

Taste Tests

The Fundamentals of K-5 Food Education

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About FoodCorps

FoodCorps is a national nonprofit advancing child well-being through food in school. We partner with schools to get kids excited about eating fruits and veggies through hands-on food education, support school nutrition staff in getting nourishing meals on the lunch tray, and work with families to create positive school food environments for all kids.

About Taste Tests

Taste tests are a great way to introduce students to new foods in a quick, pressure-free format. Ideally involving the entire student body, taste tests allow students to experience the smell, texture, and flavor of an item. Importantly, they also provide a platform for students to provide input, elevating student "voice and choice" through voting or other opportunities for feedback.

You can build connections with school nutrition staff and leverage student input to inform school menus or simply generate schoolwide enthusiasm for the nourishing foods already on the tray. This process does more than just fill plates; it celebrates “trying new things” and builds a lasting schoolwide culture of health.

While schoolwide events require careful coordination, recruiting volunteers and planning early will help ensure a smooth experience. We’ve developed tools in this guide to streamline the process. We hope these resources provide the inspiration you need to lead taste tests that are both successful and fun!

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Important Principles for Leading Taste Tests

- [ ] **Reach ALL students.** Your aim should be to give every student the opportunity to participate in the taste test, so an accessible location, such as the cafeteria or hallway, is important.
- [ ] **Collaborate with Nutrition Services.** These staff are the people feeding students on a daily basis. Their input and expertise is critical and valuable. *(see p. 17)*
- [ ] **Connect to the cafeteria menu, where possible.** Ideally the taste test features an item that is currently on or being vetted to be on students' plates during meal times. *(see p. 32)*
- [ ] **Make voting key.** Having students vote signals to them that their opinion matters. This is also a way to learn their preferences and apply that knowledge to future taste tests and choices for menu items down the line. *(see p. 35)*
- [ ] **Share voting results.** As important as having students cast a vote is broadcasting the results. Elevating student voice and choice is key! *(see p. 42)*
- [ ] **Acknowledge your limitations and begin!** These are ideal factors, and you may not have the capacity, connections, or resources to have these all in place, YET! Start small. Strive toward these goals, but don't be discouraged from starting a taste test program or feel like your current efforts have failed.

Key considerations

Throughout this guide you'll consider questions such as the following:

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? Ideally, the entire student body is participating.

Logistics: Who will prepare the food, run the taste test, and clean up? *(see p. 15)*

Preparing food: Where will you prep the food for the taste test? (We recommend that this happens in a food-preparation designated area like the cafeteria or home ec room.)

Supplies: Will you need to borrow supplies from the cafeteria, like serving trays? *(see p. 43)*

Building interest: How will you advertise the taste test to students to generate excitement? *(see p. 33)*

Getting support: What are the best strategies to engage the community? A letter home to families? A highlight in the school newsletter? *(see p. 15)*

Sharing results: How will you share results? On a school bulletin board? During morning announcements? *(see p. 42)*

Sharing the story: How are you documenting the taste test to share success later? (photos, quotes, recipe adaptations, etc.)

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Schoolwide Taste Test Field Guide

Complete the sections below to plan for your next taste test, and consider how you are integrating best practices into your plan.

Schoolwide taste test date: _____

See p. 13 for more information on choosing a location!



Location (check all that apply that will reach all students)

- ☐ Cafeteria
- ☐ Hallway
- ☐ Playground
- ☐ Garden
- ☐ Other: _____

Time (check all that apply)

- ☐ Breakfast
- ☐ Lunch
- ☐ Recess
- ☐ Other: _____



See p. 15 for more about how to get taste test support!

Key collaborators & roles (check all that apply)

- ☐ You
- ☐ School nutrition staff (names and roles:)
- ☐ School administration (names and roles:)
- ☐ Teachers (names and roles:)
- ☐ Students (names and roles:)
- ☐ Other volunteers (names and roles:)
- ☐ Taste Test Committee

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See p. 27 for more on deciding what to serve for the taste test!

Product and preparation

- ☐ Product: _____
- ☐ Preparation: _____

See p. 17 on involving cafeteria staff and p. 32 on connecting the taste test to the cafeteria menu!

Cafeteria or school connection

(check all that apply; at least one is encouraged)

- ☐ Product is or will be served on the meal line or in the salad bar in the coming month.
- ☐ Product is or will be grown in the school garden this year.
- ☐ Product is new, and the school nutrition department is using this as a student taste-testing opportunity.
- ☐ Other: _____

See p. 33 for more on taste test promotions!

Promotional plan (check all that apply)

- ☐ Morning announcements
- ☐ Posters/flyers
- ☐ Family/parent newsletter
- ☐ Other: _____

See p. 35 for voting and feedback opportunities!

Voting (choose one)

- ☐ Bean drop
- ☐ A thumb “thermometer”
- ☐ Dot voting, stamping, or tally chart
- ☐ Paper voting ballots
- ☐ Digital voting on a tablet using a Google form
- ☐ Other: _____

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Taste Test Timeline

Product: _____

Date of taste test: _____

CHECKLIST	NOTES
1 MONTH PRIOR	
☐ Check your Taste Test Field Guide. ☐ Refer to product you are testing and recipes. Ensure you are coordinating with school menu. ☐ Confirm logistics and timing with teacher or cafeteria staff, depending on where the tasting is happening. Ensure there isn't a scheduling conflict (i.e., taste test is not on a holiday, a testing day, or day a field trip or other big event is happening). ☐ Check in with or recruit parents or community volunteers to help with food prep and serving. ☐ Consider practicing a small-scale version of the recipe at home, particularly if it's new to you. ☐ Determine how and where you'll be storing the food product.	

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CHECKLIST	NOTES
2–3 WEEKS PRIOR	
☐ Make sure recipe ingredients are purchased or procured. ☐ Advertise the taste test in the school newsletter, bulletin board, flyers, classroom visits, etc.	
1 WEEK PRIOR	
☐ Send reminders to principal, cafeteria staff, teachers, and volunteers. ☐ Check that you have all the supplies you'll need. ☐ Determine system for student voting.	
DAY BEFORE	
☐ Remind principal or office to include taste test shout out in morning announcements. ☐ Check in with volunteers to coordinate final details. Organize supplies. ☐ Review recipes. ☐ Prepare recipes and/or ingredients that you can make ahead. ☐ Prepare voting method.	

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CHECKLIST	NOTES
DAY OF	
☐ Prepare recipes. ☐ Set up table. ☐ Set up voting. ☐ Hang signage. ☐ Set out testing cups with clear numbers and names next to each option. ☐ Take pictures. ☐ Clean up.	
DAY AFTER	

☐ Reflect!
  ☐ What went well?
  ☐ What would you want to do differently next time?
☐ Share results with school.
☐ Send home taste test product handouts to families.
☐ Send thanks to volunteers and whomever else helped you pull off the taste test!	

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Frequency & Location

Frequency

Ideally, taste tests will be integrated into the school as a typical way to promote student voice and choice. Students, teachers, cafeteria staff, and families all know and recognize taste tests as a way to show "we try new things" at school, and students' opinions and preferences matter. Developing 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. Some people link taste tests to a Harvest of the Month as a means of guiding the tasting. See a variety of examples showing approaches to leading taste tests in the section below.

Locations and approaches to leading taste tests

Below are examples of the different ways to offer taste tests.

