

Farm Fresh Food in the Cafeteria

There isn't much of an argument about the pluses of eating fresh produce and meats and poultry. Local institutional cafeterias whether they are part of our schools, hospitals or large living centers, usually depend more on packaged and canned products due to convenience, regulations and cost. All over the country, and certainly in Ontario County, there is a change in the wind.

Why is this Farm to Cafeteria movement catching fire? Part of the reason is the potential health benefit. Eating more quantities of fresh produce can help in the fight against obesity and related diseases. A generation that has grown up on pre-packaged convenience foods without much knowledge of where their food originates or its nutritional value comes face to fork with healthy food that they might not otherwise try or think that they could afford.

There are huge benefits of buying local that impact all of us who live in Ontario County. For the local farmers, they have improved market access to local vendors. There is less cost for shipping. And new relationships are springing up between farmers and the food service staff of local schools and hospitals.

There are lively pockets of activity throughout Ontario County where partnerships between local farmers and food service staff have resulted in fresh produce on the cafeteria line! For the past two years, St. Mary's School has offered one local lunch each month with products from fifteen local farms. The students not only savor this nutritious, delicious lunch but each class takes a turn determining the menu and preparing the lunches themselves. Local vegetable producer Laura Pedersen delivers asparagus from her Ontario County farm to the Geneva School kitchen throughout the spring season. Chris Luley from the Happy Goat Farm provides fresh spinach to the Bloomfield schools. Todd Fowler, who heads food service for the Bloomfield schools, remarks on the freshness of the produce and its longer shelf life, making it a wise purchase. Jo-Ellen Martino, head of food service for the Geneva Schools, comments that one of the benefits of serving fresh produce is that it gives students the chance to see and taste foods that they might not be getting at home.

What's the response from the kids in the school cafeteria? Todd Fowler initiated a Farmers Market Line at the Bloomfield high school. With some creative work to keep food chilled and attractive, he has found that the students gravitate towards the variety, color and textures of the fresh foods. In June 2006 he put this same line in the elementary school and almost immediately he had positive emails and phone calls from parents, as well as from the students themselves. Nobody labeled these new choices as healthy or nutritious, they were simply appealing and exciting to students who voted their approval by selecting their lunches from this lunch line of fresh produce! In fact, at Bloomfield, one kindergartener said, "I'd like the romaine lettuce please".

A recent pilot project headed by Seeking Common Ground, in collaboration with Cornell Cooperative Extension of Ontario County, revealed the commitment and creativity of

food service directors in the area in getting farm fresh produce and goods into their cafeterias. As with any new program, they start simply by featuring one locally grown item per month that is in season. They include some local produce on their salad bar or create new cafeteria lines or even theme days like fall harvest celebrations. As this movement grows, they start to modify routine recipes to take advantage of local foods and even showcasing local foods at special events.

Patricia Pavelsky
Cornell Cooperative Extension of Ontario County
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