Taste Testing Toolkit



Try New Foods. Gather Feedback. Build Excitement.

Before adding new items to your menu, take time to taste test with your team, school staff, and students. Taste testing builds familiarity, sparks excitement, and strengthens support for the changes ahead.

- Tips to Involve Your School Community
- Planning the Taste Test
- Conducting the Taste Test with Students
- Gathering and Implementing Feedback
- Marketing and Promotional Resources
- Taste Test Day Checklist
- Common Questions & Answers
- Recommended Taste Test Recipes



Introduction

Taste testing items before introducing them to your menu is a great way to build excitement, gauge interest, and gather valuable feedback. It also creates a low pressure environment for students to try new foods without the commitment of a new full meal.

The more times a child is exposed to a new food, the more likely they are to end up enjoying it. The number of exposures can vary, but studies indicate that it may take anywhere from 5 to 15 times for a child to accept a new food. Taste tests provide an opportunity for that exposure in a fun and engaging way. They also help your team to plan more accurately - by gathering student feedback, you can make informed decisions on what to introduce on your menus, and even have an idea of how much to make.

Taste testing is especially important when introducing new and potentially unfamiliar foods, such as plant-forward menu items. Giving students a chance to try them in advance helps normalize those options, builds curiosity, and can reduce food waste.

This toolkit will guide you and your team through the taste testing process - from planning and execution to collecting feedback and building community support - so you can confidently try out new, health-promoting items with your students!





Tips to Involve Your School Community

Involving your school community in the planning and execution of taste tests will help foster collaboration and increase the overall success of the event. It builds ownership, generates excitement, and ensures that everyone feels included and heard.

When involving adults in the process, remind them that their behavior and attitude will set the tone for students. Adults serve as role models to students and their demeanor will impact how students perceive the food. That being said, encourage positive, open-minded attitudes!

Below are some ideas on how to involve your community in taste tests. Don't feel pressured to do all of these things right away - start with a few, and build from there as you become more comfortable with offering taste tests.

Ways to Involve Students



Students are your consumers, and the goal is to serve them delicious, nutritious meals that they will enjoy!

Having a **formal club or advisory committee of students** will help your team successfully execute taste tests and lift some of your responsibility. Especially at the high school level, student groups can work on promotion, gathering and reviewing feedback, and reporting back to your team.

Support the creation of a student advisory committee or club to help with things like promotion, assist with distributing samples, gather feedback from peers, and suggest new items they'd like to try next.

Empower student ambassadors to lead announcements about the taste test and decorate the cafeteria.

Tips to Involve Your School Community

Ways to Involve Families

Send out a newsletter or email (or ask your principal to add a blurb to the school newsletter) asking for volunteers to help with setup, cleanup, serving samples, and encouraging student participation. This can really make a difference for your team in alleviating some of the extra work associated with offering a taste test.

Share taste test results with families so they can talk about it at home and reinforce positive food experiences.

Send an adapted recipe home so students can showcase what they tried and make an at-home version.

Ways to Involve Teachers

Include teachers in the taste test process - feeling involved will make them more likely to be positive about it.

Uplift a teacher and encourage them to oversee a student club related to school food such as a health or sustainability club - this could be the health teacher, a garden coordinator, nurse or other staff members that are interested.

Collaborate on classroom tie-ins, such as a lesson on nutrition, growing food, or cultural traditions related to the items being sampled.

Encourage teachers to build excitement by talking about the taste test in class and covering taste test etiquette.



Tips to Involve Your School Community

Ways to Involve School Administrators

Encourage administrators to approve a student club related to school food.

Partner with administrators to promote menu changes and taste testing events through morning announcements, school newsletters, and school social media.

Invite administrators to attend the taste test and engage with students

Ways to Involve Your Health Office

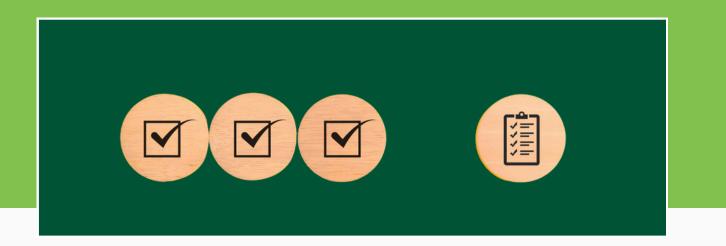
Coordinate with your school nurse or health aide ahead of time to identify any allergy concerns and ensure accommodations are in place

Ways to Involve Your Greater Community



Source items from local farms or businesses when possible, to build community connections and promote fresh, local ingredients.

