the breakfast-skipping group, and the high-protein breakfast participants naturally cut back on added sugar even further. The teens who started eating breakfast also consumed more vital nutrients like fiber, iron, zinc and choline compared to those who skipped breakfast even though most participants across all groups had a similar overall calorie intake each day.

Whether or not breakfast is the most important meal of the day, as the familiar saying goes, is inconclusive, and most doctors, nutritionists or scientists will tell you that all meals are important for different reasons. But this study and others like it do show that starting your day with a healthy, balanced meal makes a positive difference in how you feel throughout the day and your overall health and diet quality—and for kids and teens, the benefits of breakfast may be even more substantial.

Read more about the study here: *bit.ly/SNMag-Breakfast-Study*





Ingredients for Health: **Apples**

While many fruits have their moment in the summer, once fall arrives it's time for the apple's turn in the spotlight. Culturally and agriculturally, apples signify the transition from the vibrant summer heat into the cool, cozy autumn season—and with September already underway, apple picking, apple cider, apple-scented candles and more apple-themed goods are starting to pop up on store shelves, restaurant menus and weekend activity agendas once again.



HOW TO USE:

Apples are often eaten fresh, straight from the tree (or from the produce aisle), but they're also a valuable cooking or baking ingredient in plenty of recipes too. Desserts and baked goods like apple pie, apple crisp, apple cider donuts, apple cobbler and more are some of the most popular apple-themed recipes that most people are probably familiar with, but this fruit has a savory side too. Apples pair well with cheese and certain meats for things like charcuterie boards, turkey, apple and brie sandwiches or an apple grilled cheese, and you can also use baked apples or apple juice/cider to add a touch of sweetness to meats like turkey breast, pork chops, chicken, pot roast, sausage and more.



TRY THIS:

For a quick and delicious fall treat, try this easy stovetop cinnamon apples recipe. First, chop 3 apples into ½-1-in. cubes then add to a skillet with 2 Tbsp. of water. Cover the pan and cook over medium heat for about 5 minutes, stirring occasionally until the apples are slightly soft. Add 1 Tbsp. of butter to the skillet and stir until the apples are coated, then cover and cook for another 5 minutes. Finally, add 1 Tbsp. maple syrup, ½ tsp. cinnamon, ⅛ tsp. salt and ¼ tsp. vanilla extract, stir until well mixed, cook for another 5 minutes and serve. Enjoy as is or use as a topping for oatmeal, ice cream, waffles, pancakes or whatever else your heart desires.



NUTRITION:

Like most fruits, there's no doubt that apples are a great addition to a healthy diet. One raw, unpeeled, medium-sized apple contains around 95 calories, 25 grams of carbs, 4.5 grams of fiber as well as vitamin C and potassium. Apples contain both soluble and insoluble fiber (in the skin), and a medium apple provides about 16% of the recommended daily value for fiber. The high fiber content also means apples have a low glycemic index, meaning they're less likely to spike blood sugar levels.



FACT:

There are over 7,500 varieties of apples in the world! Only around 100 are grown in the U.S., including some of the most popular varieties like Gala, Honeycrisp, Fuji and Granny Smith.

READ MORE: Discover 25 apple recipes for the fall season from Half Baked Harvest: *halfbakedharvest.com/easy-fall-apple-recipes*

ANC 2026 ANNUAL NATIONAL CONFERENCE | POWER OF SCHOOL MEALS

SCHOOL NUTRITION ASSOCIATION

Thousands of school nutrition professionals came together in Charlotte, N.C., this July for SNA's 2026 Annual National Conference (ANC), celebrating the people, ideas and connections that continue to move school nutrition forward.

Held July 12–14 at the Charlotte Convention Center, ANC26 brought together school nutrition operators, industry partners and allied organizations from across the country for three days of learning, networking and inspiration. With more than 120 education sessions, 300+ exhibitors and countless opportunities to connect, attendees experienced the ***Power of School Meals*** firsthand.

This year also carried special significance as SNA celebrated its 80th anniversary alongside the 80th anniversary of the National School Lunch Program—a milestone that offered an opportunity to recognize eight decades of progress while looking ahead to what comes next.









START YOUR ENGINES: Opening Event

Before the conference officially got underway, ANC attendees received a high-energy welcome to Charlotte with an exclusive night at the NASCAR Hall of Fame.

The Saturday evening Opening Event gave attendees private access to one of Charlotte's signature attractions, with plenty of opportunities to reconnect with longtime colleagues and meet new ones before a busy few days ahead.

Throughout the Hall of Fame, attendees explored the Great Hall, Hall of Honor and Inside NASCAR exhibits, tested their skills on racing simulators and took on pit crew challenges. The combination of entertainment, interactive experiences and friendly competition made for a fitting start to ANC26.

For first-time attendees in particular, the evening offered an early introduction to one of the things that makes ANC so special: the school nutrition community itself.



CELEBRATING 80 YEARS: Opening General Session



The celebration continued Sunday afternoon as attendees gathered for the Opening General Session.

With 2026 marking SNA's 80th anniversary, the session opened by looking back at the association's history and the generations of school nutrition professionals who have helped shape it. But the focus quickly turned toward the future—and the collective power of today's school nutrition community.

SNA shared updates on the association's work to strengthen membership, advocacy and support for school nutrition professionals. Attendees also heard about efforts underway to ensure school nutrition professionals have a strong voice in conversations affecting the future of school meals.

Opening keynote speaker **John Register** challenged attendees to rethink the way they approach change, adversity and opportunity. Drawing from his own extraordinary journey as a U.S. Army veteran, four-time All-American athlete and Paralympic silver medalist, Register encouraged attendees to move beyond simply overcoming obstacles and instead find ways to transform them into opportunities for growth.

The session set the tone for the days ahead: celebrating how far school nutrition has come and recognizing the work happening today.













INNOVATION IN EVERY AISLE: The Exhibit Hall

When the ANC26 Exhibit Hall doors opened Monday morning, attendees got to see—and taste—what's next for school nutrition.

More than 300 exhibiting companies filled the Charlotte Convention Center, showcasing everything from new foods and beverages to kitchen equipment, technology, services and solutions designed specifically for K-12 foodservice. Across approximately 900 booths, attendees sampled products, watched demonstrations, talked directly with industry representatives and gathered ideas to take back to their own programs.

But the Exhibit Hall has always been about more than discovering new products. It provides school nutrition professionals with a rare opportunity to have direct conversations with the companies serving their programs—sharing feedback, asking questions and helping industry partners better understand the realities of operating school meal programs.

Those conversations continued across two days, including dedicated Directors Only hours Tuesday morning. From emerging menu trends and labor-saving equipment to new technology and operational solutions, the hall offered a glimpse at how innovation continues to respond to the changing needs of school nutrition programs.



LOOKING AHEAD:
Closing General Session

ANC26's Closing General Session brought together celebration, leadership and a powerful reminder of the impact school nutrition professionals can make.

The session marked an important transition for SNA leadership, recognizing outgoing President Stephanie Dillard, MS, SNS, for her year of service and welcoming Ashley Powell, PhD, RD, FAND, SNS, as SNA's 2026–27 President.

Powell shared her vision for the year ahead and her commitment to representing the professionals who make school meals possible every day. The transition came as SNA prepared to enter its next chapter with an updated vision and mission focused on connecting, elevating and educating the professionals who nourish America's students.

Attendees also received a special visit from U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins, who addressed the school nutrition community and announced USDA's Healthier School Meals Pledge, offering an early look at the department's priorities for the future of school meals.

Closing keynote speaker **Col. Nicole Malachowski, USAF (Ret.)** then brought ANC26 to an inspiring conclusion. The first woman pilot on the U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds Air Demonstration Squadron, Malachowski shared lessons from her military career as well as her experience confronting a debilitating tick-borne illness that abruptly ended it.

Her message encouraged attendees to go beyond resilience and become resurgent—to recognize that risk and failure are often part of achieving something meaningful, to know when yielding can help you move forward and to embrace an unscripted path.

It was a fitting message to close a conference centered on the ***Power of School Meals***. For 80 years, school nutrition professionals have adapted, innovated and continued showing up for students. ANC26 celebrated that history while making clear that the next chapter is already being written. And with Charlotte in the rearview mirror, we are already looking ahead.









Next stop:

PHOENIX FOR ANC27 JULY 11–13 2027.





INSPIRED BY GENERATIONS: WHEN CHILD NUTRITION RUNS IN THE FAMILY

By Christina Uticone











A home-cooked meal, a caring grandparent, a godmother who worked in the school cafeteria—these are just a few core memories cited by school nutrition professionals who have "inherited" their passion for child nutrition. We asked members where they found their "why," and they shared personal stories and inspiration that fuel the important work they do each day.







CHEF JASON BEACH,
Director of Café Services,
Oakland Joint Unified School District, California

MY INSPIRATION

I was fortunate to grow up in a food-filled life. My great-great-grandfather was an early executive chef on the Las Vegas Strip, and that legacy inspired me to attend Le Cordon Bleu in Las Vegas with the goal of becoming a food and beverage director for a major hotel group. After Las Vegas, I started a catering company with my grandma, and we had a blast with that.