In the school cafeteria

- A cart is brought to students with a taste test item to sample. Voting can be done via thumbs, tally on a clipboard, or asking students to vote on a poster as they exit the cafeteria.
- A table is set up with items, and students come to you to taste and vote.
- You carry items around in a bowl and serve directly onto student plates (good if you don't have a cart or a table available; low resource with no disposable cups).
- Voting can be done in the lunch line (ideal if students can get up from tables during lunch, and vote on the way out or after lunch).
- Students vote on items already included on the lunch menu; you ensure feedback is provided to cafeteria staff.

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Other locations

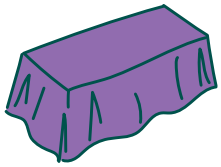
- On the playground during recess
- In the hallway, a table is set up for students to sample and vote
- In the school lobby during dismissal
- In the school garden as a follow-up to a harvest

Schoolwide events

- At a parent–teacher night
- As part of an assembly

Unique approaches

- Linked to Fresh Fruit and Veggie Program
- As part of the Harvest-of-the-Month program

CHECKLIST	NOTES	Cons
Stationary Table 	• Can be a private voting experience, so students aren't swayed by others	• Can cause bottlenecking, particularly if it's done while students are on their way elsewhere
Rolling Cart 	• Can be orderly as students stay seated	• Increased chance you might miss someone • Informal nature means some students will be influenced by peers

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Getting Support

To successfully pull off a taste test, you'll want support from the school community and from dedicated volunteers.

Establishing a Taste Test Committee

Though it takes time and planning upfront, gathering a Taste Test Committee early in the school year can save you stress down the road. You'll have the assurance that you're making decisions collaboratively with wisdom and input from key stakeholders and that you have a team of committed people you can rely on for support.

Taste Test Committee tips

- **Set regular meetings:** Convene key stakeholders like the cafeteria manager, parent volunteers, principal, lunch monitors, a couple upper-grade students, class representatives, and others who may be interested in helping shape a taste test program at the school. Involve students, as possible!
- **Assign roles:** Can committed parent or community volunteers do further outreach for a pool of volunteers to help on taste test days? Can the cafeteria manager communicate with the school nutrition department to procure items needed for the taste test?
- **Establish goals together:** What are your desired outcomes for your taste test program?
- **Set goals:** How will you measure success?
- **Coordinate tasks and timelines:** See if you can sketch out a road map of the year while you have key stakeholders at the table.
- **Gather additional input:** Plan for a way to gather input from people outside the committee.

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Enlisting Volunteers

Don't try to do it alone! Having a committed core group of volunteers will be critical for the success of your taste test program.

For each taste test, aim to have at least one, ideally two, volunteers the day of. That way, you have someone running and monitoring voting as well as someone to assist with preparing the products, portioning into taste test cups, and replenishing tastings between lunch waves.

Existing clubs: Does your school have a PTO/PTA, garden committee, or other dedicated group of volunteers you can pull from?
Community group: Is there a local church group, senior center, or Rotary Club with an interest in volunteering that you might reach out to?
High school students: Does a local high school have a culinary elective or vocational tech program that you can partner with?
Parent outreach: Look for opportunities when parents are already at the school to engage them (e.g., pickup and drop-off, back-to-school nights, school food pantry hours).

Involving lunch monitors and custodial staff

You're likely hosting a taste test in a space lunch monitors and custodial staff occupy daily: the cafeteria. Be sure to gain their support by checking in and asking for their valuable input before running taste tests.

Get on the same page as lunch monitors. Will you be bringing taste test cups to students, or will there be a designated table? What will be the process for students to get up and go to the table? Cafeteria monitors will want to know how to manage students accordingly. Without prior communication, there may be a mismatch of expectations.

Likewise, it is especially important to give custodial 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. Ask for favors you might need from custodial staff well in advance of the day of the taste test, such as finding an extra table or cart, so they don't have to scramble on the day of on your behalf.

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Involving School Nutrition Staff

> **I thought through having a taste test one time a month, looked at a seasonal chart, and talked with cafeteria. Really that should be any person's first step."**
>
> —FoodCorps member

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 school nutrition staff at the school who are discouraged to see food thrown away. Engage school nutrition staff as early as possible as you plan your taste test. See if you are able to sit down with the cafeteria manager at the beginning of the year to plan out your taste test products and dates for the fall semester or even for the year (see the Taste Test Field Guide planning document). It's even better if they're able to be part of a Taste Test Committee. But 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 goal of offering nourishing, delicious food to students.

Tips for collaborating with nutrition staff

- **Gauge level of involvement:** Some cafeteria managers are happy to give you the space to work and prep but would rather not be involved, whereas others might love to be a resource and thought partner along the way.
- **Tap into their wisdom:** Cafeteria managers will know a lot about students' habits and tastes, considering they're feeding them daily! They'll also likely have good ideas for ingredient alternatives and how to work with the school nutrition department's ordering guide.
- **Check in about the lunch menu:** Discuss which day of the week has the lightest prep load for the kitchen, especially if you need their help in food preparation; that way they won't be overburdened.
- **Coordinate taste test items:** Talk to the cafeteria manager about whether there's an item or dish they'd like you to taste test to determine whether they should serve it on the meal line.

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Quotes from FoodCorps members who have connected with cafeteria staff to plan and implement taste tests

"They love to taste the food and often ask for the recipe."

"Cafeteria staff prepare the food; I serve the food to the students and run the voting, etc."

"The partnership that I have with cafeteria staff for taste tests has been built over many years that I was lucky enough to inherit."

"They sometimes give me food for taste tests; they give me the OK to do a taste test, and give me suggestions."

"Cafeteria staff give suggestions of how to modify taste test flavor."

"Cafeteria staff cook produce from the garden."

"They order, prepare, and cup the salads into sample sizes."

"Building a good relationship with the cafeteria staff, even the area manager, will be instrumental if doing cafeteria taste tests. They can help provide supplies and an area to prepare and store, and most importantly, efficiently clean after."

"You need to understand your cafeteria staff; create the human relationship first and foremost. Can't just approach them with a big long list of things you need their help with."

"We are constantly communicating with cafeteria staff, making sure orders came in on time and assessing needs on both sides. We are forever indebted to them for letting us use their space, cookware, and ingredients! Cafeteria staff always offer good advice and insight for the taste tests and typically enjoy trying what we make. We really get a glimpse into food services and the work behind the scenes of the cafeteria through conducting taste tests."

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Discussion Points for Meeting with Nutrition Services Manager

As you know by now, fostering a positive relationship with the Nutrition Services staff at your school is key in pulling off a successful taste test or any engagement efforts in the cafeteria.

Use the following script and questions to initiate a conversation about your larger taste test plan. These questions assume you've already introduced yourself and spoken informally with the manager before this meeting. Be sure to express appreciation for their hard work and expertise. The Taste Test Planning Meeting Worksheet (p. 21) can serve as a guide when planning for a specific taste test.

Script for conversation

Thanks for taking time to meet today! I'm excited to work with you to introduce new foods to kids through taste tests. Research and experience show that the most successful taste tests include a few key elements:

- **Universal access:** Offering to all students
- **Student voice:** Incorporate a way for students to vote
- **Menu integration:** Testing foods that are likely to be offered on the menu

Partnering with you during this process is key for success; your input and guidance will help shape taste tests that engage kids and reflect what they eat every day at school. The cafeteria is your realm, and you do so much to feed our students, so I want to be as respectful as I can of your space, time, and resources. I'd like to discuss the following questions with you to help build our plan for leading taste tests with students.

