

FOOD & DINING

'Think outside of the box': How Native American foods could land in Arizona school lunches

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The Three Sisters — corn, beans and squash — have sustained life in Indigenous communities for centuries. Now a federal grant could help introduce some local varieties to school lunch menus across Arizona.

In fall 2020, the U.S. Department of Agriculture awarded Arizona and 13 other states, plus Guam, grants adding up to more than \$4.1 million to incorporate local agricultural products in school meals.

For Arizona, the goal is to develop four standardized recipes featuring traditional Native American foods, including blue corn, tepary beans, Hopi winter squash and white Sonoran wheat.

The Arizona Department of Education already has more than a dozen recipes in development, adapted from student and parent submissions. In the tentative timeline, K-12 students will taste test the recipes in August when they return to school, said the Department of Education's Jessa Zuck, the project's director.

Select schools will then serve the four recipes in November to coincide with Native American Heritage Month, Zuck continued. After some final tweaks, the department will then release the recipes as options for all schools in Arizona starting in January 2022.

"What really intrigued me is the participation, engaging the school community," said Lindsay Aguilar, director of food services for Tucson Unified School District.

"I think that's really important, when looking at introducing foods that aren't traditionally on a school menu," she said. "Letting parents and students participate, with recipes that could be potentially selected, was very exciting."

How Native family recipes could be adapted for the cafeteria

During the first phase of recipe development, the Department of Education asked eight participating schools and districts to solicit recipes from students and their families:

Holbrook Unified School District
Osborn School District
Painted Desert Demonstration Projects, Inc. (Star School)
Salt River Schools
San Carlos Unified School District
Tempe Elementary School District
Tuba City Boarding School
Tucson Unified School District

Aguilar sees this program as a way for Tucson to celebrate the diversity of its community. Tucson Unified School District has students from the Pascua Yaqui Tribe and other tribes, she said.

The district called for recipes through its newsletter, social media and parent notification emails, she said. The recipes the district received include tepary bean tostadas, blue corn tortilla tacos, squash cheesecake and sandwiches using white Sonoran wheat bread.

Amanda Conti, the representative for San Carlos Unified School District, said her team was conscious that not everyone has quick internet access on the San Carlos Apache Reservation, about 100 miles east of Phoenix.

Her team offered both digital and paper forms, and received more paper recipe submissions back, she said. The school district also worked with the local radio station to make announcements about the recipe project, she said.

Some of the submissions the district received include sauteed dandelion greens, tepary bean hummus and acorn stew.

"I think the biggest piece for me, it was important to bring the community voice to the table," Conti said. "Allowing the community to say, 'Hey, these are our kids and we would like to see traditional foods they can relate to, and keep their culture alive, especially for younger generations.'"

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Schools are working with two award-winning restaurant chefs, Charleen Badman and Tamara Stanger, to adapt the submissions for cafeteria production. Badman is the co-owner of FnB Restaurant in Scottsdale. Stanger, formerly of Cotton & Copper in Tempe, now helms the kitchen at The Lakehouse at Deer Creek and has been flying back to Arizona for recipe development sessions.

Badman and Stanger sourced the grant-related ingredients locally. The blue corn and tepary beans came from Ramona Farms, a family-run operation on the Gila River Indian Reservation south of Phoenix.

Stanger said the feedback and participation from Indigenous communities has been a crucial part of the process.

"It's hard to earn the respect of people who have been taken advantage of," Stanger said. "I think that's a huge fear, that we're taking it and not telling the story. It's really important to do things with guidance."

Why revamping school lunch menus is harder than it might seem

Running a school lunch program is much harder than running a restaurant, Badman said. It's been a humbling experience for her.

In 2016, Badman started leading the Blue Watermelon Project, a group that advocates for school food reform. When it comes to improving school meals, it was easy at first — and sometimes embarrassing — for outsiders like her to come in knives blazing thinking they were going to change the world with their ideas, she said.

Understanding the challenges of executing those ideas, however, has made her more open-minded and appreciative of the workers keeping children fed every school day.

Procuring products has been the hardest hurdle so far, said W. Ray McLaws, director of food services at Holbrook Unified School District, located in Navajo County.

The district can only purchase food from state-approved distributors. Many of his students have grown up with family farms and he also tends to his own garden, but none of the food they grow can be used for school meals, he said.

Other factors that come into play include a limited budget, compliance with USDA nutrition guidelines, preparation time, labor intensity and availability of kitchen equipment.

For the Three Sisters enchiladas, for example, Badman would normally roast the squash and smash it by hand. Instead of asking workers to smash squash and hand roll enchiladas for hundreds of people, the school version would use a mixer and cook the meal more like a casserole.

"I would say the hardest thing is making it taste good," Stanger said. "Charleen had this recipe, but had to take out the salt and butter. I think she might have shed a tear."

Then there's keeping the price point per meal low. One pound of pinto beans might cost 99 cents, compared to \$6-\$7 for tepary beans.

Badman described a chicken and tepary bean bowl recipe submitted by Salt River Schools. In this case, swapping out the chicken for cheese can cut down on total cost.

Despite the challenges, Aguilar believes it's their duty to help students "mature their palette beyond pizza and chicken nuggets."

"It's kind of like a big puzzle and you have to actually work at it to make it fit," Aguilar said. "You think outside of the box, and then put it in our compliance box and student palette box and budget box, and all these different angles have to perfectly sync for it to be successful."

'You have to take your ego out of it'

Ultimately, one of the most crucial parts of that puzzle is making sure the students, with preferences varying from kindergarten to high school, will like the food.

It doesn't matter if you come up with a beautiful hummus recipe — if the kids don't eat it, they're not getting that nutrition in the end, Badman said.

"Kids are honest," Badman said. "You don't have to wait for a s---- Yelp review. They will tell you straight to your face. I've seen kids spit food right out ... You have to take your ego out of it and think, 'Are they going to eat this?' Because this might be the only meal they get."

Badman and Stanger said the feedback has been helpful: A wheat berry pilaf might be a hit with the teenagers, but school workers know the younger children won't eat it because they tend to want their food separated, not mixed.

Even the smallest adjustments can make a difference, such as cutting up fruit instead of serving them whole, making fruit easier to eat for children losing their baby teeth.

The summer school students at Longview Elementary School's food and nutrition class are quick to blurt out their likes and dislikes on a recent afternoon. Located at 12th Street and Indian School Road in Phoenix, Longview is part of Osborn School District.

Grilled cheese sandwiches and chicken nuggets are among the favorites of the impromptu popular vote. "Squishy" and "gross" eggplant is a definite loser for these critics.

"I eat a little and leave it," said 11-year-old Alam Lizama about cafeteria foods he doesn't like.

"I don't like PB&J," added 10-year-old Yovan Martinez later, with strong conviction. "I just grab it, but I don't eat it. I'll just eat the fruit cup. And I love carrots, dipped in ranch."

If he's still hungry, he'll just drink the ketchup, he said. He does like that the school serves tamales, which reminds him of the chicken tamales his grandmother makes at home.

The students who spoke with The Arizona Republic said they were at least open to trying new foods, even if they had never eaten them before. They've already taste tested foods grown in the school garden.

"I'm always curious," said 10-year-old Caleb Stuart. "You can always discover new foods and see if you like it, so it's your new favorite. Or sometimes you don't like it."

Eleven-year-old Arlene Perez said she didn't know a lot about Native American foods, but wanted to learn.

"I'm pretty excited to try something new," she said.

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