Invite community members such as local chefs or farmers to present during the taste test about their work and how it is connected to the food being served.



Planning the Taste Test



- Are you introducing a new menu item?
- Deciding between two recipes?
- Seeking feedback on new flavors or preparation styles?
- The why behind your taste testing is important for you and your staff to be aware of so you can effectively promote, execute, and gather feedback.

Select Items to Test

- Limit to 1-2 items to keep the process manageable for your team and engaging for students.
- Choose nutritious options that align with your meal program goals.
- See the Recipe Guide fo some ideas on what you could sample
- When selecting items to taste test, consider:
 - Can it be featured in the future as part of our regular school lunch or breakfast menu?
 - Does your kitchen have the necessary equipment and staff training to prepare the dish?
 - Is the dish culturally significant to members of your school community?
 - Is it possible to source some of the ingredients locally?









Sample with Your Team + School Staff

- · Before introducing items to students, create a small batch and conduct an internal tasting with your foodservice staff and key school stakeholders.
- Involvement in the decision-making process is critical within your team. Including school staff in the process will not only create buy-in at all levels, it will foster collaboration and strengthen the relationship between cafeteria staff and the rest of the school community.

Choose the Right Time and Place

Choosing the right time and location for your taste test can make a big difference in participation and student engagement. Consider what works best for your school's schedule, traffic flow, and staffing capacity.

Cafeteria (ideal for high traffic and visibility)

Cafeteria Line

Offering samples at the end of the serving line is an efficient way to reach students, but can slow down your line and might feel rushed.

Tray with Samples in Cafeteria

Bringing a tray of samples over to students during lunch can be a more effective way to engage with students. This method allows students to ask questions and provide verbal feedback as they are sampling.

Dedicated Booth or Table in Cafeteria

Setting up a staffed station where students can voluntarily stop by and try the sample is a great way to stay organized and collect feedback.

Classroom visit with mobile cart (more controlled environment)

Ideal for a more structured, small-group experience - especially with younger students. Tasting in the classroom allows for deeper engagement and can be paired with lessons or discussions. This is a more time-intensive option and will require coordination with teachers.

Setup During Special Events (can tie into the event theme)

Hosting your tasting during themed events like Farm to School Month, National School Lunch Week, or a Multicultural Celebration is a perfect way to introduce new and aligned menu items to your school community.

Ensure Guidelines are Being Followed

- Communicate plans with school administration, health office, and other relevant staff.
- If taste testing in classrooms, check if permission slips are required.
- Ensure allergy and dietary restrictions are accounted for and that items are clearly labeled.



Conducting the Taste Test with Students

Get your students involved in taste testing. It's all about making them feel empowered and part of the decision-making process.

Allowing them to taste test foods will make them familiar with the options when they are on the serving line. Imagine them saying to their friends "I tried this last week and it was awesome!" That kind of energy and positive peer influence can drive participation.



Set Up the Environment

- Clearly label items.
- Display posters, signage, or other promotional materials.
- Set up a clean and inviting area (station, cart, etc).
- Prepare napkins and utensils if needed.
- Have staff or volunteers ready to serve and engage with students.
- Ensure feedback tools (posters, forms, QR codes) are visible and accessible.



Create a Positive Experience

- Greet students with energy and enthusiasm!
- Tell students what they're trying and why. Share a fun fact about the food or how it might appear on the future menu.
- Encourage honest feedback, ask questions like:
 - What flavors do you notice?
 - Would you pick this for breakfast/lunch?
 - What, if anything, could make it even better?
- If you, your team, or school staff appear to show negative behavior towards new dishes, the students will notice. Getting your team and school staff on board from the start will set the tone for positivity. This is a key step in getting students excited to try new things.



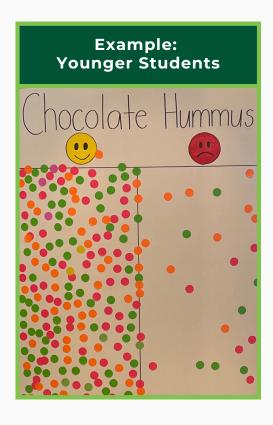
Provide Simple Feedback Tools

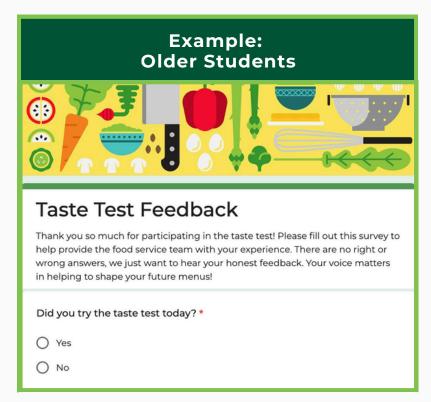
• For younger students:

- Create a poster split into three sections: "I loved it" "I liked it" and "not for me."
- Provide stickers for students to place on the poster.