Ideas and troubleshooting

- Are there any recipes/food items that you've been wanting to try out?
- Are there any seasonally appropriate fruits or vegetables you want to taste test? Or something in surplus?
- Are there any concerns or challenges that you anticipate?

Scheduling

The dates for preparing and running a taste test need to work for you.

- What are the good weeks of the school year, days of the week, or dates to run a taste test (considering your normal prep load)?
- How often during the school year can you see successfully pulling off a taste test?
- Are there any other theme days or "Harvest-of-the-Month" days that can dovetail with a taste test?

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Ordering

With my limited budget and resources, anything that can be ordered through Nutrition Services will be crucial in helping the taste test get off the ground.

- Can you share how ordering in your district generally works?
- What pantry items are easily available for taste tests?
- Are there any items you know are difficult to procure that should be avoided during a taste test?

Supplies and space

- Is your preference to help prepare the food for the taste test?
- Are you able to provide a station for me to prepare food the day prior?
- Will there be space where I can refrigerate items?
- What are the protocols for sanitizing and cleanup that I should be aware of?
- I might need tasting cups or boats, forks, a hairnet and gloves, and a small cart. Are these items available?

Day of Logistics

I could use your help thinking through the flow of students on the day of the taste test.

- How many lunch periods a day are there? Approximately how many students per lunch period? How long is each lunch period?
- I'll either need a table set up in the cafeteria or a cart to bring tastings to seated students. What is your preference? Why?
- Is there any bottlenecking or other challenges you foresee with either scenario?
- How much will you or another staff member be able to help during a taste test?
- What's the best way for me to move about and use the space to not interrupt lunch service?

Results

My hope is that the voting results can be put to use, ultimately informing decisions for the salad bar or cafeteria menu.

- How much flexibility do you have for implementing changes?
- How could you see using the results of a taste test?
- To what extent do you want to be involved?
- My goal would be to offer taste tests X times in the year. Does that seem reasonable?
- Are there ideal days of the week or parts of the month that work best for you?

Thank you for all you do!

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Taste Test Planning Meeting Worksheet

This worksheet is to be used in conversation with the Nutrition Services manager when planning for a specific taste test. Refer to the Taste Test Timeline (p. 10) and Materials Checklist (p. 43) to help you plan and stay organized. Use this in tandem with Discussion Points for Meeting With Nutrition Services Manager (p. 19).

- ☐ Suggest a date for the first taste test, or have them suggest a date:
  - ☐ How does your prep load look that week? Is there a better day?

- ☐ My idea so far for the taste test item is
  - ☐ What are your thoughts? Do you anticipate any challenges with this item or preparation?
  - ☐ Do you have suggestions for altering the recipe? Do you have any recipes you like for this item?

- ☐ Food I'll need help ordering
  - ☐
  - ☐
  - ☐
  - ☐
  - ☐
  - ☐

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☐ Supplies or cooking space I'll need

- ☐
- ☐
- ☐
- ☐
- ☐
- ☐

☐ Is it OK to hang signs? Where?

☐ Dates and times for when I'll be preparing food (if in cafeteria)

☐ Dates and times for when I'll be setting up for taste test

☐ Space I'll need to set up

Thank you for all you do!

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Involving Administrators

> **“The great relationship that I have with the principal at my school was built on how I give taste tests at the staff meetings.”**
>
> —FoodCorps member

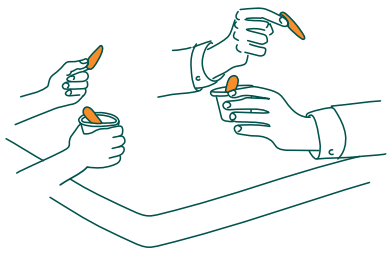
Aim to have your principal and other administrators be informal ambassadors for taste tests.

- Be sure to coordinate taste test dates with the principal. They’ll let you know of testing dates, field trips, or other scheduled events that may conflict with your desired dates.
- Invite the principal and other administrators to be present in the cafeteria during taste tests. They can encourage students to try the taste test and model by trying it themselves!
- If they can’t come to you, bring leftover taste test samples to the office. It’s a thoughtful way to appreciate them, and build awareness of your taste test program.

Engaging school and community members

The more the school and the broader community are involved in the taste test, the more success you will see. The following are some tips for engaging these folks:

- 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!
- Promote taste tests during back-to-school night, PTO/PTA meetings, or other after-school events where parents are in attendance. Have a sign-up sheet for volunteering and sample tasters to pique interest.
- Ask volunteers 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.



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Connecting 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.





For example, if you're taste-testing squash, can you...

- lead a squash-focused lesson with students?
- plant squash in the school garden?
- help facilitate squash-focused research projects?
- guide students in cooking the squash themselves to prepare for the taste test?

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.

Connecting with teacher

> **"Taste tests are simple and don't take very long, so that could be a great way to build a relationship with a class and a teacher."**
>
> —FoodCorps member

- Can you partner with a particular classroom (whose teacher is excited and supportive of food education and nourishing school food) to have students be Taste Test Ambassadors (see Engage Students below)?
- Perhaps before attempting a cafeteria-scale taste test you do a trial run in a classroom.
- Hang flyers in the teacher's lounge announcing taste tests and making specific requests for support (e.g., help finding parent volunteers or being a Taste Test Ambassador classroom).
- 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 teachers 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?

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Engaging Students

Explore a variety of ways to promote student excitement about the taste test. 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. The following are a few additional ideas:

- **Taste Test Club or Taste Test Ambassadors:** Develop a club to engage students in leading taste tests. They can help prep the food, develop names for recipes that are being tested, lead the taste test and voting process, and summarize the votes! Students can brainstorm ways to share the voting results, including making schoolwide announcements and sharing results on a hallway bulletin board.
- **Role modeling:** 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.



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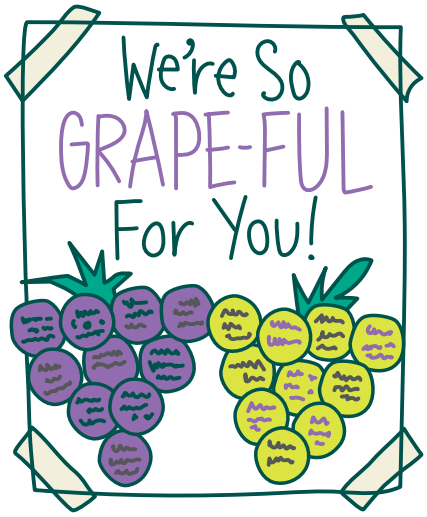
Expressing Gratitude



Be sure to express gratitude and appreciation for the hard work your key collaborators played in the success of your taste test.

Some tips:

- Write a handwritten thank-you note, whenever possible.
- Mention specific ways that your collaborators were helpful.
- Include student quotes.
- Have students send direct messages themselves.
- Mention your desire for future collaborations.

