



# FROM MIND to MENU

Chefs reflect on the **recipe ideation** process that leads to delicious dishes served in our nation's school cafeterias and beyond.

BY PATRICIA L. FITZGERALD

I don't cook. But like an increasing number of Americans, I'm fascinated by TV's endless schedule of culinary competitions. We're captivated by the challenges of the Chopped basket, the crazy grocery game, the descending ingredient platform or the spinning randomizer—each presenting competitors with an added layer of complication to the already formidable goal of brainstorming and executing a mouth-watering recipe under the pressure of time. *How do they do it?*

This entertainment regularly leads me to contemplate the more practical version of the process: How do trained chefs and talented home cooks do what they do, especially for schools? Whether you work in a school kitchen or advocate for the profession at large, you may have wondered the same thing. Let's draw back the curtain on the mystery and explore the recipe ideation and development process from the perspectives of seven chefs who support meals for kids in a variety of ways.

## ALWAYS ON MY MIND

"I'm always thinking about—and talking about—my work," says Diane Grodek. "I'll be at a restaurant and think, 'How can I turn this into a school dish?'" She's been with **Austin (Texas) Independent School District** for seven years, starting as a foodservice manager, moving into catering and now as Executive Chef. "I look at what's popular in the real world. Like it or not, we know the mainstays for most of our customers are places like Chick-fil-A, which have to be factored into our own menu development process," she says. "I'll also get suggestions from managers, and we'll take a look at old recipes in the files and see how to freshen them up."

But with 75,000 kids to feed at 113 schools, speed-scratch assembled items dominate the menu, and the scratch recipe tends to be the "B" entrée, says Grodek. As a result, she'll target most of her recipe ideation at dishes for the secondary schools. "There, we have more lines and choices, so we can serve less of the dish, which makes it easier to pursue something a bit more labor intensive. Kids at this age also tend to be open to more flavors."

At **Detroit Public Schools**, Chef Kevin Frank, MBA, SNS, agrees that high schools represent the greatest opportunity for menuing scratch-prepared new recipes. "Those kids know the program. They've been with us for a decade—so they're also more prone to menu burnout," he explains. "They're also more likely to give us honest opinions, for better or worse."

As Senior Director, Culinary Services, with a 10-year tenure in the district, Frank oversees a team of four chefs—two who came to the district from restaurants and two who graduated from the district's own culinary vocational program. Together, they create a menu blend of processed, speed-scratch and scratch prepared items—although they do not work with any raw proteins, Frank notes.

Honing her school nutrition bona fides in multiple school districts before committing full time to her own consultancy, Chef Rebecca Polson, CC, SNS, **Chef Rebecca K-12 Culinary Consultants**, develops recipes, performs culinary training, creates videos, conducts recipe analyses and provides kitchen wisdom for a wide range of public and private clients, including *School Nutrition*. In many ways, her recipe ideation process is a constant activity, whether or not she's working on a specific project. "I'll get ideas from everywhere, all the time. I'll be in a restaurant or hear a comment from a parent, student or a colleague, like [former boss] Bertrand [Weber, Minneapolis Public Schools], who has *lots* of ideas. It's just always in the back of my mind," Polson says.

She's constantly photographing the meals she eats out, and her phone's image gallery has become a de facto database of future inspiration. Grodek, on the other hand, maintains a running Google Docs list with her ideas.

Meanwhile, Frank and his team regularly hold "culinary meetings" at area restaurants, seeking fresh inspiration for menu R&D (rip-off and duplicate). "We want to see what the



kids are eating commercially to determine how we can mimic it in our program," he explains. Their visits take them to food trucks, QSR chains, local sit-downs and barbecue joints, but they tend to avoid fastfood restaurants.

