

Feeding the Future Student Cooking Contest Returns for Eighth Year

Written by Larisa May

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The Blue Watermelon Project's "Feeding the Future" cooking contest returned for its eighth year to the Republic National Distribution Company warehouse on January 24. The contest, designed to help students develop nutritious and affordable recipes that meet the real-world requirements of the National School Lunch Program and National School Breakfast Program, featured 22 student teams from 17 schools. Students are paired with a mentor from their school as well as a mentor chef who helps them to create their own unique dishes. The competition starts early in the school year when teams begin forming their recipes.

They begin meeting with their faculty mentors and partnered chefs to review ingredients and recipe requirements, such as nutritional factors and costs per serving. These are the same requirements that food service workers have to consider when formulating their school lunch menus. Once the recipe is approved, students get ready for the big day.

"They work the whole fall semester as a team, and it doesn't stop after the competition," Blue Watermelon Executive Director Jillian Sundberg explained. "Once they've got their final recipe... they're able to take their meal back to their school cafeteria. And that's the crowning achievement. We now have years of student-created recipes that are on the school's permanent menus."



The Blue Watermelon Project is led by Chef Charleen Badman of Scottsdale's FnB restaurant. The organization is "a group of chefs, restaurateurs, farmers, and community food advocates that want children to have access to good food in schools."

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Since 2016 the BWP has worked with individual schools to provide education and interactive programming to students to help them “rethink their relationship with fresh, seasonal, and whole foods, helping them to become more adventurous eaters.” Before Sundberg joined the program, she was a classroom teacher, and learned of Badman’s goal to broaden the program and bring it into more schools. To her, the most rewarding part of the project is helping teach children critical thinking skills through real world application.

“This is a way for students to see themselves in a problem solving role in the world around them, and it creates engagement,” Sundberg said. “They feel activated, they feel proud, and they feel like they can truly make a difference.”



The winning dish this year was created by Perry High School senior Maddie Handschug, who made *Manh Mi Torta*, described as “tender, juicy pulled pork layered on a fresh sub roll and dressed with creamy, spicy sriracha mayo. Crisp romaine, bright cilantro, and zesty jalapeños add crunch and heat, creating a bold, flavorful sandwich that’s savory, spicy, and irresistibly fresh in every bite.”

Jicama fries were served on the side: “baked to tender, lightly crisped perfection; these fries balance natural sweetness with savory heat, delivering a refreshing, crunchy, and flavorful twist.”

Learn more about the project at bluewatermelonproject.org. (Images: Jill Richards)