A sample thank you letter to a cafeteria manager



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Deciding What to Serve for the Taste Test

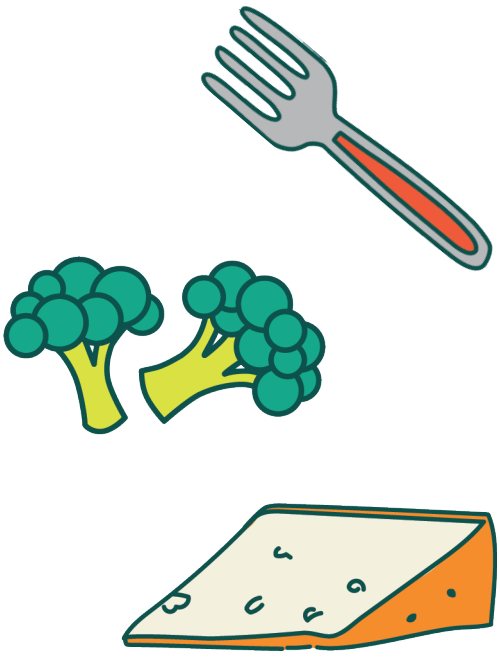
Choosing recipes

Considerations for Selecting Recipes

- **Seasonal:** Is your recipe appropriate for the time of year?
- **Connection to cafeteria:** Could the recipe be incorporated into the cafeteria menu, and is it accessible for school nutrition staff?
- **Local:** Are you able to source ingredients from local farmers or your school garden?
- **Availability and affordability:** Keep accessibility and availability in mind when considering ingredients in recipes. Are they ingredients that families can access close to home at most stores? Can you provide more common substitutions for expensive or hard-to-find ingredients?
- **Feasibility:** While a recipe might seem fun and exciting, is it something you can feasibly manage given your monetary, equipment, or time constraints?
- **"Bridge" foods:** Bridge foods are foods that help a person move from old foods to new foods (i.e., There's a familiar element to a new dish. For example, cheesy broccoli was a very popular taste test, thanks to cheddar cheese!).
- **Informed source:** Is your recipe inspired by or adapted from sites or programs that have done pre-vetting with kids, school nutrition directors, and large serving sizes?
- **Culturally affirming foods:** Have you considered the histories and food traditions of your students? What are the tastes and cooking practices of their families?

Questions to consider

1. 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?
2. How much will it cost?
3. Is it connected to the cafeteria menu? (Ideally yes; see more below.)
4. Is the item linked to a specific season or local holiday for students in the school community?



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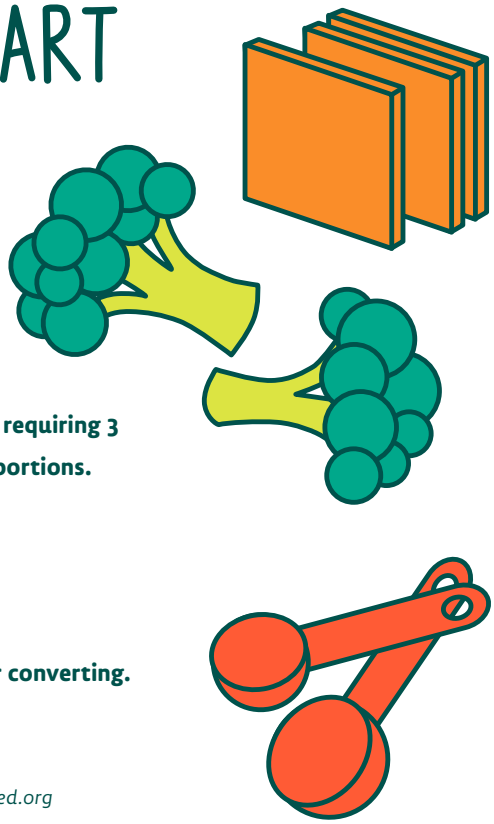
Converting recipe yields

- Many recipes you encounter in cookbooks or on the internet will consider a serving size well above a "tasting" or what would fit in a 2 oz. serving cup. To avoid food waste but also have enough for each student, you'll have to do some calculations.
- It's best practice to taste the food that you're preparing for the taste test as you go (with tester spoons that you use once!), ensuring the seasoning or dressing is adequate and balanced. This is especially important if this is your first time making the recipe!
- Be sure to record substitutions, adaptations, and scaling up notes as you're creating the dish; that way, if it's successful, it's reproducible.

RECIPE CONVERSION CHART



1. Divide the desired new yield by the existing recipe yield:

$$\frac{\text{New yield}}{\text{Old yield}} = \text{conversion factor}$$

2. Multiply each ingredient quantity by the conversion factor:

old quantity x conversion factor = new quantity

EXAMPLE:

You have a recipe for 10 portions of broccoli casserole with cheese sauce, requiring 3 pounds of broccoli and 2.5 cups cheese sauce. You want to convert to 15 portions.

$$\frac{\text{New yield} = 15}{\text{Old yield} = 10} = 1.5 \text{ conversion factor}$$

So, Broccoli: 3 lbs. x 1.5 = 4.5 lbs. **Sauce: 2.5 cups x 1.5 = 3.75 cups**

NOTE: spices, salt, and pepper do not necessarily follow the same rule for converting. Use common sense when multiplying the amount of these.

Adapted with permission from VT FEED Guide To Tasting Local Foods In Schools www.vtfeed.org

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Seeking Recipe Input from Families

Engaging with families and caregivers is one of the best ways to identify culturally affirming foods for taste tests. Consider ways you can invite families to share their recipes and cooking methods for foods you plan to taste test.

The following are some suggestions for inquiring with students and families about their favorite recipes and cooking tips:

- Invite caregivers in to teach recipes and methods used at home during classroom hands-on lessons. Afterwards, work with caregivers to develop a schoolwide-size recipe for taste testing in the cafeteria.
- When working in the garden with community volunteers, inquire about preparations for the vegetables you're tending together.
- Be sure your Taste Test Committee has a representative selection of caregivers, and brainstorm recipes during meetings.
- Send home recipe requests with students for upcoming products.

RECIPE:



INGREDIENTS:

STEPS:

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Food Allergies

Most common food allergies in children*

- Cow milk
- Eggs
- Peanuts
- Soy
- Wheat
- Nuts from trees (such as walnuts, pistachios, pecans, cashews)
- Fish (such as tuna, salmon, cod)
- Shellfish (such as shrimp, lobster)

**According to the American Academy of Pediatrics*

- Check in with lunch monitors, the school nurse, and/or classroom teachers at the start of the year to identify any students with life-threatening food allergies.
- When choosing recipes, avoid inclusion of common allergens such as peanuts and tree nuts. Choose a dairy-free recipe, so it'll be accessible to more students.
- Practice safe food handling, and be sure not to cross-contaminate utensils and cutting boards during preparation.
- Have questions? Ask your cafeteria staff for any questions concerning student allergies and related school policies and procedures.



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Strategies to Source Food

The following are locations and strategies to source items for taste tests:

- Local grocery stores
- School cafeteria purchasing (working with cafeteria staff)
- School district purchasing
- Connecting with local farmers
- National Fresh Fruit and Veggie Program (FFVP)
- Food donations (grocers, wholesale, markets)
- Farmer's markets
- School or community gardens



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Connecting to the Cafeteria Menu

The more cafeteria staff are engaged in your efforts and are valued in the process, the more likely you will be to bridge the gap between your taste test and school meal menu items.