Irene Pawlisch, CC, SNS, recently left district operations for a teaching position at **Madison College** in Madison Wis., where she hopes to encourage a new generation of students to consider K-12 school meals as a career and discover, as she did, the joy of applying culinary creativity in this segment. "I always try to provide both my cooking teams and my customers with education about the 'ultimate bite,'" Pawlisch says. She draws a focus on the elements of taste: What is appealing or off-putting? Flavor, texture and temperature all play roles. "I talk a lot about layering flavors. The base recipe might be elementary-friendly, but then I create sauces that could take it to the next level for the courageous eater."



## TASTY SOLUTIONS

While most school chefs enjoy the opportunity to just let inspiration and imagination direct their efforts, the recipe ideation process also can be dictated by the need to solve a very particular problem. In Austin ISD, a lasagna recipe was intended to fill the slot for a vegetarian entrée, but the team found it to be overly labor intensive. With an abundance of lasagna noodles on hand that needed to be put to better use, Grodek turned to a favorite meal from her youth in Connecticut: manicotti, a dish that was all but unheard of in Texas. She developed a simple-to-execute school version that's enjoyed a successful introduction.

As K-12 Corporate Chef for **General Mills Foodservice**, Chef Monica Coulter also approaches recipe ideation from more of a solutions-oriented perspective. Her charge is to help K-12 customers take full, creative advantage of her company's branded product lines, showcasing their surprising versatility. Her projects range from providing recipe content for monthly social media-distributed Menu Moments to developing product marketing support resources, such as the *Dough For It* recipe booklet of inspired K-12 applications using Pillsbury Biscuit Dough in a dozen unexpected ways. (Examples include Chicken Mash-Up Bowls, Curried Chickpea Samosas and Biscuit Pretzel Dogs.)

For Menu Moments, Coulter picks a theme and then creates recipes around it. When she spoke with *School Nutrition*, Chef Monica was struggling to develop a K-12 version of spanakopita, a Greek spinach pie that would tie in to National Spinach Day, March 26. "I think it's something I should be able to do with the biscuit dough, but every time I've tried it, it's been over-spinached," she concedes.

"I'm creating layers of cut up biscuits, chicken, cheese and spinach and need to make sure that each serving will have the right amount of meal pattern components. If I cut back too much on the spinach, then how helpful is that to the operator?" Coulter finds recipe ideation for K-12 to be a puzzle, "But I love puzzles and it's fun to make it work. I had this idea in the middle of the night and I was so excited by it

## CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

**One of the top priorities in today's K-12 recipe development** is creating culturally relevant menu items that feature ingredients and preparation methods inspired by traditional approaches. "Equity is a huge priority for me in recipe and menu development," says Chef Kevin Frank, Detroit Public Schools. "I want to make sure that all our populations feel equally represented on the menu." This includes families with ties to Puerto Rico, Mexico, Russia, Ukraine and Africa.

One challenge in this endeavor, however, is that while the adults in the process—parents, chefs, grant funders—are often the ones calling for increased offerings of these menu items in schools, many of the kids in the target audience say they *don't* want the dishes they eat at home; they want to eat popular "American" menu items when at school.

In addition, in districts as large as Austin or Detroit, diversity across neighborhoods presents unique menuing challenges in the face of maintaining a central menu that provides equity at all sites. Austin ISD's Diane Grodek shares one occasion when tamales were on the menu: "One side of town loved them, while kids at other sites didn't realize you weren't supposed to eat the husks."

But school nutrition leaders and advocates remain committed to this goal. "Because I have the ability to provide this equity in the menu, I have the responsibility to do so," says Frank. Chef Irene Pawlisch agrees: "I love hearing a student exclaim, 'I know this food. This is *my* food.' This is what drives my recipe development choices."

Consultant Rebecca Polson has also discovered that the process builds connections with student customers. "I remember testing a Somali Spinach Chickpea Curry at a middle school, and this is the age group that tends to give the most honest feedback. The process opened the door for me to explain that our intention was to create a safe and welcoming space for *all* students in the cafeteria," she recounts. "I acknowledged that although we were trying to make the dish taste like Mom's version at home, the restrictions for school meals—the regulations, the cost, the labor—meant that it probably won't. I think we always get better feedback when we have the opportunity to explain the hurdles that K-12 chefs must jump over."