My empathetic side kept pulling me toward people in need. I took a job as a district chef with Southwest Foodservice Excellence and within six months was promoted to director at Tuba City USD in Tuba City, Arizona. I fell in love with the work.

I was raised by my mother, Sharon Beach, and my grandmother Harriett Blodgett. Every holiday, my grandmother poured everything she had into her cooking, making sure every grandchild's favorite dish was on the table. Mine was her stuffed Jell-O—crushed pineapple, whipped topping, cream cheese, layered and set—a recipe that took days to build and minutes to disappear. Her soups were the savory counterpart: so precisely seasoned that every batch tasted exactly like the last. That's the standard I carry into school meals today: food made with that same care, so that every student feels like someone poured themselves into their tray, the same way my grandmother did for us.

THE JOURNEY

I had two things I wanted to do in life: music and food. My mom said if I wanted to do music, I had to have a backup and encouraged me to pursue food first—thank God for that! I found my place.

I had gone from cooking for celebrities who marveled at a single unforgettable meal to realizing that kind of impact, however dazzling, was fleeting. When I moved into schools, I remembered what it was like to eat on the free and reduced program myself, and it took time to accept that this, and not the gourmet world, was my path. But I quickly saw these students needed something they weren't getting: motivation, excitement and inspiration.

WHY I SHOW UP

Cooking with love and knowing that the food we are creating now has a lasting impact is what I learned from my grandmother, and it's what motivates me. My mom and my grandmother are two of the most powerful women I've ever met—strong, independent and smart. My focus is always on the future because we're feeding the next president, the next governor, the next agent of change who could shift humanity to propel us forward and upward into a better, brighter future.



BRANDY GOODWIN,
Director of Food Service,
Mascoutah CUSD #19,
Illinois

MY INSPIRATION

My great-grandmother Florence Jackson devoted many years to serving others through food, first as the cook for a small rural farm school in Rensselaer and later at Columbia College, a local college in Missouri. She believed that a good meal could bring comfort, nourishment and a sense of community. Although I was young, her dedication to feeding others became a lasting example of service and hospitality.

Years later, my own connection to school nutrition continued when my cousin Jane Schaefer became the cook at the Lutheran grade school I attended, Zion Lutheran School. She prepared nearly every meal from scratch, and I was fascinated watching her transform simple ingredients into delicious meals for the entire school. One of my favorite memories was "peach juice day." Whenever she opened canned peaches, she would save the sweet peach juice and pour it into cups for the students. We all looked forward to those days, and it felt like such a special treat. Each week, students had the opportunity to serve as cook helpers, and I was always excited when it was my turn. I loved being in the kitchen, helping wherever I could, and learning from my cousin as she prepared meals with such care.

I didn't realize it then, but looking back, those experiences were planting the seeds for a career that would eventually become my passion.

THE JOURNEY

I started cooking in restaurants at 14 at a little donut shop where I would pull the donuts and proof them in the morning, and eventually I learned how to decorate them. I found myself in the kitchen, asking the cook how to do this or that, and eventually my boss decided that if I was going to be back there all the time, I would just be the new cook. I loved creating and learning.

When I turned 16, I started working in one of the most popular restaurants in town, and I learned a lot about scratch cooking there. After that, I moved over to the Holiday Inn where I got to cook for President Clinton before he became president. Later, when my husband was stationed at Eielson Air Force Base in Alaska, I started cooking at the NCO (non-commissioned officers) and officers' clubs. I learned a lot just being around different people from different backgrounds; I have recipes from every single one of them. With all the moving around we did, food is one way we created families with our friends whether that was in Alaska, England or Oklahoma.

A core memory is my grandmother's cinnamon rolls and chili. This is a staple in Missouri schools, and she made the best cinnamon rolls, so I have incorporated them into our school menus to carry that memory forward. Maybe there is someone like me who is growing up around wonderful cooks and will be inspired to go into school nutrition someday!

WHY I SHOW UP

I have been with my school district for almost 20 years, and this is my second as director. My staff puts so much into all the meals we serve. Students and staff will walk by in the morning and peek their heads in to see what we are having that day; when I see that excitement, I know we are doing something great with our program.

Today, I often think about the women in my family who dedicated themselves to feeding others. Their example reminds me that school nutrition is about so much more than serving meals. It is about creating a welcoming environment, building relationships and making every student feel cared for. I hope the meals we serve and the kindness we share become cherished memories for our students, just as those experiences became lasting memories for me.





NADINE DOETTERL, SNS,
Foodservice Sales Manager/
Consultant, SunButter/NMD
School Foodservices Consulting

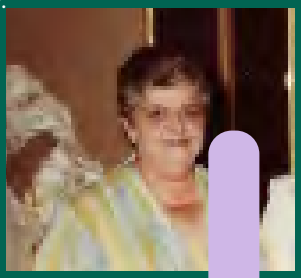
MY INSPIRATION

My godmother, Eva A. Shamaly, moved into the K-12 space after a long career in private sector foodservice management. I started my own career in school nutrition because of her. My favorite story is about the influence she had on students. I was traveling through security at the Buffalo airport when I struck up a conversation with a young woman about the chicken wings she had packed. As we talked, I realized she had attended Buffalo Traditional School, where my godmother had been the cafeteria manager. When I asked if she remembered Miss Shamaly, she immediately replied, "She was the best. She could be really stern, but everyone knew it was because she cared about them." My godmother had been gone for nearly 10 years, and hearing that still gives me goosebumps. I often share this story during staff trainings to remind people how much of an impact school nutrition professionals can have on the students they serve. I've had a similar experience with a former student from my own time managing a high school cafeteria in Buffalo. She recognized me years later while

working as a bartender and said seeing me made her smile and brought back good memories. Never underestimate the influence child nutrition staff can have on students.

THE JOURNEY

My godmother instilled in me what a great profession child nutrition is, and that's really how I got my start in school foodservice. To this day, it remains the best job I have ever had. I am on the consulting side now—I also conduct trainings for ICN and New York School Nutrition Association—but I've always said that before I retire, I want to be back on the other side of the desk. I miss the daily interaction with students; it's just very rewarding to see the kids every day.



WHY I SHOW UP

My godmother never married or had children, but she was like a second mother to me, and the impression she made on me lasts to this day. My motivation is knowing I am doing something good for kids every day.



ERICA DUDLEY,
Field Supervisor,
Montgomery Public Schools, Alabama

MY INSPIRATION

My grandmother Carrie Sears was a cafeteria manager for her entire career, dedicating more than 55 years to serving children through school nutrition. She was stern, but she was loving. She worked until she passed away, and her dedication to her work was truly inspiring. Growing up, I watched her take great pride in serving children and making sure they were fed and cared for. School nutrition was more than just a job to her—it was her life's work and a way for her to make a difference in the lives of children and families. Her commitment, work ethic and love for serving others have had a tremendous influence on me and my own career in child nutrition. I am proud to continue the legacy she started and to carry forward the same spirit of dedication and service that she demonstrated for more than 55 years. My favorite part of my job is relationship building.

THE JOURNEY

I was the secretary for our current director, and he told me about the field supervisor position and encouraged me to apply. I thought, "I love it here—you don't like me?!" He laughed at my joke, but he also encouraged me to apply to a position with better pay. I was comfortable where I was, but with much prayer, I listened to him and applied for the job—and I got it! I've been in this department for nine years; I supervise 12 cafeterias and manage more than 50 people.

I think I learned a lot from my grandmother in terms of her discipline and her work ethic. She did her job well; she was strict, but compassionate.

WHY I SHOW UP

The kids are what inspire me, and I know that sounds like a cliché. Since I've been in child nutrition, I've seen children living in hotels who don't get meals on weekends. Our lunch might be the only meal they get in a day. Students who are displaced, or maybe in foster care, students experiencing food insecurity or mistreatment. My role is making sure these kids are going to eat.





KALEIGH STIVERS,
Supervisor, Phoenix Elementary School District #1, Arizona



MY INSPIRATION

My biggest inspiration has always been my mom, Corrina DeJohn. She worked in the kitchen at my elementary school after my brother and I started school, which allowed her to be there with us every day. I loved having her at school, and because of her I developed a special appreciation for our cafeteria staff. Watching the care that they put into serving students inspired my own passion for school nutrition and the important role it plays in a school community.

Even after I went to college, I would come home and go visit my mom at school. I loved seeing her on line and all the food she was serving; sometimes she would let me go back and help a little. I would describe my mom as gentle but stern—she was definitely that lunch lady you didn't want to mess with! But she also has a gentle, loving way about her—she is the epitome of a mother, a lioness who will do anything for her kids, including her students. I strive to be like my mother: loving, but tough.



THE JOURNEY

I have worked in foodservice since I was 16 at a little coffee shop. I was at Disney for seven years and I loved it; the customer service aspect of Disney is astonishing. Even now when I do a presentation or talk about customer service, I bring it back to Disney because they are top-tier, including their training program.

I went to school for nutrition and dietetics, but the medical rotations weren't really for me. I would always talk to my mom about how cool it would be if I could make menus for a school district, and she encouraged me. Foodservice is hard work, and I knew [early] that the support staff behind the lines work hard, even though that work can often be overlooked.