For older students:

- Use a QR code linked to a short survey that they can fill out on their phones.
 Google forms is an easy platform to use.
- You can ask a few questions, however, keep it short and simple. Here are some sample questions:
 - Did you try the taste test today?
 - Did you enjoy the flavor of the food?
 - Did you enjoy the texture of the food?
 - Would you consider choosing the food if it were offered for lunch?
- Sample Google Form Survey







Gathering & Implementing Feedback

Analyze the Results

- Tally the responses (sticker count or digital survey results).
- Look for clear trends.
- Collect any additional verbal or written feedback, consult a student focus group if you have one. If not, consider starting one!

Make Menu Decisions

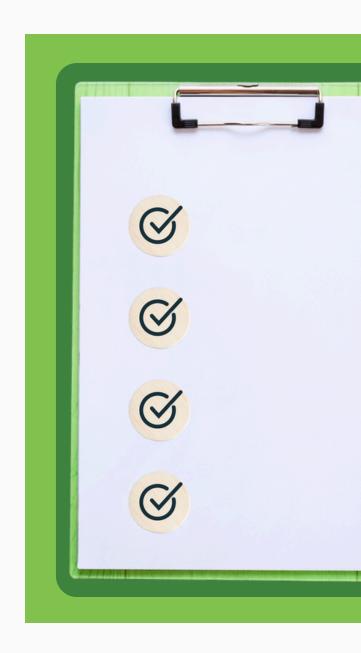
- Will the item be added to the menu?
- Do you need to adjust the recipe or serving method based on student or staff feedback?
- Can the item be prepared consistently with your available equipment and staffing?

Report Back to Students

- Share what was learned with students this reinforces that their opinion matters.
- Thank them for participating and let them know if the item will appear on the menu.
- When the item is eventually served, remind them: "Remember this from the taste test?"

Implement the Change

- Finalize the recipe.
- Communicate with your team about the updates.
- Promote the new item with the same excitement as during the taste test!



Marketing & Promotional Resources

Promotional Ideas



Morning Announcements

"Today we will be taste testing [name of food] in the cafeteria! Try it out and let us know what you think. Your opinion helps us decide if it makes it to the menu - so bring your appetite and your voice!"





"The Food Service team looks forward to offering samples of [name of food] this [day of the week] to students during lunch. We're testing new options for the menu and asking for student feedback to help share future meals."



Posters and Flyers

- Hang up around the cafeteria and hallways "Get ready to try something new this week! The cafeteria will be sampling [name of food] during lunch on [day of the week]."
- These could be dry-erase posters so you can fill out what you will be sampling and reuse them for future taste tests.
- Balanced can help create promotional materials for your specific taste test.



Social Media Posts

"Get ready to try something new this week. The cafeteria will be sampling [name of food] during lunch on [day of the week]."

Classroom Visits



Work with teachers to present a fun fact sheet or quick slideshow related to the tasting.

Checklist

Pre	paration
	Announce taste test
	Prepare tasting samples
Set	Up
	Arrange your station and display signage
	Ready your feedback collection tool (survey, voting poster/stickers, comment cards)
	Have napkins and utensils available if needed
Exe	ecution
	Welcome students and explain purpose
	Distribute samples
	Collect feedback
Pos	st-Event
	Analyze feedback and summarize results
	Share outcomes with school community
	Plan for menu adjustments based on feedback
	Celebrate!

Common FAQs

Q What types of foods should we taste test?

Focus on sampling items that align with your menu goals - nutritious, appealing, and feasible to prepare at scale. Taste testing is a great opportunity to introduce plant-forward meals, global flavors, and even some scratch cooking if possible. Reference the Recipe & Tips Guide for a few of our recommended delicious, health-promoting recipes!

Q How often should I plan to offer taste tests?

It's great if you are able to taste test things on a regular basis so students can become accustomed to the process. A goal of one taste test per month might seem daunting at first, so you can work up to it! Start with one, then evaluate if you need more support next time. If it was just your team handling the whole event, maybe plan on gathering additional support like parent volunteers for next time.

What if students don't like the food?

Of course it would be great if students always love what you serve, but you might end up serving something that isn't very popular, and that's okay! It lets you learn more about what students like and dislike, and also gives you the opportunity to learn more about how you could alter the recipe so additional students might like it in the future.

