



TDA Food & Nutrition



i tried local!
TASTE TESTING TOOLKIT



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introduction



welcome to the Texas Grown Taste Testing Toolkit!

Taste testing at school is an interactive way to boost healthful eating habits and get students excited about food grown and produced in their home state! Their feedback can be used to enhance menus – whether for tasty, nutritious lunches or inventive new snacks. By consistently updating menus and introducing students to local foods and flavors, we can appeal to their taste buds while building an appreciation for the amazing bounty of flavors available in Texas.

As part of the Texas Farm Fresh Initiative, we have created this Taste Test Toolkit to help guide you.

*what to expect in this guide



1. Simple steps for launching your first taste test
2. Recommendations to make taste tests part of regular programming
3. Tips to plan and promote a special tasting event
4. In-school promotional assets to encourage participation
5. Tools to help collect feedback and more!

A little bit of planning can help make any taste test a success!

- Build your plans into the culture of your program.
- Use taste test feedback to develop popular menu items.
 - Increase participation in meal programs.
 - Improve students' nutrition knowledge and preference for healthy foods.
 - Build awareness and knowledge of Texas products.
 - Offer a fun and tasty educational opportunity for students.



bring taste tests to your program

Bring the joy of a fresh peach and the crispy first crunch of a chilled cucumber to all Texas kids. A taste test can introduce fresh new foods to students in a variety of ways. Students who are given the opportunity to try and give their input on healthier foods will be more likely to establish healthy eating habits that last.

Taste tests are a school community effort, and research shows children need to try a food multiple times before it becomes part of their diet. Texas offers a large selection of delicious fresh products coming from every corner of the state to help get students excited about healthy eating and good nutrition.

why do taste tests?

Want a school full of adventurous eaters? High rates of exposure can get you there. Taste tests are one fun way to meet these goals:

- Introduce new Texas-sourced menu items that you know students will enjoy.
- Unite the educational community behind nutrition and help children learn more about healthful eating and the benefits of trying new foods grown and raised in Texas.
- Be creative and try new menu items- the flexibility of a taste test helps to gather valuable feedback from kids and staff before adding new items to the menu.

conducting A TASTING

step 1

Pull together your team of co-collaborators.

Change is not made in a vacuum. If this is the first taste test you are coordinating, make sure to pull together a committee or an informal group of contributors that can assist with planning and coordination.

step 2

Choose a date with no major scheduling conflicts.

Make sure that principals, teachers, foodservice staff and custodial staff are aware of the event as far in advance as possible. Be conscious of any field trips or other extracurricular events that could impact attendance on the day you have chosen.

step 3

Communicate out to students, parents and families.

Don't skimp on promoting this special event! Include facts about the new menu items and taste test in your messages as you promote your event. Take advantage of the promotional items provided by TDA. Find facts and information on fruits and vegetables at TDA's Harvest of the Month website: SquareMeals.org/HarvestoftheMonth

step 4

Work the checklists and timelines!

Checklists can be the difference maker when it comes to a stress free special event. Complete as many tasks in advance so you can take it all in and participate in the great event you have coordinated. **See pages 8 and 9 for ideas.**

TIPS & TRICKS:

Communicating to your target audiences

School Staff

Teachers are role models and their support and excitement can encourage students to sample new foods by participating in the taste test. Taste tests and new menu items also provide opportunities to connect classroom activities to the cafeteria. Teachers can also support the school nutrition program by promoting taste test events in their interaction with families. Communicate through a staff email. Collaborate with your school's administration to include reminders during the morning announcements.

Students

Get students pumped about participating in the taste tests and sharing their opinions. Create excitement through school announcements, classroom announcements, bulletin boards and classroom discussion.

Families

When students participate in taste testing activities, they are introduced to nutritious foods they may not have tried otherwise. Communicate with families through the school newsletter, the website, a letter home and if available, school social media platforms.



*tip

Taste tests held in October that feature Texas products and are publicized on social media can count towards the **Be Social** element of the Farm Fresh Challenge. Earn recognition for serving local foods by joining the challenge. Learn more at SquareMeals.org/FarmFreshChallenge



checklists & timelines

coordination details

A Few Weeks Prior

- **Announce** date, time and location at a food committee meeting.
- **Decide** what food will be tested. Make sure the selected foods align with your goals and the school food program.
- **Communicate** logistics to all teachers.
- **Identify** parents, students and staff members who are willing to help with food prep and clean-up on the day of the taste test.
- **Promote*** the taste test. Use the in-school branding assets provided by TDA as well as your school website and newsletters.
- If you're using locally-grown products, **contact** the farmer or rancher and invite them to participate. Farmers can help to build their brand awareness and share their love of the food.

