

+ Montana Farm to School Successes



Cooking up farm to school in Missoula, the Garden City

By: Emilee Inouye, Montana Dietetic Intern

With over 6,000 breakfast and lunch meals served daily, the Missoula County Public School (MCPS) Central Kitchen is a busy place, and daily meal preparation is hectic. So, when Ed Christensen, Assistant Supervisor of MCPS Food and Nutrition Services, and his staff began to introduce local foods into their school menus, they had a big job to tackle. Working with leaders of the local foods movement at the University of Montana, they began to look at what would work for them. While there are many great ideas and local products, they had to consider what was realistic. "Not everything makes sense," Ed explains. "We'll do things local if they make sense and it's fiscally responsible."



Well, it seems that many local foods have "made sense" at MCPS. The program began with apples from the Bitterroot Valley. Local apples are a good fit for the school district because they are grown locally by a number of local orchards, are the right size for school children, are good quality and similar in price to what they were already buying.

The products used by MCPS have expanded in the last couple years from local apples to squash, pinto beans, flour, honey, broccoli, and much more.

The local purchasing program has been successful, but it has not come without difficulties. Ed recounts that timeliness of delivery, need for value-added products and a lack of distributors have created challenges to the local food market and the district's ability to purchase locally. At one point, they tried to incorporate local carrots, but they needed to be processed. Large distributors offer precut and ready-to-use carrots. But with the local produce, the challenges of volume, timing and convenience were large enough to make it unfeasible. Before determining that the carrots would not work within their kitchen, you would have found Ed giving it his all, slicing hundreds of carrots in hopes that they could make it work.

But, the challenges have not slowed them down. Aside from local food purchasing, Ed Christensen has another project up his sleeve. Six raised garden beds have been built at the central kitchen site, and MCPS is now expanding farm to school to

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More information available at www.opi.mt.gov/Farm2School
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"school farm." Last year they planted the beds with onions, reaping a harvest of over 300 pounds that were diced, stored and used in recipes throughout the school year. The onions were also used in a salsa day during which elementary students helped prepare the salsa for the whole school.

This year, they are trying something different. As a "kale ambassador," Ed Christensen has led the way in developing a foolproof recipe for kale chips that have been a huge hit in the school district. With a recipe that the kids love, bunches of kale plants have taken up a new residence in the six school garden plots.

With kale rapidly gaining popularity, the central kitchen has pursued another creative way to use this nutritious leafy green vegetable. One full quart of kale can crunch down to just ½ cup of crumbles, and Ed has taken advantage of this as a great opportunity to fortify other menu items with "kale crumbles." "When you put that into sauces," says Ed, "you are adding a tremendous amount of nutrients." One of Ed's goals this year is to meet the school district demand of kale by growing it themselves. With over 300 pounds harvested so far, it just may happen.

To see a video tutorial of Ed's famous and foolproof kale chip recipe, visit:

<http://youtu.be/13ZmhyQJiU0>.

For more information about farm to school efforts in the kitchen at MCPS, contact Edward Christensen at ejchristensen@mcps.k12.mt.us or 406-728-2400, ext. 5012.



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