I love working in school nutrition. I didn't realize what I was getting into in terms of federal guidelines—we didn't have that in our rotations at school—but I really love that aspect of my job; it's like a puzzle I get to solve. There are so many misconceptions about school nutrition, and we are trying hard to break down that wall and help people understand what we do.

WHY I SHOW UP

Kids are so gracious. Sure, they have complaints, but I love making menus and seeing them get excited about what we serve. One of my kids recently told his mom he didn't want a packed lunch anymore because he likes school lunch so much!

We never really know what is going on in someone else's life, so if these meals can make my kids excited to come to school, that's what I want. I do not believe that any child should have to go hungry or worry about where that next meal is coming from.

I hope that 15 or more years from now, a student will remember their favorite school breakfast or lunch and the positive experience they had at school. Most of all, I hope we inspire the next generation of school nutrition professionals and help them discover how meaningful this work can be.





SHANNON REINA,
Food Service Program Manager, Salt River Pima-Maricopa Community Schools, Arizona

MY INSPIRATION

My daughter, Bee Wood Jackson, recently switched from being a cook in a restaurant to becoming a baker in our school nutrition program, and I couldn't be prouder of her work ethic and desire to do her best for students. I have been in school nutrition for 18 years and have shared many stories with her about the work I do. I know she understands how important this profession is to me and how passionate I am about serving students. It makes me incredibly proud to see her learning, growing and carrying that same passion into school nutrition herself.

THE JOURNEY

I started as a part-time cook aide in 2008 and moved up to cook within a year. I had a lot of good mentors and moved up to kitchen supervisor within five years, and five years after that, I became the food service program manager. The more I learned, the more I fell in love with the

work, and I realized the difference we make in students' health and the way nutrition services support education and learning.

We are from the O'odham and Piipaash from Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community. My big goal is to introduce more fresh-made items and more of our Indigenous foods. So, when Bee is baking—today she was making sheet pancakes, and we also make something called a lazy tortilla (Sko:v Ce:mait)—she uses a whole grain flour provided to us by an Indigenous farmer. Bee is a really good worker, and I'm not just saying that because she's my daughter! She is one of our best workers, and it's enjoyable to have her here because she is dependable, works hard and stepped up to take on the position of baker.

Bee: I started in restaurants as a dishwasher and then prep cook and moved up from there. I trained on the job from the beginning, and after a couple of years, I started training other people. After I changed restaurants, I started baking: bread work, pretzels, cakes, things like that. Like my mom, I think I just like feeding people, and making something people enjoy eating gives me a lot of gratification. Working for the school like my mom was always in the back of my mind. Who wouldn't want to help feed their community?

WHY I SHOW UP

Shannon: This work is an opportunity for me to make a difference in my community, teaching kids healthy eating habits so they can stay healthy throughout their lives. I have lost a lot of family members to diabetes, so I am just trying to make a positive change, and that starts with the kids.

Bee: I am still new, and I am still learning a lot about school nutrition. I feel like the work I do now is going to make a difference for kids now and later down the road. I want to find a way to present healthy food to kids to make them more willing to try new things.



Christina Uticone is Communications Consultant for the School Nutrition Foundation and Contributing Editor of *School Nutrition*.

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The Way Your Grandmother Made It

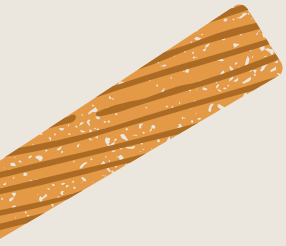
HOW TRADITIONS AND FAMILY RECIPES ARE SHAPING SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS

BY DYLAN ROCHE





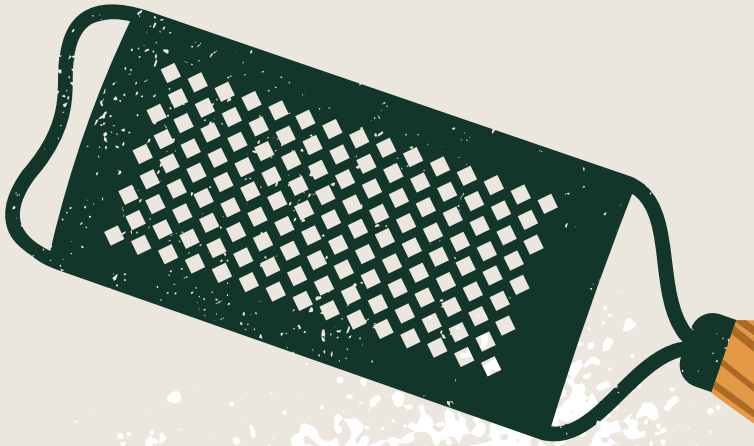
Few people understand the meaning behind a meal better than school nutrition professionals like you. It's something that brings people together, fuels favorite activities, adds to a celebration, offers comfort when times are tough and shows the person you're serving that you care about them.











And for many, that understanding of a good meal's importance comes from something deeper. It can come from something like personal experiences, good memories or traditions instilled in you. Family recipes and traditions going back to childhood teach an appreciation for food—the people who make it, the effort that goes into it, the ingredients used and where they come from, who serves it, and the way the world seems to stop when people come together to enjoy it.

"Some of my favorite memories are of sharing homemade meals with family, where everyone had a place at the table," says **Luis Mazariegos,** communications and technology specialist for the Food Services Department of West Contra Costa Unified School District, Calif. "Those experiences taught me that a nutritious meal can bring comfort, connection and a sense of belonging."

Mazariegos grew up in a Guatemalan family and watched his grandmother—Mama Juana—lovingly prepare cultural dishes. Food was never just a meal. He says it was how their family came together.

Kevin Rescigno, site supervisor of St. Vrain Valley School District, Colo., had a similar experience growing up. His grandparents came from Italy, and they had the same philosophy: Every meal was about bringing people together. "One tradition that has stayed with me is that everyone sat at the table together, no matter how busy life was," he says. "Meals were a time to talk, laugh and enjoy each other's company without rushing."

And for those who didn't have the happiest memories of meals at home, the school cafeteria became a place of solace and security, proving that good food can have a positive impact no matter where it's served. That was the experience of **Heather Hobbs,** child nutrition manager for Duplin County Schools, N.C., who still remembers the smell of the hallway leading to the lunchroom when she was a little kid. "As the youngest of three children who didn't have a lot on the table at home, it was one of the best parts of my day," she says. "I knew that whatever was on the serving line was going to be delicious."





> "I want families, students, staff and the community to see that school meals are prepared by dedicated people who genuinely care about the well-being of every child."
>
> **LUIS MAZARIEGOS**
> Communications and Technology Specialist,
> Food Services Department of West Contra Costa USD

The reality is that as different—and as personal—as family traditions and memories around food can be, they are often what shape our approach to meals for a lifetime. So it should be no surprise that the influence of Mazariegos' Mama Juana or Rescigno's Italian grandparents or even Hobbs' affectionately remembered "lunch ladies" live on in the approach to school foodservice these professionals take.

MAKING MEMORIES

It's hard to say exactly why a memory forms, or even why it sticks with us. Sometimes, it's what we're specifically taught, as Mazariegos was by Mama Juana. "Mama Juana taught me to respect the ingredients, the people who grew them and the effort that goes into preparing every meal," he says. "Food was never something we took for granted; it was something to be shared, celebrated and appreciated."

He says this is one of the reasons he's so passionate about his department's farm-to-school effort and commitment to increasing the amount of local and certified organic food served. As the communications specialist, part of his job is creating videos and other educational content that helps students and their families respect the food. Through presence on Instagram and Facebook (*@WCCUSDFoodServices*), students are introduced to local farmers and seasonal harvests, get a behind-the-scenes look at how meals are prepared, and see their peers (or even themselves) enjoying healthy, nutritious meals.

"Growing up around Mama Juana's

"I want students to feel like they're being served a meal made with care, the way you would feel sitting down for Sunday dinner at your grandparents' house."

KEVIN RESCIGNO
Site Supervisor, St. Vrain Valley School District







"It is important to remember that although you are serving hundreds of children every day, you may not remember each one, but they will remember you and the feeling that you gave them."

HEATHER HOBBS
Child Nutrition Manager, Duplin County Schools



restaurant taught me that every meal has a story," he says. "Someone planted the produce, someone carefully prepared the recipe and someone served it with pride and care. That's the story I try to tell through my work. I want families, students, staff and the community to see that school meals are prepared by dedicated people who genuinely care about the well-being of every child."

Rescigno also learned a respect for meal preparation from his grandmother—as he puts it, putting love and care into food wasn't optional, it was the way things were done. "That lesson still shapes the way I approach school meals today," he says. "While we have to work quickly and efficiently, I believe every student deserves a meal that is fresh, hot and appealing. Taking a few extra moments to present a tray that looks inviting can make a real difference. I want students to feel like they're being served a meal made with care, the way you would feel sitting down for Sunday dinner at your grandparents' house." *Good* doesn't necessarily mean *complicated.* While Rescigno watched his grandmother dedicate herself to recipes like arancini (aka rice balls, a particular favorite of hers that she'd spend hours making by hand) or struffoli, she was also of the belief that good food didn't have to be complicated. Fresh vegetables, fruit, olive oil, bread and homemade meals were a normal part of life.

