

Expanding local food procurement for school meals and taste tests

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OREGON SCHOOL DISTRICT QUARTERLY SERVICE STORY

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Here in Oregon we've had a busy start to the school year: nutrition lessons in classrooms, virtual cooking clubs for kids, garden harvests, and cleaning up gardens for winter. Some of our biggest successes this fall, however, have been in local food procurement for school meals and taste tests.

In September, we connected with Raleigh's Hillside Farm of Brodhead, Wisconsin to bring in fresh, fall-harvested yellow peppers as a vegetable option at lunch. Crunchy, sweet peppers were available at all of our schools. At Forest Edge Elementary, AmeriCorps Farm to School Specialist Isabel Greene spent the lunch hour chatting with the kids about what the peppers tasted like and where they came from - less than an hour's drive away! No matter the time of year, talking about delicious food and healthy habits is always in season.



Golden bell peppers from Raleigh's Hillside Farm in Brodhead, Wisconsin.

Starting in late September, our schools began sourcing local beef from Greenfield Farm in Iowa County, about an hour from Oregon. The farm is family owned and operated, raises grass-fed cows, along with other animals, and uses sustainable grazing practices that sequester carbon from the atmosphere. Ground beef from Greenfield Farm is now used in four different school lunch recipes that are in common rotation on the menu.



A student at Brooklyn Elementary takes a bite from an apple grown at Eplegaard in Fitchburg, Wisconsin during the Great Lakes Great Apple Crunch.

One of the many challenges the global pandemic has presented is disruption of critical supply chains - including food. According to School Nutrition Director Sarah Tomasiewicz, "Supply chain issues have significantly affected how food gets from the producers, to the distributors, and then to us." However, these shortages present a unique opportunity for local producers to get in the game with school districts. Working directly with local farms provides not only a reliable supply and more flexibility, but also the opportunity to introduce students to the foods that grow near their communities and the idea of 'eating with the seasons'. Some of our favorite seasonal foods Oregon students have tried this year are apples, purple radishes, cranberries, and more!



It's Alive! Purple daikon radishes are ready to go for a lunchtime taste test.

Outside of the cafeteria, lots of great Farm to School things are growing too. Schools have been harvesting the last of their gardens (cabbage, kale, and pumpkins... oh my!) and putting the gardens to bed for the winter by removing weeds, turning the soil, and adding an insulating layer of compost or cardboard. But the gardening doesn't stop there - indoors, 6th grade students have set up and are now managing a hydroponic grow tower. In the tower, the students are growing salad greens, tomatoes, and even strawberries. According to one student, "if we have a good harvest of lettuce, we'd like to bring it to the kitchen so they can use it for our lunches."

In the new year, we will continue to increase the menued local foods in our schools. In January, we will begin serving local yogurts at school breakfasts from Odyssey Brands, a part of the Klondike Cheese Company located in Monroe, Wisconsin. The yogurt will also eventually be added to lunch menus to increase student opportunities to try it and enjoy a nutritious treat from 'America's Dairyland'.



6th grade students pose with the new grow tower after setting it up and planting a variety of foods.

As 2021 comes to an end, we are grateful for the nutrition staff, teachers, farmers, the Department of Public Instruction AmeriCorps Farm to School Program, Serve Wisconsin, and community members that make Farm to School possible in Oregon. Thank you for helping to cultivate relationships between school communities and our local farmers.