The following are some strategies to consider:

Seeking input

- Vet 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 item or recipe for which they would like to do a trial run via a schoolwide taste test.

Coordinating efforts

- Ask cafeteria staff if they are willing to promote the taste test with students or participate in some way.
- Pair something that's already on the cafeteria line with a new recipe using that product. If steamed carrots are typically served, try pairing it with carrot soup.

Taking small steps

- If your school has a salad bar, try putting a taste test item there, and track the popularity of the food with the help of nutrition services.

Sharing results

- Ensure that you will share the taste test results with cafeteria staff to inform their planning and follow-up.

For more guidance on collaborating with the Nutrition Services staff, see the handout Discussion Points for Meeting With Nutrition Services Manager, on p. 19.

Highlighting local produce

Whenever possible, incorporate a product that is available locally into your taste test. Even if you can't source the item locally 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. Consider the following:

- 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!

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Promoting Taste Tests in the School

Posters and flyers

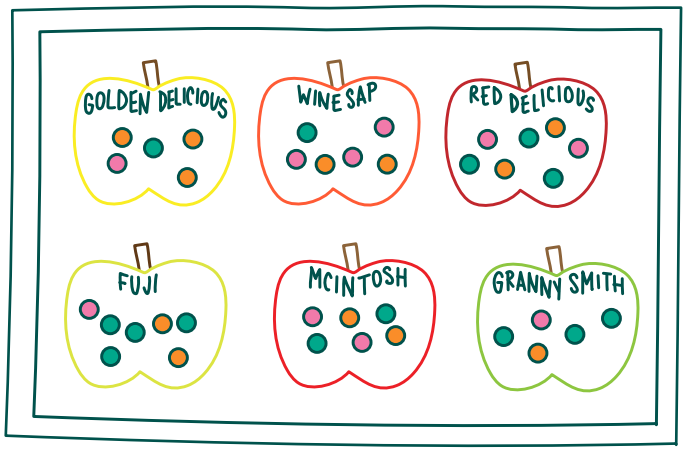
One way to drum up excitement for an upcoming taste test is by posting fun, colorful posters or flyers around school a week in advance. You can have students make them (a great way to creatively engage a class or student group you are currently working with), or you can create them yourself (see the Sample Templates section for ideas). Either way, be sure to include the following details on your posters/flyers:

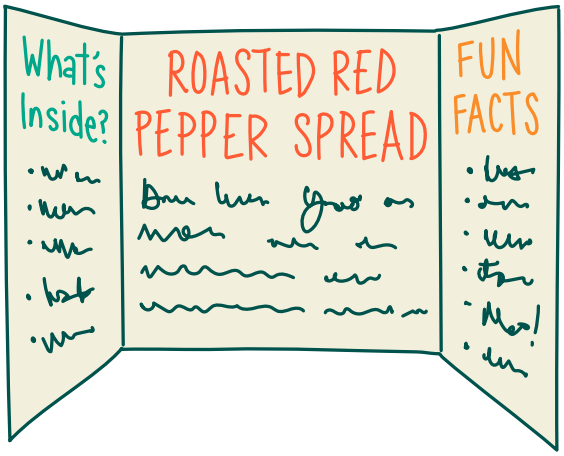
- Day, time, and location of the taste test
- Food product(s) you will be offering to all students (ideally an illustration or graphic and the name)
- Encouraging language (e.g., "Hope to see you there!" or "Join us!")

Place posters/flyers in high-traffic areas in the school where students will see them. Post them at student eye level, so everyone can see the taste test details.

Bulletin board

If you used a tally or sticker chart, you already have a display of the results to share with the school! Post this on a bulletin board in the cafeteria or other highly trafficked area. If you collected votes or feedback elsewhere, synthesize them into in a fun, visual display to share with students. You might recruit a class or group of students to help with this display—another reason Taste Test Student Ambassadors are a helpful resource!





Credit: Emily Chau, AtlantiCare Healthy Schools, Texas Avenue School (Atlantic City, NJ)

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Announcements

In this section are some examples of how to get the word out about your taste test. You'll want to make sure to let students and the school community know it's happening beforehand, through loudspeaker announcements on the day before and day of, mention in the school newsletter, a bulletin board flyer, or poster posted the week before. Then you'll want to use these same outlets to announce the results. Even if you aren't immediately able to make use of the results (i.e., serve the dish on the lunch line), this step demonstrates to students that they've been heard and that you care about their input.

Sample school community and family newsletter announcement

This week, on Try it! Tuesday, we will have a taste test of a potential new dish to be served at lunch. We encourage students and adults to try new things! So feel free to come on down to the cafeteria to try it yourself at lunchtime. Students will have a chance to provide feedback, and if enough love it, we'll add it to the lunch rotation.

Sample morning announcements for classic taste test

Day of

We're having a special taste test in the cafeteria today! Be sure to look for [name], and let us know what you think!

Results

Thank you for participating in yesterday's taste test of roasted red pepper spread!_____ out of the_____students who tried it said they loved it!

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Voting & Feedback Opportunities

Giving students the opportunity to provide feedback communicates to them that you care about their input and preferences.

There are two main purposes for voting, both of which raise student voice:

- To gather feedback and opinions (e.g., liked it/loved it/tried it)
- To gather preference between two items (e.g., vote for your favorite)

There are also many ways to vote and reasons to select one method over another:

- **To make voting simple and fun:** bean drop, thumb "thermometer," stickers, etc.
- **To gather, compare, or share information:** dot voting, voting ballots, digital voting, etc.



Even while doing simple tastings as part of a lesson in the classroom, it is a good idea to solicit feedback from students, or provide an opportunity to vote by having students hold up a thumbs up, down, or sideways to validate student preference.

Using the voting results

It is essential to use the results from the vote to build support around your taste-testing efforts and to engage the school community. This could look like sharing the results with the cafeteria staff, with parents in a community newsletter, or with students on a bulletin board in the hallway. The results from the student vote are ideally informing your planning for what to serve for future taste tests.

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Incentives for Providing Feedback

Ideally, we're building intrinsic motivation for students to try taste tests (i.e., students want to try new things because it feels good and is part of their value system). The Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) model, used in many US schools, believes that rewarding positive and desired behaviors with verbal praise and other incentives can help build intrinsic motivation. "I Tried It" stickers or a stamp on their hand can serve as an incentive, and high fives and verbal praise for trying and being adventurous can go a long way.

Getting to vote and state a preference can be the incentive in and of itself, especially when it's fun! Students will appreciate giving their input in novel ways such as in a homemade voting booth, the bean drop, or getting to use a stamp. Apart from trying something new, a student's favorite aspect of a taste test is often getting to vote, so don't underestimate the incentivizing value of seriously asking for their preferences.