"I think people often associate complicated with better because extra steps can make something feel more refined or special. Sometimes that's true, but not always," he says. "A great dish doesn't have to be difficult to prepare if the flavors, ingredients and execution are done well. In a school kitchen especially, simplicity often leads to greater consistency and a better experience for both staff and students."

Sometimes that means rethinking an approach. As an example, he points to dandan noodles, a Sichuan dish that was a huge hit with students. The original recipe they used required too many ingredients and too many steps to keep up with the pace of a school lunch program.



"Our executive chef listened to that feedback and developed a new version that uses about half the ingredients while maintaining the same flavor and presentation," he says. "It made the recipe much easier for our teams to prepare without sacrificing quality." In the end, it wasn't about preparing a specific, exact recipe—it was about listening to those who were preparing it, and those who were eating it, and finding a way to take care of both groups.

Of course, the food on the menu is a huge part of a school nutrition program, but of equal importance are those who are serving it. Hobbs understands this personally, having once been the child who sought solace with her school's cafeteria team. "I have the very best memories of the lunch ladies who welcomed me every single day," she says. "Though I didn't realize it at the time, they were a constant in my life. They always showed up and always had a warm, welcoming smile."

That childhood memory carries forward with her because she loves the fact that she gets to be the "nice lunch lady" who makes a difference today. "Cafeteria workers have more of an impact on children than they may think," she says. "It is important to remember that although you are serving hundreds of children every day, you may not remember each one, but they will remember you and the feeling that you gave them."

SHARING TRADITION

Some of this raises an important question: If you had a favorite family recipe you grew up enjoying, should you share it with your students? You don't necessarily have to—but it could be fun. "We haven't had the opportunity to feature my grandmother's arancini on a school menu yet, but it's something I'd love to see happen," Rescigno says.

He explains that his program holds passport weeks, when they highlight cuisine from around the world, which was when they had the chance to serve the dandan noodles that proved so popular. "I hope to advocate for adding arancini to a future menu so we can share a piece of my family's tradition with our students," he adds.

Sharing family tradition proved to be a positive experience for Mazariegos, who brought some of his Mama Juana's homemade pupusas (strictly speaking, a dish from El Salvador, but one that his Guatemalan grandmother was an expert at making) to share with colleagues. Barbara Jellison, executive director of food services, tried them and loved them.

"That experience sparked a conversation about offering pupusas as part of our school menus," Mazariegos says. "While the recipe we serve today isn't Mama Juana's, it's incredibly meaningful to know that something inspired by her cooking helped bring pupusas to thousands of students across our district."

By simply sharing some food he brought from home with his colleagues, Mazariegos inspired new ideas, and it ultimately led to an opportunity for them to introduce students to foods that reflect the rich diversity of their community. In the future, he hopes to introduce students to more traditional Guatemalan dishes, such as Pepián or Guatemalan tamales.





"These recipes represent generations of family traditions and are full of history, culture and incredible flavor," he says. "I believe introducing culturally diverse foods helps students explore new flavors while celebrating the many backgrounds represented in our schools."

INSPIRING INNOVATION

While a love of mealtime might be rooted in tradition, that doesn't mean your approach to meals is going to be stuck in the past. In fact, it's the opposite! School nutrition professionals are always looking for ways to look forward and be innovative. Much of that innovation, however, is still rooted in tradition and childhood memories.

Take Rescigno and the respect he learned for fresh ingredients from his grandparents. This probably explains why he's so passionate about his program's Colorado Proud School Meal Day. It's an annual opportunity for them to create an entire menu using locally sourced ingredients, including pork raised by the local vocational agriculture program.

"When students see that connection, the meal becomes more than just lunch," he says. "They slow down, take pride in what they're eating and recognize that people they know helped bring that meal to their tray. It creates a deeper appreciation for the food and the work that goes into producing it."

For Hobbs, who faced food insecurity at home, one of the great innovations of modern school foodservice programs is the way they continue influencing the lives of students outside of a 30-minute midday or morning period Monday through Friday. "I think one of the biggest changes in school lunch today from my childhood is the availability of summer meals," she says. "Meals are offered even during the off-season, and I know that is relief for struggling families. No child should ever know what it feels like to worry about where their next meal will come from, or when."

And while Hobbs was a huge fan of the food served in the cafeteria when she was growing up in the '90s, citing pizza bagels and doughnuts as some of her favorite options, she acknowledges that it's a good thing school meals are more conscious of nutrition now than they were then, with a greater variety of fresh fruits and vegetables for growing students.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Maybe all of this has you reflecting on your own family traditions and the memories you made as a child at mealtimes. That's great! You're in a field of work that's all about paying it forward and creating similar memories for the children in your cafeteria. As Mazariegos puts it, "Every meal we serve is an opportunity to make a positive impact on a student's day."

In some ways, it can be a little daunting. After all, you're the one who is creating these memories now. You might be the reason a child tries a certain vegetable for the first time, or the reason they appreciate a culture that's different from theirs because they tried one of its dishes. You might be asking yourself, *What if I do it wrong?* Instead, ask yourself, *What if I do it right?*

"I never imagined life would bring me back to a place that nurtured me at the most vulnerable times of my childhood," Hobbs says. "Now, I get to be the constant. I get to nurture today's children with nutritious foods and be the welcoming, warm smiling face."

When it comes down to it, you're offering these kids much more than food. "A good school meal should not only fuel learning but also help create a sense of community," Rescigno says, "just like family dinners did for me growing up."

Dylan Roche is Contributing Editor of *School Nutrition*.





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Harvest Highlights







Fall brings a fresh lineup of flavors to school cafeterias across the country, shaped by what's growing close to home. From school gardens and local farms to regional ingredients and longtime harvest traditions, school nutrition professionals always find creative ways to connect students with the season—and the communities behind their food. In these spotlights, eight SNA members share how they're bringing local harvest to the tray.



















LILYANNA MONTENEGRO, MPH, SNS

Nutrition Programs Manager, Yucaipa-Calimesa Joint Unified School District, Calif.

I am a first-generation Latina. My grandfather was a farmworker in Southern California, which ultimately led to my mother moving to the United States, where she and my father, who shared a similar upbringing, both spent part of their youth as farmworkers as well. Now, having the opportunity to create a full-circle moment going back to my "roots" is nothing short of amazing and truly continues to fuel my passion for both school lunch and local farming.

In my district, local farming has a significant influence on our programs for several reasons, including the immense amount of nutritional benefits it provides for our students, strengthening local economies, fostering community connections and benefiting our overall environment. At Yucaipa-Calimesa Joint Unified School District, I'm proud to share that we currently source 70% of our fruits and vegetables from local farmers. In addition, over the past four years, as grantees of the California Department of Food and Agriculture Farm to School Incubator Grant, I was able to coordinate local farm field trips for all of our elementary students, host mini farmers markets and incorporate Harvest of the Month programming in the classroom. With all of these efforts, our farm-to-school programming has become a cornerstone of our Nutrition Department.

In addition, when I create our menus, salad bar rotations and promotions, I find different ways of incorporating locally sourced fruits and vegetables depending on the season. A great fall season example would be our Elementary Halloween Lunch Special from last year, where I menu'd Australian finger limes and marketed them as "Witches' Fingers" on our salad bars.

The best part of this promotion was bringing it all into a full-circle teaching moment. The year prior, all of our elementary students had the opportunity to try these finger limes in their classroom through our Harvest of the Month program, so when the Halloween Lunch Special came, the excitement was unmatched and our finger lime container was left ghostly.





MICHAEL PINGREE

Nutrition Service Director, Amador County Unified School District, Calif.

I found that we were not getting great quality produce, or the produce was not local, so in November 2025, with the help of UC CalFresh, we implemented a bunch of strategies from the Smarter Lunchroom Movement. We increased the amount of fresh fruits, flavor stations, menu boards, student artwork and student involvement in menu items.

But my biggest contribution to the program was the creation of our own Nutrition Service School Farm. With the kindness of the Motherlode Land Trust, we were able to break ground on a three-quarter-acre plot to plant, maintain and harvest over 3,500 pounds of fresh produce that went right back into the salad bar or recipes. With the success of the first harvest, we decided to expand the program and we broke ground on another 1-acre plot, making it a total of a 1.75-acre thriving farm! To date we have produced just under 7,000 pounds of fruits and vegetables that have been grown by staff and students.

An amazing side effect of the farm has been the FFA student helpers and the new opportunity they will have coming this school

year. Both Amador High and Argonaut High FFA classes will be held on the farm and out of the classroom, giving these students an opportunity to have active, hands-on agriculture experience rather than just learning it out of a book or video.

We are forecasting a yearly harvest of 18 to 25 tons of produce being grown, tended and harvested by, and for, our students.



CONNIE CRAWLEY

Food Service Director, Lincoln Elementary School District 27, Ill.





Ten years ago, if you had asked me how local farms influenced our fall menu, I wouldn't have understood the question. We weren't doing any scratch cooking. Everything came off a truck in a case, and the calendar that governed my year was the commodity calendar.