My staff is already so busy, how can we execute a taste test with our current workload?

Engaging your community will help support your staff and foster collaboration and excitement. Consider asking for support from parent volunteers, teachers and aides, student volunteers, health office staff, and administrators. If you are using pre-made products, vendors love to come and sample their products.

Consider inviting plant-based companies to sample their products at your school.

What's the best way to promote taste tests?

Use a variety of methods including: morning announcements, posters/flyers, social media, emails, and classroom tie-ins with teachers! Additionally, have your staff mention it to students during lunch to create buzz leading up to the event.

Common FAQs

Q

Do we need permission slips for taste testing?

Α

This varies by school/district. Check in with your administration, especially if you are planning on offering samples in classrooms.

Q

How long should a taste test take?

Α

It depends on the setting. If you are taste testing during lunch, your regular lunch period should offer enough time to hand out samples to each student, given you have adequate staff. If you are visiting classrooms and doing a more in-depth tasting with students, budget between 15-30 minutes per class.

Recommended Recipes

Heat & Serve

- Spicy Kickin' Sandwich
 - **Product:** Rebellyous Spicy Kickin' Patty

Semi-Scratch:

- Cold Woodles Salad with SunButter Sauce
 - **Product:** Woodles Whole Grain Noodles
 - Korean BBQ Street Tacos
 - Product: Deeply Rooted Korean BBQ Crumbles

Scratch

- <u>Tuscan Bean Pesto Penne Pasta</u>
 - Key PB Ingredients: Great Northern Beans
- Ethiopian Split Pea Stew
 - Key PB Ingredients: Yellow Split Peas, dry

Additional Resources

- <u>Illinois Harvest of the</u> Month Taste Test Toolkit
- John Stalker Institute NSLP & Taste Test Resources
- <u>More Plants on Plates</u> <u>Recipe Guide</u>











Example Taste Test Promotional Materials

- Announcement Line Signs/Handouts
- Printed Surveys















Taste Test!

Today, the cafeteria will be offering samples of



Taste Tested. Feedback Requested.

- ? Rate the taste test on a scale of 1-10? (10 is best!)
- ? Would you like it on the lunch menu?
- What did you like about the food?
- What did you dislike about the food?
- Are there any items on the current menu you would like to swap for this meal?





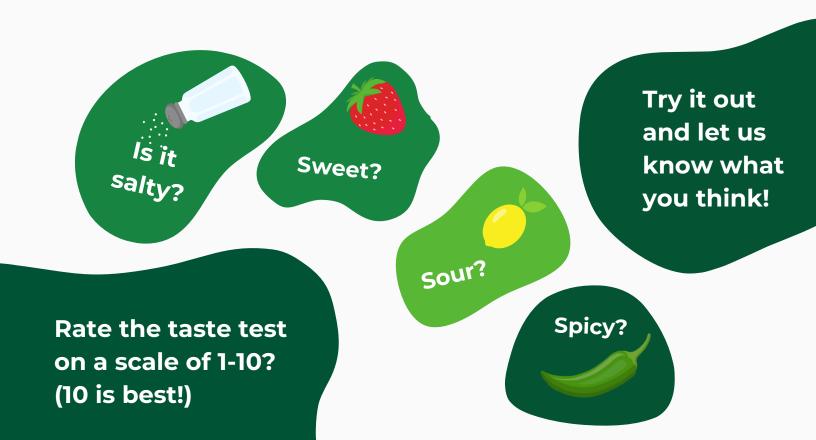


Taste Test!

Today, the cafeteria will be offering samples of



Taste Tested. Feedback Requested.



Taste Test Feedback Survey

Today, we taste tested
Thank you so much for participating in the taste test! Please fill out this survey to share your experience. There are no right or wrong answers—we just want your honest feedback!
1. Did you try the taste test today?
☐ Yes☐ No
2. Did you enjoy the flavor of the food?
Yes
SomewhatNot my personal flavor
3. Did you enjoy the texture of the food?
Yes
Somewhat
Not my favorite texture
4. Would you consider choosing the food if it were offered for lunch?
Yes
No
Maybe, if there were a few tweaks
5. What would you rate the taste test on a scale of 1–10? (10 is the best!)
6. What did you like about the food? (Optional)
7. What would you improve about the food? (Optional)
8. Would you be interested in joining a student focus group about school food? (We would ask for your input on school meals more regularly to help shape future menus.)
Yes No



Download these and other resources at: **moreplantsonplatesusa.org**