Beyond providing greater menu inclusivity, all the chefs agree that adding authentically inspired recipes to the menu helps to provide greater exposure, raise awareness and advance the palates of *all* students in the district.



Keep it simple and straightforward. Deliver something that works from a flavor and performance perspective and that will be easy to execute.



that I got started even before breakfast. However, by my first cup of coffee, I was thinking, 'This just isn't very good.' But I'm not giving up on it." [Editors' Note: Within a few hours of the interview, Chef Monica sent a text revealing that she'd successfully solved this particular puzzle.]

Like Chef Rebecca Polson, Chef Samantha Gasbarro, SNS, is another former district chef who is now leveraging her experience and expertise as an independent consultant, as well as serving as Executive Chef for **HealthySchoolRecipes.com**. Along with business partner Cathy Powers, Gasbarro frequently develops new K-12 recipes for corporate and non-profit clients with the goal of highlighting a specific product or ingredient.

"We'll start by brainstorming a long list of recipe ideas: breakfast, lunch, sides, hot, cold, grab 'n' go, all aspects of the school meals operation," she explains, also noting increased interest in recipes that reflect the global pantry. The client will pick their top favorites from the list, often based on the product characteristics they intend to showcase in their

marketing—this recipe shows how you can hold the product, that one will be popular with the teen demographic and so on. "So, we may come up with 16 ideas, but only develop eight of them. Or they'll want three recipes and we'll give them six choices."

### THE K-12 FACTOR

While some chefs may take a broad view of a recipe initially, before considering the unique factors of K-12 foodservice, others are so immersed in this segment, it's on their mind from the get-go. "It's always in the forefront," says Polson. "I'm always asking myself, 'Is this appropriate for children? What equipment is going to be required? Can it hold for a long time? How will it look on the line?'" Gasbarro agrees: "This is now how I view the world. I'll eat a restaurant dish and think, 'Hmmm, I wonder how this credits?'"

Coulter points to the challenge of accommodating the wide range of taste preferences among kids: "When I do a collection of recipes, I may try to include different levels of spicy heat

The advertisement features a vibrant background of various vegetables including carrots, sweet potatoes, and pumpkins. In the center, a large red 'V' logo with a leaf and the word 'blend' is displayed. Below the logo, the text 'VEGETABLE OPTIONS THAT DON'T TASTE LIKE VEGETABLES!' is written in a bold, green, outlined font. To the right, two product images are shown: a carton of Ruby Red® vegetable juice and a carton of Sunset Sip® vegetable juice. Below the Ruby Red carton, it says 'Credits as a 1/2 cup Red/Orange Vegetable'. Below the Sunset Sip carton, it says 'Credits as a 1/2 cup or 3/4 cup Red/Orange Vegetable'. At the bottom, a small text line reads 'To learn more visit [countrypure.com/red-orange-vegetables/](http://countrypure.com/red-orange-vegetables/)' and a Country of Origin logo is in the bottom right corner.



or make it a priority to include recipes that speak to both the adventurous eater and kids who are more timid."

If chefs are struggling to get it "right," they can take some comfort in the luxury of time when ideating recipes for schools. "There's not a lot of spontaneity in creating recipes for school," says Grodek, citing a timeline that can stretch as long as 18 months from ideation to service. "I'm always rolling out new menu items, but I thought about them a year or more in advance."

Polson agrees: "It's not like you need to produce a daily special." The benefit, she adds, is that "you often have a lot of time to research and perfect the recipe, playing around with it. I think it's important to have fun with the process."