One Week Before

- **Verify** that the taste test food items have been purchased or are being delivered before the date needed.
- **Confirm** attendance of all volunteers and guest speakers and share need-to-know information (date, time, check-in info, duties, etc.).
- **Print** posters, ballots, and other resources you will be utilizing. *Items available on pg 19.*
- **Advertise** the taste test in the school newsletter, website and with posters in the hallway. Send an all-staff email reminder.
- **Encourage** teachers to talk about the taste test in classroom meetings and hang posters on bulletin boards throughout the school to generate excitement.

Day of the Test

- **Announce** the taste test during school announcements.
- **Coordinate** volunteers and student helpers and share any information related to food safety.
- **Set up** the taste testing tables or carts. Tablecloths and decorations can help the taste testing area stand out as a special event in the cafeteria.
- **Conduct** the taste test and distribute the surveys.
- **Take** photos and notes to report for your newsletter and share with the [Texas Department of Agriculture](#).

*tip

Some special printing may be needed weeks prior to event.

One Week After

- **Collect** and tally the results of the taste test and post them in the school newsletter and on the school website. Post the results in the cafeteria or on a bulletin board so students can see them.
- **Send** information about the taste testing to the [Texas Department of Agriculture](#).
- **Send** a letter home to parents describing the taste test and the results.
- **Consider** sending home nutrition education materials or recipes. Students love to share what they have learned at school with their families! Once you've had a few successful taste tests, consider inviting local media outlets.

Simplicity is the name of the game when it comes to selecting foods to taste. Start simple by selecting a food item that requires less preparation and is easy to hand out to students. Local apples dipped in low-fat yogurt and garden grown tomatoes with simple seasoning are good examples.

By starting small, you'll find you can build momentum and launch the program forward. Once you are comfortable with the routine of simple taste tests, add complexity.

Consider offering multiple taste tests of an item to increase the students' exposure to a certain food or recipe. If you are providing nutrition education, identify specific topics and questions to ask the students. Describe the featured food and display the information.

Cut the featured item into smaller pieces or slices so that each student can taste a bite.

Offer portions of the item to each student. Allow students to decline samples if they are uninterested or unwilling to participate.

Display unprocessed samples of the ingredients at the taste test to allow students to see and touch the food in its original form.

Ask students to think about how each item tastes and smells, and looks different from other varieties. Have students make the "promise to be honest" in their feedback.

the cafeteria as an extension of the classroom

the cafeteria as a learning lab

When schools emphasize nutritional education, **the cafeteria can also become an extension to the classroom where students discover new things about food and healthy eating.** Taste testing activities can introduce students to nutritious Texas foods they may not have tried otherwise.

By supporting those efforts in the classroom, as well as with educational information, students will know the benefits of healthy food and healthy lifestyle choices, and grasp a better understanding of where food comes from.

Coordinate Monthly Tasting Events through a Harvest of the Month program

Spotlight the seasonality of fresh produce using the Texas Harvest of the Month Program.

These print-ready resources are available on SquareMeals.org/HarvestoftheMonth

Product Sheets – Information in English and Spanish offer an overview of nutrition and seasonal availability for each of the identified products. Copies can be shared with participating staff members or posted in the kitchen.

Product Posters – Decorative and informative displays teach children about each product. These can be used in the classroom or cafeteria.

Farmer Profiles – Profiles of Texas farmers and ranchers currently participating in the Farm Fresh Initiative.

Note: This is one example of an activity that could fulfill the Teach Local component of TDA's annual Farm Fresh Challenge.

Host a Farmer or Rancher for Interactive Activities

Invite a farmer to bring his or her local food to the class for a special show and tell.

Invite a farmer or rancher to attend your event and give students an overview about an item and explain how it came from their farm to the school cafeteria. These special guests can help educate students about the connections between Texas food, agriculture, health and the environment. It's always helpful if your guests have an example of their produce to share with students, and also prepare your visitors for lots of questions from the students.

displaying THE FOOD

Just like adults, children eat with their eyes first. Have fun with the experience. Creating visual stimulation around the program is the first step to getting your student's taste buds interested!

