

IN THE NEWS!

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School Kitchen Workers Already Busy in Norwich

New processing program to provide plenty of fresh produce to 4,000 students



Photo Credit: The New London Day, Sean D. Elliot

By Judy Benson

Though students aren't due back for 2.5 weeks, the cafeteria kitchen at Mahan School on Friday looked every bit as busy as a regular school day, with slicing, steaming and shucking happening at a pace and volume clearly aimed at preparing food for many mouths.

"Are you ready to start the zucchini?" Erin Perpetua, cafeteria manager, asked Martha Oates, food service aide, after the two had just finished blanching four trays of Swiss chard and placed them in the blast chiller.

Oates nodded, then reached into a bin loaded with about half of the bushel basket of deep green squash that would be sliced. At another cutting board across the room, Christina Tomlin, also a food service aide, kept her chef's

knife trained on creamy yellow loaves of summer squash, carving a bushel's worth into half moons.

"We don't want to slice it too thin because then it will turn to mush," said Tomlin. "We tried using the food processor, but it cut the pieces too small."

This summer, for the first time, the Norwich school system is operating a processing kitchen, buying local produce that gets blanched, frozen and stored in vacuum-sealed bags. Roberta Jacobs, food services director, hopes that enough tomatoes, green beans and other vegetables and fruits will be processed to supply about three-quarters of all the produce served to the district's 4,000 students.

After it was blanched and blast-chilled, the summer squash would be weighed, bagged and labeled, with each bag holding enough for about 20 to 25 child-sized servings, Perpetua explained. On the counter in front of her awaited the next task for the three-woman crew - turning two large boxes of plump green peppers into fajita-style slices, and husking about 100 ears of fresh-picked butter-and-sugar corn, piled in three mesh sacks. The corn would be blanched and frozen on the cobs for future lunches, when it would be sure to delight many young diners unaccustomed to corn-on-the-cob out of season.

"We need to get all this done by 2:30," said Perpetua, as she peeled the husk of a long, full ear. "Corn is best the day it's picked, so we don't want this to sit over the weekend."

She had picked up the corn and zucchini that morning at Malerba's Farm, just a few miles from the school. The peppers, Swiss chard and summer squash were raised in soils a few miles farther away, at LoPresti Farm in Preston and Our Acres Farm in Lebanon - but much closer than the massive truck farms of California, Arizona, Florida and Mexico that are the source of much of the produce that ends up in home freezers and ultimately, dinner tables.

"I've been going to Malerba's since I was a kid," said Oates. "It makes a big difference with vegetables when they're fresh like this."

A \$50,000 state Department of Agriculture grant supported the program, paying for the commercial steamer, blast chiller, vacuum-sealed bagger and wages for the cafeteria workers who otherwise would not be working in the summer. The district

already owned the large walk-in freezer where the produce is being stored.

“The more fruits and vegetables the kids have, the better, and it’s created more hours for me,” said Tomlin.

Perpetua said the processing kitchen will continue to operate into the fall, processing butternut squash and other fall crops after workers are done preparing breakfast and lunch. With new federal school lunch nutrition requirements calling for children to be served a greater variety and quantity of fruits and vegetables, buying and freezing from local farms just makes sense, she said.

“And it helps the local economy,” she said.

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Has Lunch with Connecticut Elementary School Students



Last April, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack visited Wolcott Elementary School in West Hartford to talk to students and staff about USDA initiatives designed to improve children’s health. Also in attendance were U.S. Representatives Rosa DeLauro and Joe Courtney, U.S. Senator Richard Blumenthal, and CT Governor Dannel Malloy. Vilsack has been visiting schools across the country to promote the new school meal regulations, and West Hartford was chosen because all the schools in town have received the bronze award for USDA’s Healthier US School Challenge, recognizing excellence in nutrition and physical activity in the district.

The special guests sat at various tables in the cafeteria and enjoyed a lunch of fresh-made soup, and a hearty salad from the cafeteria’s salad bar. They had a true “school lunch” experience, with cafeteria trays including the five meal components, with lots of colorful fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and low fat milk. Secretary Vilsack had an engaged conversation with the 5th grade students that he dined with, and when called by his staff for the press conference, he wouldn’t go until he finished his lunch and conversation!

At the press conference, all officials commended Secretary Vilsack for his dedication and efforts to help resolve the issue of childhood hunger and obesity, and the Secretary complimented Connecticut for being a leader in this effort. Governor Malloy also spoke of efforts to increase school breakfast programs in our state. Overall, it was a great recognition for Connecticut school meal programs. We are proactive and have put many healthy practices in place before they were mandated. Our students did not see major changes with the new standards, because most were already in place. It was nice to see this recognized in Washington, and have Secretary Vilsack speak about the quality of our programs. Connecticut school nutrition professionals should be proud!

