

Farm-to-table food comes to SLO school lunches. How it helps kids — and local growers

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Remember the days of greasy sloppy joes and oily, salty pizzas from the old school cafeteria experience of yesteryear?

It would likely be unrecognizable to today's students — especially in San Luis Obispo County.

Welcome to the new era of healthy, locally farmed food options at San Luis Coastal school district, which includes campuses in San Luis Obispo, Morro Bay and Los Osos, where about 2,500 lunch meals per day are served across 15 campuses.

Since 2017, the district has partnered with a program called [FarmSLO, a networking group for local, small commercial farmers](#) who provide a wide selection of healthy, locally farmed foods to district students such as watermelons, peppers, local grains, tomatoes and grass-fed beef.

Recent meals at Laguna Middle School, home of the district's central kitchen, have included chocolate-flavored hummus, nitrate-free hot dogs and nachos with whole-grain chips, in addition to an assortment of greens at the salad bar.

The district's partnership has included expenditures of more than \$100,000 on regionally farmed or produced products among farmers, said Erin Primer, San Luis Coastal's director of food service.

A similar program involving FarmSLO is planned at the Lucia Mar school district, according to program officials.

The students also get to meet SLO County farmers as part of the program, and learn how their food was made.

Lessons on food production and cooking have been worked into education, such as measuring out ingredients for a daily average of 200 students eating lunch at Laguna Middle School.

Students taste-test new and different types of foods such as the popular chocolate-flavored hummus, which has the appearance of pudding and mostly consists of garbanzo beans, Primer said.

“Once our students know where they come from and how it’s made — and take a role in tasting it and giving feedback — they become so much more invested not only in locally made foods, but healthy ones,” Primer said. “Students will even go to Farmers Market and say, ‘Hey, that’s what I eat at school,’ and want to support those farmers.”

STUDENT MEALS ARE CHEAP, HEALTHY AND FOCUS ON LOCAL

On a recent Wednesday, flocks of students excitedly lined up for 12:30 p.m. lunch in the Laguna Middle School cafeteria to order meals such as pulled pork whole-grain sandwiches with sweet potato fries and slaw, pasta and Asian noodle salads in cups.

Treats such as cookies with reduced sugar content and baked chips with reduced salt are less fattening than what most grocery store products offer, Primer said.

Lunches in the district are no more than \$3.25 at any school, including San Luis Obispo and Morro Bay high schools, and [meals are free and reduced](#) for about 30 percent of students who qualify based on family income, Primer said.

Brandon Sanders of [Templeton-based RobinSong Farms](#), which grows on 4 acres, said the program has worked well for his business because it sells a high volume of products, including his watermelons.

Sanders said the district has been a reliable and supportive buyer, enabling him to sell products in high volume or with seasonal production that checks out financially.

“I look out for Erin, and she looks out for me,” Sanders said. “We both want each other to succeed. We just coordinate the products, times and amounts to make it all work.”

HOW THE FARMSLO PROGRAM STARTED AT SAN LUIS COASTAL

The partnership started a couple of years ago when Primer met Jeff Wade, co-founder and executive director of [Slow Money SLO](#), a nonprofit organization that connects local farmers with investors willing to provide financial support.

Slow Money SLO runs the FarmSLO program, offering networking and education opportunities, including the schools program.

Farms participating with the schools include: Achievement House (hydroponic lettuces); Cal Poly Corp. (citrus); Green Gold Organic Farm (peppers); Kandarian Organic Farm

(local grains/legumes); RobinSong Farms (watermelons); Red Barn Farm at City Farm (tomatoes); and Larder Meat Co (local grass-fed beef).

“The key was Erin to help introduce more healthy food into the schools,” Wade said. “The work we have done has increased consumption of local foods in the schools incrementally. The primary goal was quality fresh and local food that keeps kids healthier, but it’s more interesting to consume.”

Primer said the result also has been students loving the tastes of the new food and the cooking experience. Experimentation with different kinds of food also has been delight for head chef Sara Slusser.

“This is not just about feeding kids and nourishing them, but how to make them better, more knowledgeable food consumers for the future,” Primer said.

Read more here:

<https://www.sanluisobispo.com/news/local/education/article235897257.html#storylink=cpy>