

Taste Test Basics

Leading a taste test with students is a great way to introduce them to new food for the first time. It allows them to experience the smell, texture, and flavor of the food, while offering them an opportunity to authentically provide input on how they feel about the food. There are many ways to do this, including by leading a FoodCorps Lesson that engages students in growing, harvesting, and cooking a food before trying it.

This section provides some tips for how to lead a classic taste test where students quickly try a new food for the first time and offer input, using a quick, pressure-free format.

Key Questions to Consider

Deciding What to Offer for the Taste Test

- ✓ Who will you engage in making this decision? Are students, cafeteria staff, community members, teachers, or other school staff involved in deciding the item or recipe?
- ✓ How much will it cost?
- ✓ Is it connected to the cafeteria menu? (ideally, yes; see more below)
- ✓ Is the item linked to a specific season or culturally relevant holiday for students in the school community?

Logistics

- ✓ Will you need to borrow supplies from the cafeteria, like serving trays?
- ✓ Timing: When are you leading the taste test? What time works best for all school community members? Connect with teachers, cafeteria and janitorial staff, and administrators
- ✓ Numbers: How many students are you planning to engage?

- ✓ Who will prepare the food, run the taste test, and clean up?
- ✓ How will you advertise the taste test to students to generate excitement?
- ✓ How are you documenting the taste test to share success later? (photos, quotes, etc.)
- ✓ What are the best strategies to engage the community? A letter home to families? Highlight in the school newsletter?
- ✓ How will you share results? On a school bulletin board? During morning announcements?

Location and Cleanup

Where you hold the taste test influences how the taste test is run. Whether the event will happen in the cafeteria or classroom, ensure that you gain permission from those who facilitate use of the specific space you are in (teachers, cafeteria staff, etc.). It is especially important to give janitorial staff a heads-up and troubleshoot how you can ensure that the taste test doesn't negatively affect their job. Inquire about how you can thoroughly clean the space after the taste test. You may need to borrow a broom and other cleaning supplies.

Strategies for Greatest Impact

Involve Cafeteria Staff

A taste test provides a low-cost way to explore if incorporating a new food item on the menu is marketable to students before offering it on the meal line. This information is potentially helpful to cafeteria staff who are discouraged to see food thrown away. If possible, engage cafeteria staff early on as you plan your taste test. Value their time—they are busy. Clear communication is key, especially if you are running the taste test in the cafeteria during a school

meal. Remember that you share the same goals of offering healthy, delicious food to students.

Connect to Cafeteria Menu

Coordinate the item you are offering and the recipe you use with cafeteria staff. Ideally, the item will reflect something that can be incorporated into an upcoming schoolwide meal. Ask the cafeteria staff if there is a new recipe for which they would like to do a trial run via a schoolwide taste test. Ensure that you will share the taste test results with them to inform their planning. Ask cafeteria staff if they are willing to promote the taste test with students or participate in some way. The more cafeteria staff are engaged in your efforts and are *valued* in the process, the more likely you will be to “connect the loop” between your taste test and school meal menu items.

Frequency

Ideally taste tests will be integrated into the school as a typical way to promote a “schoolwide culture of health.” Students, teachers, cafeteria staff, and families all know and recognize taste tests as way to show “we try new things” at the school. Instituting a regular taste-test schedule is a great way to institutionalize taste tests. Considering what it takes to lead a successful taste test (people, time, and money), aim for setting up a taste-test calendar: once a month is a great initial goal.

Role Modeling Opportunities

Younger students look up to older students. Explore if older students can serve younger students the items being tested. Create opportunities for younger students to see older students trying new foods—this is one of the most influential things you can do to create a positive taste-testing culture throughout the school.

Engage School and Community Members

The more the school and the broader community is involved in the taste test, the more success you will

see. Encourage staff and parents to participate in trying a new food during a taste test and to model to students that it’s cool to try new things! Ask them to sign up to help prepare the food for the taste test or help run the taste test table. Regularly communicate with parents about upcoming taste tests, and highlight what foods students are tasting. Invite farmers to interact with students, and share what it’s like to grow a product featured in the taste test.

Connect the Taste Test to the Classroom and Garden

The more students have an opportunity to learn about a new food in a hands-on way, the more likely they will be to try it. Explore opportunities to connect your taste test to classroom time. If you are taste testing a squash recipe, can you lead a squash-focused lesson with students? Can you plant squash in the school garden? Are there opportunities for squash-focused research projects? Can students cook the squash themselves to prepare for the taste test? Some schools plant a “taste test garden” that features produce that can be incorporated into taste tests regularly.

Connect with Teachers

If the taste test is being offered in the cafeteria, is there a way to engage teachers in preparing for and running the taste test? In addition to the ideas about classroom connections mentioned above, can you engage teachers on a personal level? Ask them to participate and vote, along with the students. Encourage them to share stories about the first time they tried a new food! What did they like or not like about it?

Engage Students

Explore a variety of ways to promote student excitement about the taste test. Have students develop names for recipes that are being tested. Allow them to be as involved in the process as possible—from planting and harvesting produce that is featured in the recipe to creating taste-test promotion posters to running the taste test itself.

Highlight Local Produce

Whenever possible, incorporate a product that is available locally into your taste test. Even if you can't source the item for the actual taste test, there is still value in highlighting something that reflects local agriculture and community cuisine. Explore regional specialty crops and foods and the people who grow and prepare these items. What is available seasonally? How can you highlight these throughout the school year? Are there times when there is a surplus of items (like zucchini)? Can you engage farmers to sell "seconds" or imperfect crops that might not go for market value but could easily be incorporated into a taste test? If you can source a local product, create a sign or map showing where it is grown in the state or region!