We're now heading into our seventh school year working with Chef Greg Christian of Beyond Green Partners and The Sustainable Food Institute of America, a nonprofit helping transform school kitchens. Today, 95% of our breakfast is scratch cooked, every single lunch entrée and roughly 75% to 80% of vegetables and side items are from scratch.

Scratch cooking with local ingredients requires more thinking and planning ahead. With commodities, I can pick up the phone and request what I need. With farmers, I can't call somebody today and say I need 500 pounds of carrots next week. That's not how local carrots work. That's not how cattle work either. I have to know when their planting season is, what they're putting in the ground, what their animals are doing—and I have to be in that conversation months before the food ever shows up.

We get protein from a local farm year-round, so that part is steady. Produce is the seasonal piece, and fall is when it all lands. So our fall menu is really a conversation that starts with: What does everybody have?

The part I didn't expect is how much these farmers have taught me. I did not know what kabocha squash was. I had never in my life thought about ordering blue potatoes. I never had asparagus until this program, as an adult. I've gotten as much out of this as the kids have. So now we're all learning together, and my job is to expand students' palates.









SHANNON REINA

Food Service Program Manager, Salt River Pima-Maricopa Community Schools, Ariz.

Fall is always so much fun because we add soups, stews and squash recipes to our menus. We also celebrate Native American Heritage Month by showcasing Indigenous foods like squashes, beans and corn—the three sisters. We also have a school garden where we grow these items, adding them to our meals or offering them on our salad bar.

We have created many recipes using seasonal Indigenous foods, and we love to share them with our students! Recipes like whole-grain frybread, blue corn cake, soam bav (brown tepary bean) bowls and olas pilkan (wheat berry) parfaits. We do a lot of work with Indigenous foods to support our school's language and culture programs and nurture the development of our students' positive self-image as Indigenous people.



CHRISTINA NELSON

Director, Mason County Schools, W.Va.

Supporting local agriculture is an important part of our child nutrition program because it strengthens both our schools and our community.

Each year, we purchase locally raised beef and pork through our county fair livestock sale. This allows us to serve high-quality, locally sourced protein in our school meals while directly supporting the hard work of our students who have spent months raising their animals through 4-H and FFA projects. It's a meaningful way to invest in our students beyond the classroom and give back to local families who are the backbone of our agricultural community.

In addition to purchasing local meats, we make every effort to incorporate locally grown fruits and vegetables into our menus whenever they are available. Seasonal produce provides fresh, flavorful options for our students, supports area farmers and keeps food dollars circulating within our local economy.



MURIEL BROOKS

Catering and Special Events Manager, Johnston County Public Schools, N.C.

Supporting our local farmers is something we're very passionate about, and we make it a priority to include fresh, locally grown North Carolina fruits and vegetables on our menus throughout the year. Every Thursday, we celebrate Southern Cuisine Day by serving favorites like North Carolina sweet potatoes and collard greens, giving students a taste of the foods that make North Carolina special.

In the fall, we feature North Carolina apples, and in the spring, we serve fresh North Carolina strawberries. We love turning these local foods into fun learning experiences with events like Sweet Potato Day and NC Crunch. During NC Crunch, all 49 of our schools celebrate together as students take a big bite into a fresh North Carolina apple while learning about the farmers who grew it.

These events are about more than just serving fresh food. They give us the chance to teach students where food comes from, why supporting local farmers matters and how fresh fruits and vegetables help keep them healthy.



KEVIN HARRIS, M.S.ED., SNS

Director of Food Services, McHenry School District 15, Ill.

A couple of years ago, we received some funding from the state to source "locally" produced foods. I found a company called Tribe County Farms that grows aquaponic lettuce (similar to hydroponics, but better). Aquaponics is the combination of growing plants and raising fish in a single recirculating system.

Once we started using the new aquaponic lettuce for premade salads, I started getting great comments from students and staff about how wonderful the salads were, and the counts began to climb. Even though we no longer receive the local source funding from the state and the lettuce costs are a little higher than what we can get from our other produce company, we continue to use the lettuce from Tribe County Farms, and our premade salad counts are higher than ever. The additional quality has been worth it.



BETH COOKE

Nutritional Services Supervisor, Radnor Township School District, Pa.

Through our partnership with Common Market, RTSD purchased more than $6,000 of locally grown produce, beef, bacon and eggs during the 2025–26 school year, supporting 11 local family farms.

Thanks to funding through Project PA, we have been able to introduce students to local foods through tasting events across the district. These events have been an overwhelming success, giving students the opportunity to sample fresh Pennsylvania-grown ingredients in fun and engaging ways.

Some of our featured local menu items have included Pennsylvania mushrooms, sweet potato and black bean salad, and mixed melon and mint salad at our schools. The response to the Pennsylvania mushrooms was so positive that they are now a regular menu item at Radnor High School. Students also enjoy smoothies made with locally grown blueberries, and locally sourced hard-boiled eggs are offered as a nutritious breakfast and lunch option.

Back in the Cafeteria Groove

Before students headed back to class, school nutrition teams were already busy getting ready for another year.

Across the country, staff came together for back-to-school trainings, workshops and activities designed to help everyone prepare for the first day. Teams have been brushing up on food safety, learning new recipes, getting a first look at new menu items and talking through everything from customer service to kitchen procedures.

These gatherings are also a chance to reconnect. After a summer apart, staff can catch up with coworkers, welcome new team members and get excited about the year ahead.

Of course, all that preparation comes down to one thing: being ready for students.

Seeing those familiar faces back in the cafeteria is one of the best parts of a new school year. The kitchens are ready, the teams are prepared and there's plenty of excitement in the air.





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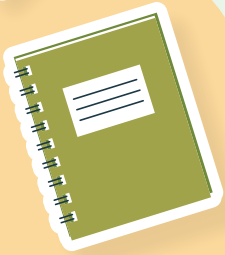






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COOKING *WITH* COLOR

BY MARI BRAND

Chefs Lindsey Schoenfeld, MS, RDN, and Vahista "V" Ussery, MS, MBA, RDN, K-12 culinary nutrition experts and founders of To Taste, answer all your questions about "cooking with color"—and share six delicious, vibrant, kid-approved recipes they've developed specifically for K-12 school nutrition menus.



Phrases like "cooking with color" and "eat the rainbow" are often thrown around in culinary or nutrition circles, but what do they really look like in practice, and why are they worth prioritizing? Some of those answers are pretty straightforward. Colorful foods are visually appealing, and nutritious ingredients like fresh fruits and vegetables naturally come in a variety of vibrant colors. But the ins and outs of how you can use more color within the constraints of a school meal program and how relevant those sayings actually are when it comes to nutrition are a little murkier. Luckily, there are experts who are qualified to speak on it—and we've collaborated with two K-12 chefs, Lindsey Schoenfeld and Vahista "V" Ussery, to answer all those questions (and more) and share some of the most colorful meals from their K-12 recipe repertoire.

What does "cooking with color" mean to you?

Chef V: I would say cooking with more produce. Fruits and vegetables naturally are a rainbow of different colors. Whenever we can add them to recipes or on the line, they add pops of color! Thinking about the variety of colors when cooking adds visual appeal to our dishes.

Chef Lindsey: Cooking with color means giving food personality. We are naturally drawn to different colors, and I believe it really catches kids' attention. Is the attention good or bad? Well, that depends on the food and the students. They might say, "What is that?" or "Can I try that?" or "Gross!" but it's getting attention, and that's more than what a boring lunch line can do. If it's the right colorful addition, meaning it adds flavor or texture and enhances the dish, don't give up! They might just take a minute to warm up to it, and that's okay.

How does color influence the way you approach menu or recipe development?

Chef V: We are always thinking about color when we write menus and recipes. We add a variety of color when we can, thinking about adding fresh herbs for a pop of green, or fruits or vegetables to main-dish recipes to brighten their look. Spices can also be used to add some color variety. Think about paprika or curry powder—they both add beautiful color! With menus, the meal pattern vegetable subgroups already help, but you can still end up with a monochromatic tray if you are not careful. We make sure that our vegetables and fruits are different colors, and we try to add garnishes when we can. For example, sprinkling a few red grapes or blueberries on diced cantaloupe. We evaluate each day's menu to make sure there is a variety of color and try to avoid all tan and white trays!

Chef Lindsey: Seeing the serving line from a student's perspective is so important. To test this, I assemble different trays based on the daily menu options to see if it is possible to create a completely unappealing tray. We love asking students, "How many colors can you put on your tray?" And when we ask, we better be able to deliver a colorful serving line every time!

What are your favorite ways to add more color to food?

Chef V: I start by considering the recipe by itself (not with the meal) and look for color opportunity, which is truly flavor opportunity too. Can I add some fruits or vegetables, freshly chopped herbs, and colorful spices? Then from there, I think about what else I want to match with that recipe to make the meal. If the recipe isn't naturally very vibrant, then I add super colorful sides!

Chef Lindsey: Adding color to food is an art, especially when working with students and on a budget! If it's not the right flavor or it's expensive when scaled to hundreds of servings, it's obviously not worth it, so in school nutrition programs, we are slightly limited to start. It's fun to add different flavors through ingredients that are built or stacked, like a burrito bowl or pasta bowl. If students can build the color themselves, they're more likely to try it and enjoy it!