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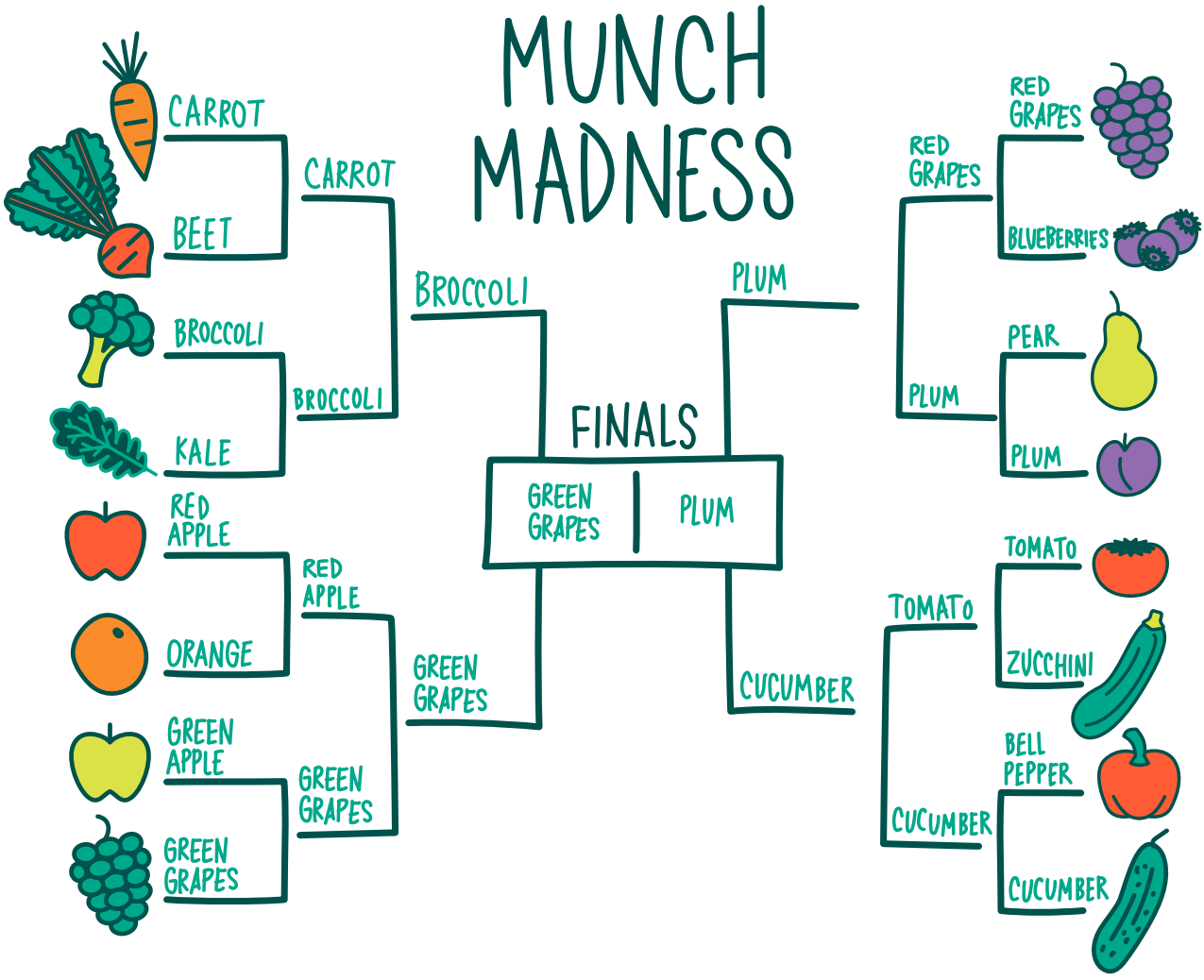
Incentives

- **Verbal praise**
- **Stamps and stickers**
- **Voting in novel ways (see Ways to Vote below)**
- **Guessing a mystery flavor**—Consider pumping up students before a taste test by telling them there will be a mystery or secret ingredient that they'll have to guess.
- **Blind tasting**—Again, an element of intrigue can entice students to participate. Perhaps you ask students to close their eyes while you hand them red grapes versus green, first asking them which they prefer and then having them guess which was which.
- **Stamp book**—Students get a stamp book and receive a stamp in their book for each taste test they participate in.
- **Change on the line**—Getting to see one of their favorite taste test products or dishes served at lunch is a powerful incentive to participate.
- **Munch Madness**—Throughout the school year, various products and dishes are pit against each other until there's the ultimate winner!



Credit: Erin Wenk, Crim Fitness Foundation, Eisenhower Elementary (Flint, MI)

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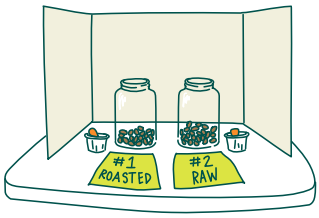
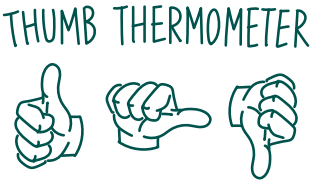
Ways to Vote

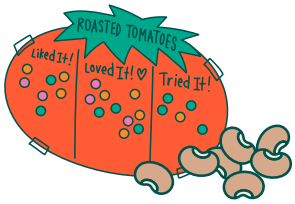
Ways for students to vote include the following: bean drop; a thumb "thermometer"; voting ballots; dot voting, stamping, or tally chart; voting stickers and buckets (in which students drop the backing of their stickers to vote); and digital voting on a tablet using a Google Form.



Bean drop



A thumb "thermometer"



Dot voting, stamping, or tally chart



Voting ballots



The great sticker debate!

Dot voting and "tally charts" are popular methods for taste test voting. Using stickers promotes student responsibility in the voting process. "Tried it" stickers can also be offered as a reward to students. That said, sometimes school staff have concerns about giving students stickers.

Sticker pros

- Engaging for all students
- Easy voting method for younger students
- Quick visual results
- Promotes voting autonomy and independence

Sticker cons

- Concerns from staff about stickers ending up in the wrong place
- Possible cleanup for misplaced stickers
- Increased student management necessary to prevent rogue stickers!

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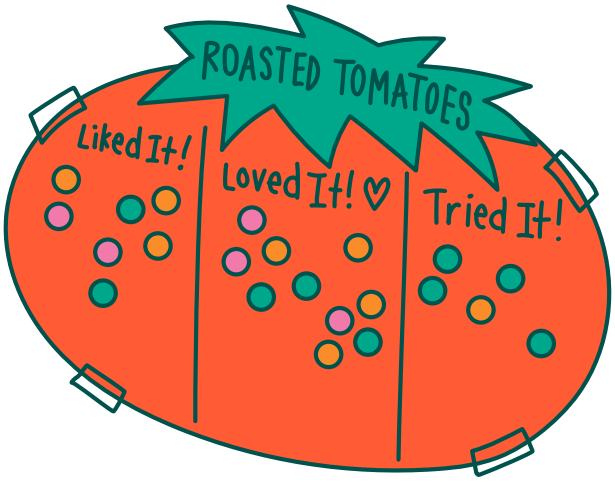
Dot Voting & Tally Charts





Credit: Emily Chau, AtlantiCare Healthy Schools, Texas Avenue School (Atlantic City, NJ)

Materials

- Poster board or chart paper
- Tasting table or cart
- Dot stickers, colorful markers, or rubber stamp and stamp pads
- Painter's tape (for affixing poster to wall)

Setup

- Create columns on your chart paper. If you're testing multiple dishes, write the name of each dish as the column header. If you're sampling one dish, you can use Liked it, Loved it, Tried it, or thumbs up or down.
- Display sample(s) on the table (if you're testing multiple dishes, you'll need students to clearly differentiate between the items).

Process

1. Give a sticker to each student who tries the tasting.
2. Instruct students to place their sticker, draw a star, or stamp under one column to show their vote.