Some K-12 chefs find it difficult to separate recipe ideation steps from the menu development process, often considering the recipe in the context of all the components in a reimbursable meal. "I'm always thinking about what the whole tray is going to look like," says Grodek, explaining that it's not just about the meal pattern, but how a new recipe will deliver eye appeal. "You will never see me plate chicken tenders with corn," she pledges. "Similarly, I wouldn't pair sweet potatoes with spaghetti and marina, choosing cauliflower or broccoli instead."

School chefs also need to consider the skills of the employees charged with recipe implementation and any equipment limitations. Although most kitchens in Detroit Public Schools have self-prep capability, Frank and his team opt to write recipes so they can be executed in "our weakest profile equipment kitchens that might only have a steamer and a classic convection oven." Coulter, on the other hand, says she doesn't think consciously about the differences in K-12 kitchens. "School teams are really smart at figuring out adaptations to make a recipe work within their resources. As long as they have a source of heat and a bowl, it's amazing what they can do!" she says. "I just try to keep it relatively simple."

## KIDS FIRST

As Food and Agriculture Literacy Chef in the Nutrition Services department at **Houston Independent School District (HISD)**, Brittany Jones *doesn't* write recipes for the cafeteria serving lines, yet creating kid-friendly options is still

priority No. 1. Jones' work is centered on being a culinary educator, teaching children (and their families) about food, nutrition and agriculture. Whether through in-person demos, or via her compelling HISD Café video series ([www.houstonisd.org/Page/197530](http://www.houstonisd.org/Page/197530)), Jones is using her culinary talents to make meaningful connections with kids of all ages.

Her recipe ideation process varies based on the project at hand. Jones might be tasked with developing a recipe around a star ingredient, such as the pre-assigned produce item of the day in district culinary classes. For HISD Café, she produces four videos every month (one for breakfast, lunch, snack and dinner), which entails a *lot* of recipe creation. In this series, she and her colleagues also aim to share recipes that reflect as many different cultures as possible, often using annual awareness observances like Black History Month, Hispanic Heritage Month or the Lunar New Year to direct her efforts. She might create recipes for parents to prepare and kids to eat—or for the family to make together. The fundamental goal is always the same: Develop recipes that kids will actually eat. (And she is clearly doing something right here, as "Miss Betti" Wiggins, HISD Nutrition Services Officer, has asked Jones to translate some of her recipes for school menus.)

## A LEARNING OPPORTUNITY

Jones embraces the research component of her ideation process. For example, in the early stages of preparing for Hispanic Heritage Month, research led Jones to seek out lucuma, a South American fruit. But when she couldn't find it on grocery shelves anywhere in the Houston metro area, Jones went back to the internet, trying to identify a similar alternative. This led to the Caribbean mamey fruit and her subsequent creation of a recipe for "Mamey Nice Cream" ([www.tinyurl.com/MameyNiceCream-SNmag](http://www.tinyurl.com/MameyNiceCream-SNmag)). "It might be exotic, but it was still cost-effective and available as a whole fruit, which is where I always want to start," she recounts. "That recipe is something I'm really proud of, because I learned a lot about the ingredients along the way."

Pawlisch has reached out to cookbook authors to get their opinions on resolving tricky culinary situations. One time, upon a disagreement with a supervisor as to the approach for a particular recipe, she connected with an expert in Indian cuisine and had "a great chat" about how to adapt recipes to a K-12 setting. ("As I like to be as authentic as possible, I did not feel it was appropriate to use Sriracha in a Butter Chicken," she explains.)

## INTO THE KITCHEN

The school chefs who shared their process with *SN* differ a bit when it comes to the steps they take to prepare and test a new cafeteria recipe. Polson, for example, says her first batch is usually 50 servings. She wants to know right away if it's going to work operationally in a K-12 setting. "I understand flavor profiles and culinary principles already, so I don't need to start with a single serving or smaller batch."