As registered dietitian nutritionists, what do you think about the "eat the rainbow" approach to eating?

Chef V: We love teaching kids to "eat the rainbow," as well as adults! It's an easy way to remember to eat a variety of fruits and vegetables. Each color group



Buffalo Chicken Wrap

Serves: 52 (1 wrap)

Per Serving: 200 cal., 16 g pro., 11 g fat, 4 g sat. fat, 9 g carb., 1 g fiber, 418 mg sod.

Meal Pattern: 2-oz.-eq. meat/meat alternate, 2-oz.-eq. grains, ¼ cup vegetable (⅛ cup dark green, ⅛ cup red/orange)

Ingredients

52 each tortillas, whole-grain, 10-in.

5 lb. chicken, fully cooked, diced

3 cups Greek yogurt, plain, low-fat

1 cup hot sauce, Frank's

1 cup mayonnaise

1 lb. 10 oz. cheese, cheddar, shredded

2 cups celery, diced ¼-in.

1 lb. 1.3 oz. lettuce, romaine, shredded

1 lb. 5 oz. carrots, shredded

Directions

1. Thaw tortillas at room temperature.
2. Thaw chicken in refrigerator overnight. **CCP:** Hold at or below 41°F.
3. Combine the yogurt, hot sauce and mayonnaise in a large bowl. Mix thoroughly.
4. Add thawed, diced chicken, shredded cheese and celery. Using a spatula, fold to combine.
5. Place a #10 disher of chicken slightly off-center on a tortilla. Top with ¼ cup romaine lettuce and 2 Tbsp. shredded carrots. Roll into a wrap. **CCP:** Hold and serve at or below 41°F.

Recipe, Photo and Nutrition and Meal Pattern Analysis: Chef Lindsey Schoenfeld, MS, RDN, and Chef Vahista Ussery, MS, MBA, RDN, *totaste.com*

provides different nutrients and benefits to our bodies, so the more colors you eat, the better! Ideally, we should think beyond color as well, such as including cruciferous vegetables, leafy greens, citrus fruits, etc., but focusing on color is an easy tactic for people to understand and remember more easily.

Chef Lindsey: "Eat the rainbow" makes nutrition feel more fun! It's a way to challenge students to try a variety of foods without making it complicated or too technical.

Do you have tips for making K-12 menus more colorful even with minimal scratch-cooking capabilities?

Chef V: First, be sure to evaluate each individual menu day. Think about, or even list, the colors of each dish. Are they different? Can you add more variety? Fruits and vegetables are the easiest way to add more color, so start there! Move them around throughout the week to make sure they are paired with main dishes that are different colors. Serving spaghetti with marinara (red)? Then instead of pairing it with red apples and cherry tomatoes, serve it with orange slices and a green salad! Grilled cheese (tan and orange)? Serve it with broccoli (green) and red apples!

Chef Lindsey: You don't need to cook from scratch to have a colorful menu! Look at the layout of your serving line, and try to alternate fruits for stronger visual appeal. For instance, if you are serving apples and oranges, try alternating one row of oranges and then a row of apple slices to create stripes of color instead of solid blocks.

What are the benefits of highlighting fresh, colorful ingredients?

Chef V: Kids want fresh food! When we conduct surveys and focus groups with kids, the word "fresh" is always mentioned. Highlighting fresh, colorful foods is giving our students what they want. "Fresh" is associated with higher-quality food and better nutrition, which is something both kids and their parents are looking for.

Chef Lindsey: People are drawn to colorful things; not just food, but art, sunsets, paintings—everything! Highlighting fresh, colorful ingredients sparks interest and encourages students to try it. When they're interested in how it looks, they are more willing to put it on their tray and, hopefully, eat it!

Do you find that kids gravitate toward more colorful, vibrant recipes?

Chef V: 100%, no question. We all eat with our eyes, and I would say that kids especially do. Color adds natural interest to meals. You can't help but be drawn to a colorful dish or plate!

Chef Lindsey: Yes! I go back to the sunset I was thinking about earlier. If there are multiple layers of color in the sky, I am drawn to it, and that's the same with food.

What about pickier eaters?

Chef V: Fruit is usually fairly easy for kids to accept, so I would start there. A colorful smoothie or yogurt parfait is a great start. A simple fruit salad that combines different fresh



Unicorn Smoothie

Serves: 56 (8 oz.)

Per Serving: 218 cal., 11 g pro., 6 g fat, 3.7 g sat. fat, 32.2 g carb., 3.8 g fiber, 44.3 mg sod., 23 g sugar

Meal Pattern: 1-oz.-eq. meat/meat alternate, ½ cup fruit

Ingredients

1 gal. + 3 qt. yogurt, Greek, vanilla, fat-free

7 lb. banana, fresh, EP

3 lb. 15 oz. blueberries, frozen

1 qt. + 3 cups ice cubes

3 lb. 15 oz. strawberries, whole or sliced, frozen

1 qt. + 3 cups whipped cream, real dairy, prepared

Directions

1. Place half the yogurt, half the fresh bananas, all of the frozen blueberries and half of the ice cubes in a 5-gal. bucket. Blend using an immersion blender until pureed and smooth.
2. Place remaining half of the yogurt, bananas and ice cubes and all of the frozen strawberries in another 5-gal. bucket. Blend using an immersion blender until pureed and smooth.
3. Pour 4 oz. of blueberry smoothie into 56 9-oz. cups. It should fill about halfway. Then pour 4-oz. of strawberry smoothie on top for an 8-oz. smoothie total. The strawberry will initially sink into the blueberry smoothie, but then will fill the rest of the cup.
4. Top each smoothie with 2 Tbsp. whipped cream. If dome lids are available, draw unicorn eyes and a horn using black permanent marker before placing on top of smoothie cup. **CCP:** Hold and serve at or below 41°F.

Recipe, Photo and Nutrition and Meal Pattern Analysis: Chef Lindsey Schoenfeld, MS, RDN, and Chef Vahista Ussery, MS, MBA, RDN, *totaste.com*

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Cinnamon Sugar Bagel with Greek Yogurt Berry Schmear

Serves: 90

Per Serving: 235 cal., 7.7 g pro., 6.8 g fat, 3.7 g sat. fat, 36 g carb., 3.8 g fiber, 278 mg sod., 11 g sugar

Meal Pattern: 2-oz.-eq. grains



Ingredients

Greek Yogurt Berry Schmear

4.5 lb. blueberries, wild, frozen

3 lb. cream cheese

3 qt. yogurt, Greek, vanilla, fat-free

Cinnamon Sugar Bagel

1 cup + 2 Tbsp. sugar, granulated

1 Tbsp. cinnamon, ground

½ cup unsalted butter or buttermist spray

90 each bagels, whole-grain-rich, 2-oz.-eq.

Directions

1. Day before service, thaw berries in refrigerator overnight. Place berries in a perforated pan set over a solid pan to drain juice. **CCP:** Hold at or below 41°F.
2. Day of service, allow cream cheese to sit at room temperature to soften, about 30 minutes.
3. In a large bowl or mixer bowl with paddle attachment, combine yogurt and cream cheese. Mix until light, fluffy and smooth.
4. Add thawed, drained berries. Mix thoroughly to create purple schmear or use a spatula and fold to create a swirled visual effect. Cover and hold in refrigerator until ready to serve. **CCP:** Hold at or below 41°F.
5. Preheat oven to 375°F convection or 400°F conventional.
6. In a small bowl, combine sugar and cinnamon.
7. Melt butter if using.
8. Split bagels and place top halves cut side down and bottom halves cut side up on full size sheet pans. Lightly brush bagel halves with butter (about ¼ tsp. per half) or spray with buttermist spray. Sprinkle tops and bottoms with cinnamon sugar mixture (about ¼ tsp. per half). Bake for 8–10 minutes until bagels are toasty and golden brown.
9. Using a #16 disher, portion ¼ cup Greek yogurt berry schmear into 5 oz. cups.
10. To serve on line, place one bagel on each tray and allow students to pick up one cup of schmear. To serve as grab and go, place bagels in paper sleeves and hold in full size steam table pan. Place in warmer until service and serve with 5 oz. cups of schmear.

Recipe, Photo and Nutrition and Meal Pattern Analysis:
Chef Lindsey Schoenfeld, MS, RDN, and Chef Vahista Ussery, MS, MBA, RDN, *totaste.com*

fruits, or fresh mixed with canned fruit, can add beautiful color to your lines without scaring off those picky eaters. Also, don't forget taste tests! They are essential for student acceptance.

Chef Lindsey: Picky eaters are always a fun challenge, but color can be helpful. One great recipe is our Unicorn Smoothie (page 47) that has a purple layer on the bottom and a pink layer on top. While it takes a small amount of additional labor, it really brightened students' faces and the serving line. Even for a picky eater, it's hard to say no to sweet layers of color! We also love to build layers in cups, bowls or grab-and-go boxes. When we compose recipes in containers so students can see all the different colors and foods, they are less intimidated. If they don't like something, they can choose to remove it, and maybe they'll even decide to try it one day!

