

Making St. Paul schools a destination for dining

Looking for something low-cost and low-fat with an international flavor? That's what the food service kitchens try to cook up daily.

By [James Walsh](#), Star Tribune

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It was a Tuesday morning, and a team of experienced culinary professionals sat around a table, digging into a buffet of whole-grain salads during a taste test. The top choice may make its way onto one of the state's most renowned menus, after extensive market testing and focus group feedback, of course.

OK, they were really just trying to guess which one second-graders will eat.

At the St. Paul schools' food service kitchens, coming up with tasty, healthy and popular school lunch and breakfast choices is a continually evolving process.

And Jean Ronnei, executive director of the St. Paul public schools Nutrition Services, is among the best at managing the challenge. The reigning Golden School Foodservice Director of the Year, a designation awarded by the national School Nutrition Association, has put Hmong beef fried rice, Somali chicken suqqar and Mexican rice and beans into the regular hot lunch menu for the St. Paul schools. This year, she added good old-fashioned Tater Tot hot dish.

But if you think serving 45,000 meals to schoolchildren every day is child's play, well, you don't know Ronnei. She's enlisted ethnic recipes from Hmong, Somali and Hispanic families, tapped into the creativity of Seth Bixby Daugherty, former executive chef at Cosmos, and started a secret diner program -- all to give kids flavor and low fat for less than \$2 a meal.

"Children love to experience foods," said Ronnei, who joined the St. Paul schools in 1989. "I just think it's a wonderful part of life."

Ronnei takes a CEO's approach to her \$21 million, self-supporting department. She got her start in restaurant and hotel management and once directed food service at Hennepin County Medical Center. To better balance her budget, her creative folks find ways to incorporate "freebies" from the U.S. Department of Agriculture into lunches and breakfasts to cut costs. A truckload of frozen apples and cherries has spawned an apple-cherry bread, with a streusel topping -- thanks to Caron Atkinson, who is in charge of baked goods.

Weekly "Healthy Hits" meetings allow her and her staff to check the progress of new menu items, scout out low-cost, low-fat and low-sodium options, and come up with new ways to get kids involved in nutrition.

This spring, the class of 2008 at each high school will vote on its favorite school lunch -- and then be rewarded with it on a special day. Another promotion will have school kids plant herbs and later harvest them to use at lunch, said project manager Dianne Wortz.

Over the past few years, pizza crusts and breads have gone whole wheat. Jicama sticks, fresh bell peppers and hummus are adding healthy crunch and flavor to lunch. And new rice bowls and noodle dishes are proving hugely popular. Winter melon soup and Cuban black bean soup could appear in a school lunchroom soon.

Ronnei said that as St. Paul becomes more diverse as a district -- its 41,000 students speak more than 70 languages and dialects -- introducing new fare has gotten easier. A diversity of kids has a diversity of palettes.

Finding a new choice

On this day, Ronnei's crew was trying new whole grain salads that members of her staff prepared at home.

A toasted wheatberry salad? A bit too nutty. Israeli kibbutz barley salad? Tasty, light. Tabbouleh? Always a safe choice. A fresh corn and barley salad with cilantro and tomato. Mmmmm.

"Our ultimate goal is to have a salad the kids really, really like and we could put out on the choice bar -- not every day, but to give the kids a choice," Ronnei said.

That doesn't mean unhealthy choice. Baloney is out as a lunch meat. And Ronnei wouldn't think of putting fast food franchises into cafeterias, as some districts have done. What it means is being creative, she said, being responsible and listening to your customers. Even if many of your customers still prefer PB and J.

"We need to present choices to children and young adults," she said. "But they need to be good choices."

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