Put the taste test on display. Get creative using the facilities that already exist. Include any promotional materials, educational documents, and displays on a large table at a focal point in the cafeteria.

Supervise and encourage. Schools have found that having a taste test facilitator is more successful than allowing students to stop by voluntarily.

Keep it low pressure. Allow students to say no. Teaching adventurous eating skills takes time.

Don't be discouraged if students are underwhelmed by a food in your taste test. It's natural for them to be wary of a new food, and it may take several exposures to a fruit or vegetable before it is accepted. Sometimes it even takes serving a food several different ways. For example, Texas mushrooms may have to be tried on their own, in soups, salads and in a pasta dish. With encouragement, they will find a home on your school's menu.

*tips

- Place sampling cups or small plates on a line so they can be easily accessed as students get their lunch.
- Make sure you have enough of your exciting new food, and that your sample size gives a sense of the flavor of your item. Sometimes it takes more than just a small bite to really appreciate the flavor.
- If space allows, set up the taste testing table where students can stop by after they finish their lunch.
- Set up a table outside of the cafeteria so students can take a sample on their way into or out of the lunch room.
- Encourage students to examine how the fruit or vegetables look, smell and feel when ripe.
- In addition to making sure your food samples are tasty and appealing, give a reward, like stickers, for participating.



more SETTINGS: the classroom & garden

the CLASSROOM

A classroom taste test can create a more intimate approach and can provide a greater opportunity to integrate the taste tests into the curriculum. Taste tests in the classroom are best fits for simple food demos or raw ingredients. These taste tests can often promote discussions and questions in the classroom.

*tips

- When using local fruits and vegetables, show where it is grown in Texas. The [Farm Fresh Seasonality Wheel](#) is perfect for making this connection with students. It will show when it is in season and provide information about the different growing regions in Texas.
- Tie a taste test into existing classroom subjects. Estimate and test veggie weights for math class or explore the many colors of fruits and vegetables for art class.
- Invite food service staff to classroom taste tests to introduce

- the new food and promote school-wide connections. Keep these valuable staff members aware and involved.
- Invite a farmer to bring his or her local food to the class for a special show and tell.
- Once the class has tasted the items, discuss the flavors, textures and ingredients. After your discussion, encourage the students to share their thoughts on the survey template included in this resource.

Visit SquareMeals.org/TexasFarmFresh to access additional educational materials for teaching students and young children about agriculture and nutrition.

the GARDEN

Research has shown that if students participate in growing the food, they are more willing to taste it and like it! For that reason, a garden has bushels of potential as the site for a small group taste test.

*tips

- Refer to TDA's [Let's Get Growing: Harvest](#) for food safety in the garden.
- If there is not enough of a particular food for the whole class to taste, supplement with other varieties from local farmers.
- Keep it simple and request support from teachers to make sure students have clean hands before the event.
- A simple chef demo that highlights how things taste great when they're straight from the garden and with minimal processing really brings agricultural and nutrition education full circle.



*success story

Austin ISD

Austin Independent School District (AISD) sees the value of offering classroom taste tests throughout the year. During their Summer Meals Program in 2018 the district chef and dietician visited many different summer meal sites at elementary schools to gather feedback on recipes for the next year's school lunch program. Feedback is captured through a simple paper ballot and all students receive an informational sheet with tips on how to choose healthier snack foods in and out of school.

building out A PROGRAM

Once taste testing at your program has gained momentum, formalize the process. Use the input group to build on the success and plan for regular taste testing events.



CREATE A COMMITTEE & IDENTIFY STAKEHOLDERS



- A taste testing program can be a fun and memorable experience. However, it can be a lot of work for one person to do. Build a team of school community stakeholders so you have strong collaboration and communication.
- Include culinary team members as well as educators. The cafeteria team is a critical component for your committee, as are supportive teachers who work with students every day.

- Invite parents and family members to participate or help coordinate. Invite parents either in the weekly newsletter or through a special invitation.
- Custodial staff members play a key role. Including custodial staff in your committee can add a helping hand to the set-up and break down of your event.
- Diversify your team. Include administrators, community members, student organizations and the school nurse to provide different perspectives.