While Jones has use of a test kitchen and access to many

schools, her recipes are purposely family size. So, she often starts at home, turning to her son as Chief Tester, who, at 4 years old, can be brutally candid in his criticisms, Jones reports. "But if he doesn't like something, I try to find out the *why*. Is it the flavor? The texture? The way it looks or smells?" Since COVID, Coulter also works mostly from home, turning to her husband, "who has kidlike tastes," she says, for first impressions of new recipes.

When Grodek gets into the test kitchen, her first goal is to make it delicious. "I'm always trying to get a new recipe to taste as close to what it would in the real world," she explains. "But then, I'll get to my computer and look at the sodium and say, 'Oh, shoot. I need to finesse this.' For Coulter, this kind of "retrofitting" of the recipe is "a nightmare," so she'll do the computer work before using a single ingredient.

Frank agrees that "schoolifying" recipes is the step that takes the most time. But he's adamant that it needs to be done in tandem with the flavor building. "Recipes can be very different on paper and in the kitchen," he warns. "It can fully comply with the rules, but taste like cardboard, or taste delicious but be impossible to work into a school menu. You have to work toward the perfect balance."

With a degree in culinary nutrition, Gasbarro says she doesn't find it difficult to create scratch-prepared recipes that meet the nutrition standards required for school meals. She'll

lean on seasonings to avoid added sodium ("granulated garlic goes a long way in enhancing flavors") and finds she's not using a lot of cheese or other sources of naturally occurring sodium either. Another sodium hint? Use kosher salt! "The flavor disperses more easily and since the granules are larger than table salt, it has less sodium per teaspoon," Gasbarro details.

She also eschews granulated sugar in favor of using honey or maple syrup. "I always want to make fats and sugars count toward building flavor," Gasbarro explains. "I love working with whole foods to create flavors, like using blueberries in a barbecue sauce or glaze."

### READY TO WRITE YOUR OWN RECIPES?

"Just get in the kitchen and keep working," advises Jones.

"Practice gaining confidence." She also encourages her peers to always stay alert for new trends, new products, new ideas. "I recently discovered apple squash in my own local grocery store. I'd never seen it before. I bought it to do further investigation, and I might talk to our agricultural team about growing it on our 6-acre education farm."

Gasbarro takes a more pragmatic turn with her advice: "Weigh everything. Avoid volume measurements and you'll get more consistency and standardization in your recipes, which is helpful when you scale up." She also suggests being generous in including tips and hints that encourage efficiencies when

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writing recipes. These include mise en place-inspired techniques or making a large batch of a seasoning blend in advance and putting it in your pantry for future applications.

Pawlisch urges nascent school chefs to take advantage of the many resources available to this segment from the Institute of Child Nutrition, Chef Ann Foundation, state agencies and more. "Also, take baby steps. Start by making tweaks to existing recipes, such as making flavored mayonnaises or sour creams to offer sandwiches with different flavor profiles," she says.

"Play—remember that kids are fun to feed. Don't take the process—or yourself—too seriously. Mishaps happen," says Polson.

Coulter warns against adding a lot of "embellishments" to recipes. "Keep it simple and straightforward," she says. "Deliver something that works from a flavor and performance perspective and that will be easy to execute. People will like those recipes more than ones that are overly focused on being 'impressive.'"

"Don't think like an institution," advises Grodek. "Think like a restaurant." Frank echoes this advice, urging other school nutrition professionals to look ahead at upcoming trends. "I don't think they're going to be about cuisines, per se," he predicts. "They're going to be around expectations for ecological sourcing of products and sustainability across the food industry. This is becoming more and more important with Gen Z—and soon they are going to be parents with young kids in our programs." **SN**

*Patricia Fitzgerald is Editor of School Nutrition.*



## BONUS WEB CONTENT

### From Mind to Menu

In this month's online exclusives, school chefs share some of their recent recipe ideation hits, as well as those that missed the mark, but may have inspired a new solution, turning a "mess" into a success."

You'll find these at [www.schoolnutrition.org/bonuswebcontent/#articles](http://www.schoolnutrition.org/bonuswebcontent/#articles)