

Oregon school lunch cooks learn to adapt

[Brooke Jackson-Glidden](#), Statesman Journal 4:07 p.m. PDT October 28, 2016

Oregon school lunch cooks learn new skills

Michele Blackerby (left) and Lori Dyson prepare their kitchen space at the "Oregon Cooks for Kids" training on Friday, Oct. 21, 2016. Chef Garrett Berdan modified Oregon State University Extension Food Hero recipes to work in school kitchens. MOLLY J. SMITH / Statesman Journal



(Photo: MOLLY J. SMITH / Statesman Journal)

For a brief time, Oregon school cooks ditched the chicken nuggets for roasted cauliflower.

At the "Oregon Cooks For Kids" training earlier this month, they spent two days learning how to make new, nutritious meals from scratch.

Chef Garrett Berdan, a registered dietary nutritionist who specializes in K-12 school lunches, led the training at the Salem-Keizer School District central kitchen, the fourth of seven training events throughout the state for school lunch workers. The Oregon Department of Education and the Oregon Dairy and Nutrition Council sponsored the classes.

All 15 recipes Berdan taught met USDA nutrition requirements as well as typical school budgets.

Sheryl Golden, a cook from Community Action Head Start, cooks for 3-to-5 year-olds, so she said the dishes in the training were "very different" from what she cooks day-to-day.

"I would make this for them, definitely," she said, preparing a recipe for sweet Thai chicken.

Lori Dyson, a school cook in the Estacada school district, was partial to the "blueberry bling," a breakfast crumble made with whole berries.

"We try to incorporate homemade when we can," she said. "We try to eliminate cooking from freezer to oven to plate."

Berdan has led these cooking classes every year for seven years, and school cooks come from across the state to learn new recipes and culinary skills.

It's unclear how many cooks bring these recipes to their school kitchens, but Berdan said Umatilla School District uses his banh mi sandwich recipe in its schools.

Oregon schools vary when it comes to kitchen appliances and supplies. Some get stove tops, some don't. Some cooks have control over the menu, some don't. Some chefs cook almost exclusively from the freezer, reheating pre-made meals. Berdan modified recipes from the Oregon State University Extension Food Hero program to specifically work in these scenarios. Gourmet grilled cheese is pressed with two sheet pans in an oven, for instance.

"Each operation is completely different. Some have complete control; some have their food made at a central kitchen," Berdan said. "These recipes ... are also adaptable for those who just have an oven and a steamer. We had to come up with kitchen hacks, just like a home chef."

Heather Vandorstrand of Pleasant Hill Elementary School didn't see these recipes fitting in to her day-to-day, however.

"We don't have a lot of from-scratch cooking," Vandorstrand said. "When you have to make 250 lunches each day, you have to do a lot of reheating."

When it comes to the Salem-Keizer School District, menus are set at a central kitchen, and ingredients and certain foods (muffins, cookies) are sent to the schools. Salem-Keizer schools all have offering bars, which provide fresh fruits and vegetables for students to grab and go. In November, menu items in Salem-Keizer middle schools include carnitas tortas with refried beans, teriyaki beef nuggets, fajita flatbread with roasted veggies and corn dogs. Chicken Caesar salad is also available as a daily choice.

The real challenge for local schools is menu planning. Since the district sets the menus for all public schools in Salem-Keizer, menu planning starts a year in advance.

Still, change is possible. Dave Harvey, Salem-Keizer School District food service director, said any chef can make a suggestion for district menus.

"Recipes and ideas from schools is encouraged. We take suggestions from the frontline staff all the time," Harvey said in an email. "Our executive chef then works with our dietitian (both here in our district) to modify the recipe to meet the National School Lunch Program regulations."

Regardless, Berdan said, these skills are valuable for any chef, even if they can't bring them to his or her own school kitchen.

"The main point is, we're gaining hands-on culinary skills," Berdan said.

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