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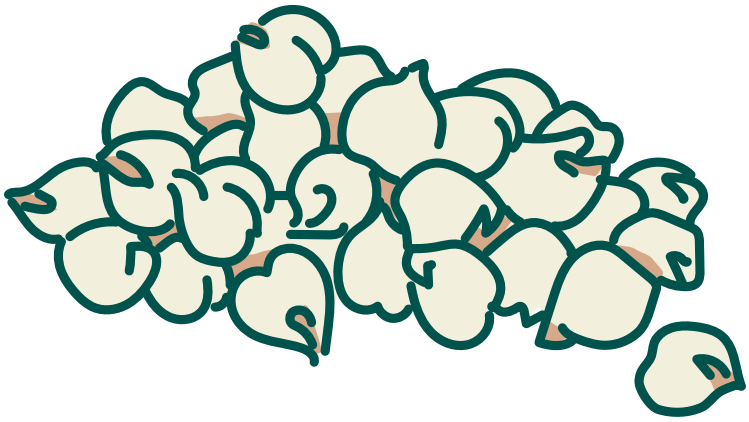
Bean Drop Voting



Materials

- Tasting table or cart
- Large bean seeds (such as fava beans) or other small voting object
- Large mason jars or other clear container
- Construction paper
- Painter's tape or sticky labels (to label jars)
- Permanent marker

Setup

- Write the name of each tasting in big bold letters on its own piece of construction paper that can serve as a place mat for each tasting.
- Create a label for each jar with the name of the tasting.
- Set up the table, placing each tasting on top of the labeled paper directly in front of a corresponding jar.
- Optional: Create opaque sleeves for each jar out of construction paper to hide the contents if you're concerned students will be influenced by seeing what others have voted for.

Process

1. Hand a bean (or other voting object) to each student once they're at the table.
2. Instruct students to put a bean in the jar of their favorite tasting.
3. Once all students have voted, count the beans!

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Voting Ballots

TASTE TEST Product: _____ Date: _____ Grade: _____ (circle one) Loved It! Liked It! Tried It! 	TASTE TEST Product: _____ Date: _____ Grade: _____ (circle one) Loved It! Liked It! Tried It! 	TASTE TEST Product: _____ Date: _____ Grade: _____ (circle one) Loved It! Liked It! Tried It! 
TASTE TEST Product: _____ Date: _____ Grade: _____ (circle one) Loved It! Liked It! Tried It! 	TASTE TEST Product: _____ Date: _____ Grade: _____ (circle one) Loved It! Liked It! Tried It! 	TASTE TEST Product: _____ Date: _____ Grade: _____ (circle one) Loved It! Liked It! Tried It! 

Paper

You can hand out paper slips as ballots for each student, and have them submit them to a voting box on their way out of the cafeteria, for example.

Digital

If you teach at a "1-to-1 school" (i.e., a school where all students are provided with their own technology) or have access to technology, you might consider setting up a Google survey on a tablet to get feedback from students.

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Collecting Input and Sharing Results: How to Raise Student Voice

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. This is a key opportunity to highlight that students are sharing their opinions and have a voice about their food preferences! This is also the moment for you to reflect on the results, share the results schoolwide, and consider how you might make adaptations to future taste tests.

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 nourishing food items. This small step will have large results over time.

Use taste test results to inform...

- what is being planted in the school garden
- what is being served in the cafeteria
- upcoming taste-test recipes
- the Harvest-of-the-Month program
- what is served in the salad bar



Taste test results are shared schoolwide to...

- get students excited about the idea of trying new foods
- inform school-food vendors about student preferences
- inform the district nutrition office about local food, recipes, and student enthusiasm
- promote traditional foods among staff and students

Also consider opportunities to gain feedback from students about the taste test, beyond the votes on the food. Consider asking for feedback via a schoolwide suggestion box or digital survey that teachers and students can complete. Invite casual discussions with students when in the cafeteria or hallways after a tasting when the experience is fresh. When asked, students have countless brilliant ideas of what they'd like to try. For example, during a discussion after a taste test, one student said, "Can we try cabbage? I haven't had it. My mom doesn't like it so she just doesn't buy it." And another chimed in, "I've never tried eggplant!"

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Recommended Resources

Recipes, local food, and procurement resources





- FoodCorps Recipe Book
- USDA Standardized Recipes
- USDA Recipes for Schools: Institute of Child Nutrition
- New School Cuisine Cookbook, Vermont Farm to School Network
- Garden Gastronomy, a bilingual cookbook by City Blossoms
- "The Lunch Box," recipes from the Chef Ann Foundation
- Guide to Taste Testing Local Foods In Schools, Vermont FEED
- The USDA Community Food Systems' website, "Procuring Local Foods":
  This 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.

Materials Checklist

For cooking

- ☐ Sharp knife
- ☐ Peeler
- ☐ Grater
- ☐ Tongs
- ☐ Cutting boards
- ☐ Large colander
- ☐ Salad spinner
- ☐ Multiple large mixing bowls
- ☐ Induction burner
- ☐ Extension cord

For serving

- ☐ Serving trays
- ☐ Serving spoon
- ☐ Tasting cups or boats
- ☐ Forks or spoons, if needed
- ☐ Gloves
- ☐ Hair ties and hairnets
- ☐ Compost bucket

For signage & tabling

- ☐ Tasting table
- ☐ Prep table
- ☐ Signs
- ☐ Tape
- ☐ Markers

For cleanup

- ☐ Cleaning spray
- ☐ Rags
- ☐ Dish soap
- ☐ Sponge
- ☐ Bus tubs

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Sample Taste Test Voting Sheets

TASTE TEST Product: _____ Date: _____ Grade: _____ (circle one) Loved It! Liked It! Tried It! 	**TASTE TEST** Product: _____ Date: _____ Grade: _____ (circle one) Loved It! Liked It! Tried It! 	**TASTE TEST** Product: _____ Date: _____ Grade: _____ (circle one) Loved It! Liked It! Tried It! 
TASTE TEST Product: _____ Date: _____ Grade: _____ (circle one) Loved It! Liked It! Tried It! 	**TASTE TEST** Product: _____ Date: _____ Grade: _____ (circle one) Loved It! Liked It! Tried It! 	**TASTE TEST** Product: _____ Date: _____ Grade: _____ (circle one) Loved It! Liked It! Tried It! 

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Sample Taste Test Voting Sheets

TASTY CHALLENGE! Circle your favorite: #1 _____ VS. #2 _____ Comments: _____ _____ _____	TASTY CHALLENGE! Circle your favorite: #1 _____ VS. #2 _____ Comments: _____ _____ _____	TASTY CHALLENGE! Circle your favorite: #1 _____ VS. #2 _____ Comments: _____ _____ _____
TASTY CHALLENGE! Circle your favorite: #1 _____ VS. #2 _____ Comments: _____ _____ _____	TASTY CHALLENGE! Circle your favorite: #1 _____ VS. #2 _____ Comments: _____ _____ _____	TASTY CHALLENGE! Circle your favorite: #1 _____ VS. #2 _____ Comments: _____ _____ _____

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Sample Taste Test Voting Sheets

TASTE TEST Product: _____ Date: _____ Grade: _____ (circle one) Loved It! Liked It! Tried It! 	**TASTE TEST** Product: _____ Date: _____ Grade: _____ (circle one) Loved It! Liked It! Tried It! 	**TASTE TEST** Product: _____ Date: _____ Grade: _____ (circle one) Loved It! Liked It! Tried It! 
TASTE TEST Product: _____ Date: _____ Grade: _____ (circle one) Loved It! Liked It! Tried It! 	**TASTE TEST** Product: _____ Date: _____ Grade: _____ (circle one) Loved It! Liked It! Tried It! 	**TASTE TEST** Product: _____ Date: _____ Grade: _____ (circle one) Loved It! Liked It! Tried It! 