The recipes featured in this article are ones you've developed yourselves—do you have a top favorite out of all of them?

Chef V: I love the chicken tagine recipe (page 51)! We developed it with Chef Cyndie Story (founder of the K-12 Culinary Team, *chefcyndie.com*) for Utah's Farm 2 Fork program, so it features fresh apricots that you can procure locally in Utah, but you can also substitute canned or dried. I make something similar for my family at home with dried apricots, and I just love the flavor and colors!

Chef Lindsey: That cinnamon sugar bagel with berry schmear (on this page) is so yummy! It uses my favorite blueberries, wild ones, and you can modify the cinnamon sugar based on your menu needs.

What are your personal favorite "rainbow" foods or ingredients?

Chef V: I have a few favorites! Not necessarily used in schools, but I love turmeric and saffron for their flavor and the beautiful yellow color they add to foods!

I enjoy using dried cherries in sweet dishes like baked goods, granola or overnight oats because I love their rich red hue. I think they are the most beautiful dried fruit!

Finally, baby spinach. It's easy to throw in a smoothie to give it a fun green color without impacting the flavor or you

Tuscan Turkey Soup



Serves: 128 (1 cup)

Per Serving: 163 cal., 11 g pro., 4 g fat, 1 g sat. fat, 20 g carb., 3.5 g fiber, 434 mg sod.

Meal Pattern: 2-oz.-eq. meat/meat alternate, ⅜ cup vegetable (¼ cup red/orange, ⅛ cup other)

Ingredients

12 lb. turkey, cooked, diced, ½-in.
8 lb. butternut squash, fresh, diced
2 qt. onions, fresh, diced
1 qt. carrots, fresh, diced
1 qt. celery, fresh, diced
2 lb. 8 oz. kale, fresh, ribs removed, chopped
¾ cup garlic, fresh, chopped
¾ cup oil, canola
2 #10 cans beans, great northern, drained and rinsed
5 gal. chicken broth, low-sodium
1 #10 can tomatoes, diced
¼ cup basil, dried, leaves
¼ cup thyme, dried, leaves
4 bay leaves
1 Tbsp. pepper, black

Directions

1. Thaw cooked turkey in the refrigerator. **CCP:** Hold at or below 41°F.
2. Rinse butternut squash under running water. Remove peel and seeds and dice into ¾-in. pieces. Place in a large bowl or container.
3. Rinse onions, carrots and celery under running water. Drain well in colander. Peel or scrub carrots. Dice onions, carrots and celery into ¼-in. pieces. Add to bowl with butternut squash. Set aside.
4. Rinse kale under running water and drain well (salad spinner recommended). Fold kale leaves together, remove stems and tear to cut into 1-in. pieces. Set aside.
5. Rinse garlic under running water, peel and mince.
6. Drain and rinse beans. Set aside.
7. Preheat tilt skillet to medium-high heat. Add oil. Once oil is shimmering, add butternut squash, onions, carrots and celery. Sauté for approximately 8–10 minutes or until onion is translucent and squash is just beginning to soften.
8. Add the garlic and sauté for 30 seconds, stirring frequently.
9. Add beans, broth, tomatoes with juice, basil, thyme, bay leaves, black pepper and chopped kale.
10. Bring soup to a boil and reduce to a simmer. Simmer uncovered for 30 minutes. Add turkey during the last 10 minutes. **CCP:** Heat to minimum internal temperature at or above 135°F.
11. Serve 1 cup (about 8.5 oz.) using an 8-oz. ladle. Recommend serving with a 2-oz.-eq. whole-grain-rich roll. **CCP:** Hold hot for service at or above 135°F.

Recipe, Photo and Nutrition and Meal Pattern Analysis: Chef Lindsey Schoenfeld, MS, RDN, and Chef Vahista Ussery, MS, MBA, RDN, *totaste.com*, developed with Chef Cyndie Story, PhD, RDN, SNS, K-12 Culinary Team, *chefcyndie.com*



Creamy Jalapeño Ranch Yogurt Dip

Yield: 3 qt. (1 serving = 1 #24 disher)

Per Serving: 89 cal., 2 g pro., 9 g fat, 1 g sat. fat, 1 g carb., 0 g fiber, 118 mg sod.

Meal Pattern: .25-oz.-eq. meat/meat alternate

Ingredients

3 qt. yogurt, Greek, plain, non-fat
1 qt. + 1 pt. mayonnaise
1 ½ cup cilantro, fresh, chopped
1 ½ cup jalapeño, fresh, finely diced
1 ½ cup lime juice
2 Tbsp. black pepper
2 Tbsp. granulated garlic
2 Tbsp. onion powder
1 Tbsp. salt

Directions

1. Place all ingredients in a large bowl or container. Whisk to combine or use a blender.
2. Cover and store in refrigerator until ready to use. **CCP:** Hold and serve at or below 41°F.
3. Serve using a #24 disher to provide .25-oz.-eq. meat/meat alternate.

Recipe, Photo and Nutrition and Meal Pattern Analysis: Chef Lindsey Schoenfeld, MS, RDN, and Chef Vahista Ussery, MS, MBA, RDN, *totaste.com*

Chicken Tagine with Fresh Apricots



Serves: 90
(⅔ cup chicken mixture)

Per Serving: 155 cal., 15 g pro., 4 g fat, 0 g sat. fat, 14 g carb., 3 g fiber, 292 mg sod.

Meal Pattern: 2-oz.-eq. meat/meat alternate, ¼ cup vegetable (⅛ cup legume, ⅛ cup other), ⅛ cup fruit

Ingredients

11 lb. 4 oz. chicken, fully cooked, diced
3 qt. apricot, fresh, diced, EP*
2 ½ qt. onion, fresh, diced, EP
1 ½ qt. carrot, diced, EP
2 Tbsp. garlic, granulated
⅓ cup oil, canola
¼ cup + 2 Tbsp. cinnamon, ground
¼ cup + 2 Tbsp. ginger, ground
3 Tbsp. cumin, ground
1 Tbsp. paprika
2 Tbsp. salt
1 Tbsp. red pepper flakes
2 tsp. pepper, black
1 gal. + 2 cups chicken broth
¼ cup honey
2 #10 cans chickpeas, drained, rinsed
½ cup cilantro, fresh, chopped

Directions

1. Day prior to service, thaw diced chicken in refrigerator. **CCP:** Hold at or below 41°F.
2. Weigh then rinse apricots, onions and carrots under running water. Dice all into ½-in. pieces.
3. Heat a tilt skillet over medium heat. Add oil. Once oil is shimmering, add onion and carrot. Cook for 10 minutes or until onion becomes translucent.
4. Add cinnamon, ginger, cumin, paprika, salt, red pepper flakes and black pepper. Add chicken and toss to coat in spices. Cook about 1 minute or until fragrant. Do not cook for longer, as spices will burn.
5. Add broth, honey, chickpeas and diced apricots to skillet. Bring to a boil, then reduce to a simmer and cover. Simmer about 15–20 minutes. **CCP:** Cook to an internal temperature of 165°F.
6. While tagine is cooking, prepare steamed brown rice according to recipe. (Serve ½ cup brown rice for K-5 or 1 cup brown rice for 6-12.)
7. Transfer chicken tagine to two 2-in. full size steam table pans. **CCP:** Hold and serve at 135°F or above.
8. Rinse cilantro under running water. Dry well and rough chop into ¾-in. pieces.
9. Just prior to service, sprinkle each pan with ¼ cup freshly chopped cilantro.
10. Using a #6 scoop, serve ⅔ cup chicken tagine mixture over brown rice.

***Notes:** May substitute fresh apricots for canned apricot halves, drained and diced.

Recipe, Photo and Nutrition and Meal Pattern Analysis: Chef Lindsey Schoenfeld, MS, RDN, and Chef Vahista Ussery, MS, MBA, RDN, *totaste.com*, developed with Chef Cyndie Story, PhD, RDN, SNS, K-12 Culinary Team, *chefcyndie.com*

can add it to a soup or curry for a pop of color and extra nutrition.

Chef Lindsey: Orange: Sweet potato! I can make it sweet or spicy, toss it in a smoothie, mash it or crisp it. Delicious!

Purple: I love beets even if it's not the go-to student favorite. Pickled red onions also add flavor and color to dishes like tacos, bowls, salads and wraps.

Blue: Wild blueberries in muffins, pancakes, parfaits, smoothies—you name it!

Yellow/Green: A slice of lemon or lime. The juice isn't always seen, but it's definitely tasted. It can brighten any meal and add fresh flavor and color when served on the side for students to squeeze on top.

Red: Watermelon, hands down. It's loved by so many and such a treat!

Brown: I realize it's not a color in the rainbow, but it's definitely worth including cinnamon and chocolate. Can I add coffee for me and tea for V too?

Do you have any final takeaways or pieces of advice?

Chef V: Color is fun! A variety of colors makes food look more appealing and adds excitement to meals. It's something we should always think about when planning and preparing food.