Use Taste-Test Feedback

Aside from encouraging students to try new things through a taste test, it is important to share the feedback that students have offered from the process. If the majority of students didn't like a recipe, consider why. Remember that most students may need to try new things several times before they like it. You may also find that even if students report that they "liked" something during a taste test, that doesn't guarantee they will like it if it is served on the lunch menu. And recipes that were taste tested may need to be tried more than once before they are standardized and incorporated into the lunch menu. Have patience, and remember that taste testing is an important method to engage students, school staff, and the broader community in trying healthy food items. This small step will have larger results over time.

Sample Taste-Test Voting Forms

Cafeteria Taste-Test Survey

Featured food: _____ Date of taste test: _____

TRIED IT	LIKED IT	DIDN'T LIKE IT	GRADE

Themed Taste-Test Survey

(Cut out and give one to each student.)

Locally Grown Greens Taste Test

Grade: _____

Directions: Check off whether you tried it, liked it, and would try it again.

GREEN NAME:	KALE	SWISS CHARD	SPINACH	LETTUCE	BOK CHOY
Tried it					
Liked it					
Would try it again					

Individual Student Taste-Test Voting Ballots

(Geared toward younger students)

Directions: Cut out and give one ballot to each student.

<p>TASTE TEST</p> <p>Product _____</p> <p>Date _____</p> <p>Grade _____</p> <p>(circle one)</p> <p>LIKE! SORT OF DON'T LIKE</p> <p>  </p>	<p>TASTE TEST</p> <p>Product _____</p> <p>Date _____</p> <p>Grade _____</p> <p>(circle one)</p> <p>LIKE! SORT OF DON'T LIKE</p> <p>  </p>	<p>TASTE TEST</p> <p>Product _____</p> <p>Date _____</p> <p>Grade _____</p> <p>(circle one)</p> <p>LIKE! SORT OF DON'T LIKE</p> <p>  </p>
<p>TASTE TEST</p> <p>Product _____</p> <p>Date _____</p> <p>Grade _____</p> <p>(circle one)</p> <p>LIKE! SORT OF DON'T LIKE</p> <p>  </p>	<p>TASTE TEST</p> <p>Product _____</p> <p>Date _____</p> <p>Grade _____</p> <p>(circle one)</p> <p>LIKE! SORT OF DON'T LIKE</p> <p>  </p>	<p>TASTE TEST</p> <p>Product _____</p> <p>Date _____</p> <p>Grade _____</p> <p>(circle one)</p> <p>LIKE! SORT OF DON'T LIKE</p> <p>  </p>

Forms adapted from VT FEED *Guide For Taste Testing Local Food In Schools*

Recommended Resources

- USDA Standardized Recipes
- USDA Recipes for Schools: Institute of Child Nutrition
- Vermont Farm to School Network: New School Cuisine Cookbook > Garden *Gastronomy: A Bilingual Cookbook* by City Blossoms
- The Lunch Box: Recipes
- VT FEED: *Guide For Taste Testing Local Food In Schools*

FoodCorps Lessons with Cooking and Tasting Opportunities

FoodCorps Lessons provide an opportunity to engage with students in the cafeteria through cooking and tasting activities. Remember to connect with cafeteria staff for approval and logistics related to leading these lessons in the cafeteria or during meal times! Please refer to cooking-related FoodCorps Lessons in the FoodCorps Lessons Book for ideas!

Local Food and Procurement Resources

- **The USDA Community Food Systems website “Procuring Local Foods” is a one-stop resource shop.** This website includes the USDA *Guide for Procuring Local Foods for Child Nutrition Programs Finding, Buying and Serving Local Foods* an extensive procurement-focused webinar series, fact sheets, policy memos, and regulations.
- **FoodCorps webinar, “Cafeteria Communications”:** Learn how to navigate your school cafeteria environment by fostering relationships and by setting achievable priorities for your service year. This webinar introduces great communication strategies for relationship building within the school food setting, tips for getting the kitchen ready, a review of creative cafeteria connections, and a demonstration of communications scenarios. Presenters include FoodCorps Regional Program Manager, Daniel Marbury, and FoodCorps alumna, Caroline Stover.

- **FoodCorps webinar, “What You Need To Know About School Food”:** Hold onto your lunch trays, folks! We are going to step into the exciting and complex world of school food. As FoodCorps service members, you are going to be spending a lot of time in school kitchens and cafeterias across the country, and we want to prepare you with the context you’ll need when you don your first hairnet (or beard net) and start working with food service directors and staff. In this webinar, FoodCorps members will gain foundational knowledge and resources from the USDA Farm to School program that are essential for achieving success in supporting healthy school meals and improving school food environments. The presenter is FoodCorps Alumna Kirsten Gerbatsch.
- **Nutritious and Seasonal Recipes for School Cooks by School Cooks New School Cuisine Cookbook.** New School Cuisine is the first-ever effort by public school cooks who wrote a hands-on cookbook for their peers. It is the only cookbook that is for school cooks; by school cooks; includes only kid-tested recipes; and features local, seasonal ingredients and farm-to-school resources. The book includes recipes for school kitchens to prepare healthy, locally-sourced meals for their students. It’s a practical resource for child nutrition programs: each recipe is in USDA format, yields school-size quantities, includes a nutritional analysis, and contains information on the specific food components that credit toward meeting the USDA meal pattern.