- Set realistic expectations for your committee. Keep in mind everyone has busy schedules.
- Make the cafeteria a learning zone. Ownership and input means a lot to members of every team. Seek participation and empower your staff to make small changes.
- Connect with your community. Once you have held a few successful taste tests, invite local media and local leaders to sample the changes your school is making to its menu.

measure & celebrate THE RESULTS

You went the extra mile to host a taste testing event. **Don't let your hard work go to waste!**

remember your initial goals.

Were you evaluating a new menu item?

- If the results were overwhelmingly positive, add it to the menu and communicate to students how the results impacted this change.
- If the results weren't great, that's okay too. Analyze the main points of feedback.
- Was it too spicy? Too bitter?
- Children's palates are developing and they may be more sensitive to these flavor profiles.

Was the demo for a fresh food item?

Keep it up! Children may need many opportunities to taste a new food before they feel confident and willing to eat it.

* success story

North East ISD

Students at North East ISD regularly participate in taste testing events. These events are a great way for students to show how they feel about new menu items and allow the child nutrition director to capture this information in real time and through a positive interaction. Voting is not always even the main component of these events, Sharon Glosson, Child Nutrition Director, hosts monthly Fun Food Fridays to expose students to new foods regularly.

Collecting feedback can be the best part of the event!

There are several ways to gather feedback. Using ballot boxes or the paper surveys provided on page 19 has worked successfully for many schools. Make sure your voting area is clearly marked.

"Ballot Box" Posters

Set up a table in the cafeteria where students can cast their vote in the box that corresponds to their opinion after they have tasted the food.

We suggest three boxes labeled, "Like," "OK, I'd Try it Again," and "Dislike." Use symbols such as smiley/frowning faces and thumbs up/thumbs down to help younger students understand their vote.

This method is interactive and allows them to record their opinion anonymously without being influenced by their peers.

Paper Surveys

The paper ballot asks students to circle their preference and give their input.

The paper ballot can also be administered anonymously to reduce peer influence.

Set up a ballot table in the cafeteria and remind students to cast their votes after tasting the food.

* tips

- Involve older students with the tabulations and share the results with the entire school community.
- Take plenty of photos and videos! Post the results on the school website so families are aware of the successful new menu options they can introduce at home and make sure to thank your community for their involvement - big or small!



resources & references

resources

TDA's Food & Nutrition team can help you navigate taste tests and the exciting world of school nutrition. It's an area that continues to develop and expand. By starting slowly, establishing your goals and enlisting the help of your school community, you will build a program that connects young people to fresh, healthy food, and eating habits. Support from your administrators and collaborating with your teachers, parents and students is vital for long-term success.

We hope this guide helps you start and continue your taste test program. We welcome you to share your recipes and success stories to further grow the appreciation of home-grown foods from our great state of Texas.

Seasonality Wheel

The Seasonality Wheel is a tool that helps you identify when fruits and vegetables are available and provides information about growing regions in Texas. Click on any month to see what is growing at that time, and the toolbar will illustrate that month's best bounty.

Four Part Farm Fresh Video Series

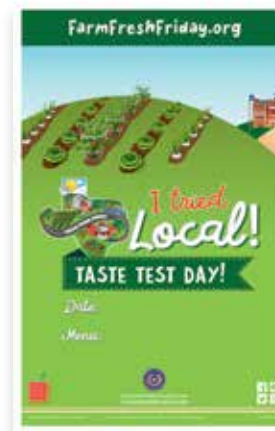
- Making the Farm Fresh Choice
- We Made It Happen
- How to Make Cheddar Cheese
- Growing Cherry Tomatoes

references

- <https://growing-minds.org/farm-to-school-taste-tests/>
- <http://www.vermontharvestofthefirstmonth.org/uploads/2/8/9/6/28966099/tastetesttoolkitaguidetotastingsuccess.pdf>
- <http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/tools-for-schools/find-challenges/cafeteria-challenges/12-10-host-a-taste-test>
- http://afhk.nonprofitsoapbox.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=701:tips-for-hosting-a-successful-taste-test&catid=39:step-3-challenges
- <https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/resource-library>

on-demand print files

Files available online at: SquareMeals.org/FarmFreshMenuPlanning



Announcement Poster



Editable Award Certificate



Voting Ballot



Email Header Graphic



Digital Wrap Pencil Graphic



Table Tent Announcement



Sticker



Editable Tablecloth



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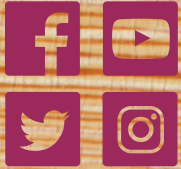


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