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Sample Taste Test Handout

The following section includes handouts designed for the following eight products: carrots, corn, broccoli, potatoes, sweet potatoes, kale, apples, and sweet peppers. These products were chosen to represent fruits and vegetables available in multiple regions, in various seasons, that could be grown in a school garden or are fairly affordable if purchased from local farmers. School food staff provided input to confirm that these products are also commonly served as a part of school lunch, increasing the likelihood that taste test results can be informed by and linked to the cafeteria menu.

Cafeteria and home handouts

These handouts are meant to be a bridge from the work you're doing to the cafeteria staff and students' home environments.

Share the Cafeteria handout with your cafeteria manager when you're discussing a taste test schedule and deciding what to prepare.

Share the Home handout with families by making photocopies to include on your tasting table, to put in students' home folders, to pass out at a back-to-school night or a PTO/PTA meeting, or other places where caregivers can access the information.

We referenced and adapted recipes from the following organizations' websites (which are acknowledged within the recipe):

- The Lunch Box (thelunchbox.org)
- New School Cuisine (vermontfarmtoschool.org/resources)
- The New York Times Cooking section (nytimes.com/recipe)
- Serious Eats (seriouseats.com)

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CARROTS

CAFETERIA

Overview

Carrots are crunchy root vegetables that are grown as annual plants but are actually biennials (the plant goes to seed and dies in its second year). There are over 100 varieties, ranging in shape and color.

Benefits

Carrots are rich in vitamin A, biotin, vitamin K, and potassium; they have beta carotene, which is the orange or red plant pigment that gives them their color. Our bodies take beta carotene and turn it into vitamin A, an important vitamin for our eyesight!

Selection

Carrots should be firm. Choose carrots depending on what you'll do with them. Large carrots are great for shredding, whereas smaller carrots with their tops intact may be perfect for roasting whole.

Varieties



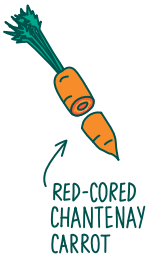
Nantes: Cylindrical varieties rounded at the bottom, including Napa and White Satin



Danvers: Classic tapered varieties, including Yellowstone



Ball or mini: True baby carrots; these are round, including the variety Thumbelina!



Chantenay: Short and broad varieties, including Red-Cored Chanteney

Imperator: Most commonly commercially produced; higher sugar content than other types

Storage tips

Twist off green tops and refrigerate in an airtight plastic bag. Don't store carrots near fruits and vegetables that emit ethylene gas, such as potatoes, pears, and apples, because this will age carrots more quickly.

Cooking tips

- Save time by scrubbing carrots' outer skin under cold water rather than peeling them.
- Save carrot tops to make a pesto.
- Pickle carrots with water and vinegar in a 1:2 ratio (e.g., ½ cup water to 1 cup vinegar; a couple tablespoons sugar; and whatever spices you like, such as mustard seed).

Kid-friendly eating tips

- Add shredded carrots to a green salad or slaw for extra color and crunch!
- Add shredded carrots to muffins or quick breads.
- Raw sliced carrots make a quick and easy snack with ranch dip, peanut butter, or tahini and honey.

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CARROTS

CAFETERIA
Sample Recipes

Roasted Carrots (50 servings, 3 carrot pieces)

Ingredients

3 pounds carrots
(about 5 cups cut)

¼ cup olive oil,
more as needed

1 teaspoon salt,
more to taste

¼ teaspoon pepper,
more to taste

Instructions

1. Preheat oven to 450°.
2. Cut carrots lengthwise into halves or quarters, depending on size, and cut into 2-inch segments. If carrots are very small, roast them whole. Toss carrots on rimmed baking sheet with olive oil, salt, and pepper, and roast at 450° until tender and golden brown, 25 to 35 minutes, flipping halfway through.

Variations:

Get creative and add spices when tossing carrots with olive oil, such as cumin, paprika, mild chili powder, or a curry blend.



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CARROTS

HOME

Overview

Carrots are crunchy root vegetables that are grown as annual plants but are actually biennials (the plant goes to seed and dies in its second year). There are over 100 varieties, ranging in shape and color.

Benefits

Carrots are rich in vitamin A, biotin, vitamin K, and potassium; they have beta carotene, which is the orange or red plant pigment that gives them their color. Our bodies take beta carotene and turn it into vitamin A, an important vitamin for our eyesight!

Kid-friendly eating tips

- Add shredded carrots to a green salad or slaw for extra color and crunch!
- Add shredded carrots to muffins or quick breads.
- Raw sliced carrots make a quick and easy snack with ranch dip, peanut butter, or tahini and honey!

Storage tips

Twist off green tops and refrigerate in an airtight plastic bag. Don't store carrots near fruits and vegetables that emit ethylene gas, such as potatoes, pears, and apples because this will age carrots more quickly.

Cooking tips

- Save time by scrubbing carrots' outer skin under cold water rather than peeling them.
- Save carrot tops to make a pesto.
- Pickle carrots with water and vinegar in a 1:2 ratio (for example, ½ cup water to 1 cup vinegar, a couple tablespoons sugar, and whatever spices you like, such as mustard seed).



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CARROTS

Home
Recipe for Home

Puréed Carrot and Ginger Soup (Serves 4–6)

Ingredients

1 tablespoon unsalted butter or olive oil

1 onion, peeled and coarsely chopped

1–2 garlic cloves, minced

1-inch piece fresh ginger, peeled and finely minced

1 ½ pounds carrots, cut into ½ inch thick rounds

3–4 cups water or low-sodium vegetable stock (or combination of both), more as needed

¾ teaspoon salt, more to taste

¼ teaspoon pepper, more to taste

Instructions

1. Melt butter in a stockpot over medium heat. Cook onion, garlic, and ginger, stirring until translucent; about 4–6 minutes.
2. Add carrots along with just enough water or stock to cover the vegetables, reserving the rest. Season with salt and pepper, and bring to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer until carrots are tender, about 20 minutes.
3. Purée the soup in a blender, food processor, or food mill, working in batches to not overfill machine.
4. Return to the pot set over low heat, and add enough reserved liquid to thin the soup to your desired consistency. Taste and adjust seasoning.

Variations:

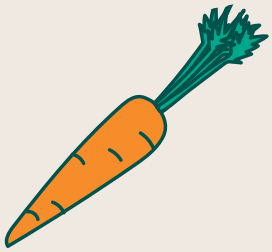
Substitute part of the liquid content with coconut milk, and add spices such as cumin, curry powder, or chili flakes. Garnish with chopped herbs, such as cilantro, or nuts, such as chopped peanuts.

Sharing home recipes

How do you prepare or eat carrots at home?

What are some family recipes that include carrots?

Are there recipes you can share with your FoodCorps member for future taste tests?



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