Chef Lindsey: In culinary school, we had no choice but to add color. At first it felt forced and complicated, but then it became second nature and a dish seemed incomplete without color. Keep trying until it no longer feels like a chore, and students will respond positively. It really should be fun for all! Think about small color additions that can be easily added or removed depending on students' preferences. And remember—it's okay to strike out as long as you keep stepping up to the plate (or tray).

Chef Lindsey Schoenfeld, MS, RDN, and Chef Vahista Ussery, MS, MBA, RDN, are K-12 culinary nutrition experts and founders of culinary nutrition consulting and education company To Taste (*totaste.com*).

Mari Brand is Communications Specialist at SNA.



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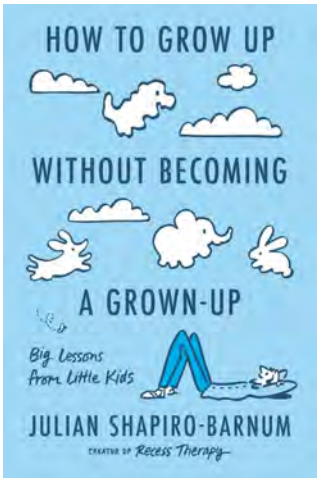
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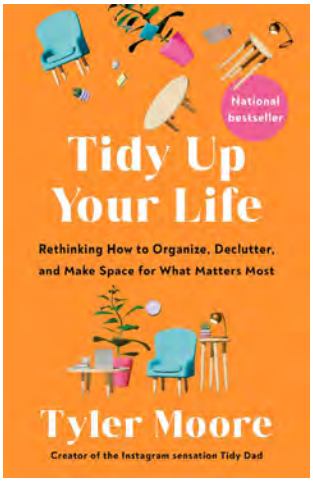


How to Grow Up Without Becoming a Grown-Up

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We all have to grow up some day, but many of us still miss the more carefree, imaginative lives we lived as kids. In *How to Grow Up Without Becoming a Grown-Up,* comedian Julian Shapiro-Barnum shares what he has learned from thousands of real kids to teach us adults how to bring back the child-like sense of wonder and joy we may have left behind.

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Tidy Up Your Life

Tyler Moore

Looking for a little post-summer reset? In *Tidy Up Your Life: Rethinking How to Organize, Declutter, and Make Space for What Matters Most,* New York City public school teacher and "Tidy Dad" Tyler Moore shares practical strategies for bringing order to a busy life. But this isn't just another book about clearing out clutter. Moore explores how simple routines and a "just enough" mindset can help make space for what matters at home, at work and everywhere in between.

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IT'S NOT NUTS. IT'S PEANUTS

LOOK AT THAT

New Campaign

National Peanut Board

Have you checked out the National Peanut Board's (NPB) new look yet? SNA partner NPB debuted its new industry brand platform, "It's Not Nuts. It's Peanuts," giving the humble peanut a fresh identity. The campaign highlights peanuts' nutrition, versatility and sustainability with a bright color palette and peanut-shaped logo—all designed to introduce a new generation of consumers to the many benefits of peanuts.

nationalpeanutboard.org



CHECK THAT OUT

Pillsbury Mini Pancake Puffs

General Mills Foodservice

One of the newest additions to General Mills Foodservice's K-12 lineup, these whole grain-rich pancake puffs come in Maple and Strawberry flavors. Individually wrapped, they can be served heated or thawed—no syrup needed.

bit.ly/SNMag-Pillsbury-Pancake-Puffs



LOOK AT THAT

Professional Performance Award
ASAE
SNA's own Danielle Duran Baron, MA, MBA, AAiP, FASAE, CAE, vice president of communications, marketing & industry relations, was recently recognized with ASAE's Professional Performance Award, one of the organization's highest individual honors. The award recognizes a senior association executive for exceptional leadership and achievement.
bit.ly/SNMag-ASAE-Professional-Performance-Award

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Daily Stretching and Flexibility Routine
Bend App
Incorporating stretching into your daily routine has a lot of health benefits, from increased flexibility to improved mobility as you age. With over 15 million users and 450,000 positive reviews, Bend offers dozens of beginner-friendly daily stretching and mobility routines that target different muscle groups for full-body benefits, or you can create custom routines from their library with hundreds of exercises to choose from.
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MEET

Watasha Rosemond

Child Nutrition Manager,
Benjamin Banneker Elementary,
Milford School District, Delaware

Q: Please share a little of your K-12 school nutrition journey.
A: I've been working in the Milford School District for 16 years, and six months ago I had the privilege of stepping into a leadership role as a school child nutrition manager. What motivates me every day is knowing that serving healthy, nourishing meals directly supports our students' growth, energy and success in the classroom. I also have a great staff at work who I love.

Q: Do you have a secret talent?
A: Baking! Whether it's cupcakes, cookies or homemade treats, I love whipping up delicious desserts for family and friends.

Q: What fictional world would you most want to visit?
A: The Marvel Universe. It would be amazing to experience a world full of superheroes firsthand, especially the Hulk and Spider-Man—preferably from a safe distance!

Q: If you won the lottery today, what would be your first purchase?
A: I would make sure my daughter's college education at Delaware State University is fully taken care of, secure financial comfort for my family and then build a custom kitchen designed for baking.

Q: If you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be?
A: A peaceful, warm coastal town where I can enjoy quiet surroundings while still being close enough to my family and city amenities.

Q: What is one crazy activity on your bucket list?
A: Taking a hot-air balloon ride over scenic countryside landscapes at sunrise.

Q: What TV show do you love binge-watching?
A: I love watching a great drama series that keeps you guessing from one episode to the next.

Q: If you had to pick one meal to eat for the rest of your life, what would you choose?
A: A classic homemade pasta dish served with warm baked bread. You can never go wrong with rich, comforting flavors made from scratch.

Q: How do you cheer yourself up after a bad day?
A: I love spending time in the kitchen baking fresh cupcakes or cakes, relaxing at home watching my son's freshwater fish (they are my babies) and playing games with my daughter like Uno or Color Stacks.

Q: What is your all-time favorite movie?
A: I can watch *Transformers* over and over again! I love watching action movies—especially on the big screen at the theater.

Q: What's the best advice you have ever received?
A: Leadership isn't about knowing every single answer on day one; it's about supporting your team and showing up consistently for the people who rely on you daily.



Q: If you could choose to have any superpower, what would it be?
A: Teleportation! Bypassing traffic or skipping the daily commute and being able to travel anywhere in the world instantly would be the ultimate superpower.

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CELEBRATION OPPORTUNITIES FOR SCHOOL CAFETERIAS



OCTOBER 2026

- National Farm to School Month
- National Seafood Month
- National School Lunch Week (Oct. 12–16)
- World Vegetarian Day (Oct. 1)
- National Noodle Day (Oct. 6)
- World Food Day (Oct. 16)



NOVEMBER 2026

- Native American Heritage Month
- Peanut Butter Lovers Month
- National Children's Book Week (Nov. 9–15)
- National Nacho Day (Nov. 6)
- National Vanilla Cupcake Day (Nov. 10)
- Apple Cider Day (Nov. 18)



DECEMBER 2026

- National Pear Month
- National Cookie Cutter Week (Dec. 1–7)
- National Green Bean Casserole Day (Dec. 3)
- National Pastry Day (Dec. 9)
- National Chocolate-Covered Anything Day (Dec. 16)

Get Ready: November 6 *is National Nacho Day*

Cinnamon Nachos with Fruit Salad



Serves: 50 (1 tortilla + ¾ cup fruit salad)

Per Serving: 248 cal., 4.7 g pro., 2.7 g fat, 1 g sat. fat, 53.7 g carb., 5.7 g fiber, 351.5 mg sod., 4.9 g sugar

Meal Pattern: 1.5-oz.-eq. grains, ¾ cup fruit

Ingredients

50 each tortillas, whole wheat, 8-in.
¾ cup + 3 Tbsp. sugar, granulated
½ cup + 2 Tbsp. cinnamon, ground
2 gal. + 1 qt. + 1 ½ cups mixed fruit salad

Directions

1. Preheat convection oven to 325°F or conventional oven to 350°F. Line 4 sheet pans with parchment paper.
2. Mix sugar and cinnamon in a small bowl.
3. Arrange tortillas on the prepared baking sheets. Spray or brush with water. Sprinkle each with ½ tsp. of the cinnamon sugar.
4. Cut each tortilla into 8 wedges with a pizza cutter or knife.
5. Bake until crisp, about 11 minutes (watch carefully to prevent burning).
6. Serve each tortilla with ¾ cup of fruit salad.

Recipe and Photo: Vermont Feed, adapted by Healthy School Recipes, *healthyschoolrecipes.com*
Nutrition and Meal Pattern Analysis: Chef Rebecca Polson, CC, SNS, *schoolnutritionchef.com*

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Breakfast





Lunch







Supper







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½ Cup	SODIUM	¼ Cup	SODIUM
• Mild Salsa Cup - 3oz	135mg	• Mild Salsa Cup - 1.5oz	70mg
• Marinara Cup - 2.5oz	170mg	• Marinara Cup - 1.25oz	85mg
• #10 Can (3oz):		• #10 Can (1.5oz):	
- Salsa	206mg	- Salsa	103mg
- Marinara	92mg	- Marinara	46mg

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