

NEWS

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Students in Northern Virginia Aren't Just Eating School Food— They're creating it

How the Real Food for Kids' Culinary Challenge is making over the lunch line

GREAT FALLS, Va., April 3, 2017—Over the past seven years, [Real Food for Kids](#), the Fairfax-based nonprofit, has experienced exponential growth through its mission to elevate the quality and character of school food in the Metro D.C. area. Three regional chapters have been formed and other counties are looking to join. The strong relationship they built with their school board was influential in the hiring of a visionary Food and Nutrition Services Director last year. Their Food Day events at area elementary schools have engaged thousands of students in making intentional choices about how they eat and how they move. The RFFK Chef Academy has trained over 200 food services staff from three counties in scratch cooking impacting the school meals of nearly 300,000 students. Their work to bring salad bars to Fairfax County has resulted in their implementation in 141 elementary schools that will roll out over the next five years.

But one goal has remained elusive: getting a lunch created by students on the lunch line for their peers to enjoy. That day has finally come. Following the Fifth Annual Culinary Challenge and Wellness Expo, held March 11, two school districts are considering including on their menus recipes created by four student teams.

The Culinary Challenge and Wellness Expo has mushroomed in the five years since it began with four teams from Fairfax County Public School Culinary Academies to 13 teams from the academies as well as high school and middle school Family and Consumer Sciences classes. And participation is projected to grow even more in 2018 following the announcement that not one, but four recipes from the event are being tested for inclusion on lunch lines in Fairfax and Loudoun counties.

Lake Braddock Secondary School won the event with their Chicken Shawarma, but three other recipes, a Chicken Tortilla Soup from South County High School, a Chicken Gyro from Chantilly Academy, and a Chicken Enchilada from West Potomac High School caught the attention of Food and Nutrition Services Directors and Staff. What made it easier to approach the teams was the knowledge that those recipes had already been vetted by FNS staff to ensure they met USDA guidelines for school meals. “We knew no matter how creative our teams were in meeting parameters we set for them in this competition, their dishes needed to meet USDA guidelines in order to make it all the way to the lunch line,” says RFFK Director of Operations, Mary Pope. RFFK developed a template to guide the teams through the USDA guidelines to increase their chances of success.

Rodney Taylor, FNS director for Fairfax, committed to the Chicken Shawarma once Lake Braddock was announced as the winner, confident their recipe could be scaled up for the country's 10th largest school district. It was Taylor's staff who reviewed the recipe submissions and sent them back for any necessary revisions before the event. Judges then had only to rate recipes on taste and presentation. One highlight for the program was celebrity chef Jamie Leeds of Hank's Oyster Bar. She brought special experience and insight as a judge, as she won a celebrity chef challenge in 2016 to create a compliant school lunch. She understood just how challenging it was for the students.

Becky Bays, FNS director for Loudoun County, also a judge, was delighted that the teams had already undergone a thorough review. Bays says Loudoun is looking for ethnic recipes and has asked to look at the enchilada, gyro and soup recipes which she may test out this spring and summer. Members of Bays staff were early participants in RFFK's Chef Academy and, from that, recipes for soups and salad dressing have already made their way onto the Loudoun lunch line.

RFFK Executive Director JoAnne Hammermaster believes the student influence on school food will only grow. "We're changing perceptions about school food by engaging the end consumer directly in the change. These are the students who eat school lunch and they have strong ideas about what they like and what their peers will like. If students know what's being served at school is something their classmates created, they are more likely to check out what's happening in their cafeteria. Not only that, teachers and staff are going to be curious too."

Specialists on Taylor's staff approached the West Potomac team about piloting their enchilada at their school this spring. RFFK will stay connected to Loudoun and Fairfax about any upcoming menu additions. The Real Food for Kids Culinary Challenge has reached a long-desired objective in ensuring students, who should be playing a change-maker role in school food, can do just that.

Learn more about Real Food for Kids at www.realfoodforkids.org.

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About Real Food for Kids

Real Food for Kids educates school communities about the benefits of eating healthful foods and advocates to ensure access to whole foods for every student. RFFK is committed to working in collaboration with our partners to increase the quantities of healthful foods in our school systems, developing and delivering programs that educate our students and their families on making healthier lifestyle choices, and ensuring access to real whole foods for all school children. The organization has chapters in Northern Virginia and Georgia and works with school systems including Fairfax County, Arlington County, Alexandria City Public Schools and Loudoun County. For more information, go to www.realfoodforkids.org.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Photos of students competing in the challenge are available upon request. Please email Sophie@Bendurepr.com or call her at 540-687-5099.