

Test Kitchen: Looking for a School Lunch Winner

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Last weekend, I cooked dinner using entries from the [Recipes for Healthy Kids](#) competition, the joint venture by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and First Lady Michelle Obama's Let's Move! campaign to improve school meals with more nutritious and kid-appealing food.



The contest invited schools around the nation to submit entries in three categories: whole grains, dark green and orange vegetables, and dry beans and peas. School teams -- to include a chef, a school nutrition professional, a community member and a student -- could enter up to three recipes each.

The schools whose recipes made it into the semi-finals are being visited by judges, and [online voting for the Popular Choice award](#) closes May 31, so I decided to try out and sample some of the entries and report.

Home testing for some of these recipes was tough. Not many people have access to ingredients like USDA Tomato Sauce or French Dressing Reduced Fat. If you don't believe in onion powder, well, you better aim for one of the other 340 submissions.

The first night I made [Tasty Tots](#), [Hippie Stix](#) and [Hoppin John Cakes w/Kickin Sauce](#), and the meal was not satisfying. But given my tendency toward kitchen improvisation, the results may or may not have resembled the originals.

The next night, I got smart and went to the store to get all the ingredients listed for [Porcupine Sliders](#). This included whole wheat buns, ground turkey, celery, dried cranberries, a smidge of garlic and onions, and spinach. I had the brown rice the recipe required, cooked and in the fridge.

I was tempted to amp up the seasonings -- one clove of garlic for a meal seemed little enough to be insignificant -- but I obeyed the recipe directions this time, even carefully measuring out $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon of Worcestershire sauce. (The odd measurement is a result of downsizing the recipe for home sampling; entries are cafeteria-sized, made for school cooks to work with 50 servings.)

My family ate up the Porcupine Sliders without complaint. The burgers had a surprising amount of flavor for something with so little seasoning. The recipe said nothing about whether we should skip the condiments, so we dressed our burgers with homemade ketchup and mustard.

There were no leftovers, but would I make them again? No. They were filling, but not stunning. When stretching ground meat into patties, I'd rather follow my whims.

The next night, I made [Red & Black Chili Pot Pie](#), which was submitted by Brooklyn New School, P.S. 146.

Once again, I was tempted to stray from the instructions and add more garlic and onions, but I didn't. I followed the recipe closely, and this one was a hit -- a bean chili topped with a corn grits (polenta) crust that everyone, except my pickiest eater, loved. The seasonings were balanced enough so that no one ran for

the hot sauce. (I think they just forgot we owned any.) The topping on mine was more dumpling-like than the picture, but I'm going to use this method -- nestling polenta with cheese in a flavorful stew -- again.

Looking through the entries got me curious to hear how school cooks tackle healthy eating, so I talked to the cook at my son's school.

Deirdre Kelly has fed approximately 60 students and staff members breakfast and lunch at The Albany Free School for the last five years. She faces budget constraints, and the challenges of cooking for many different palates and a wide range of ages.

"I've figured out how to keep things simple," she said. One of her tricks is making really good basics, like rice, whether it's brown or white, with butter and salt. If you're going to make black beans, use enough salt, she says.

Another tip: "I try not to have both things cooked. If I make a cooked vegetable, I'll serve raw fruit," she said. "I'll serve salad for lunch, and apple crisp."

Oven baked potato fries are in her repertoire. She serves lots of carrot sticks, cucumbers, cut oranges, and plain tomatoes.

"Kids aren't stupid. They like food," she said. "They aren't cartoon characters, and they don't need to be tricked into eating."

Kelly acknowledged that the size of her meal count is a luxury and says she is awed by people who tackle healthy eating for hundreds every day. Me too!

Her statement about keeping things simple stuck with me as I thought about what my picky eater likes to eat, and considered the recipes I made. Regardless of my inability to follow directions the first night I cooked with these recipes, I am not a fan of the methods because they don't let food be food.

The Tasty Tots recipe tucked chickpeas into yams. Hiding food is not high on my to-do list, and I have a kid who eats foods that are mostly bland and/or white. Even this boy loves sweet potato fries, cut up and oven-baked. However, he was offended by the Hippie Stix, which were also baked and then tossed with cinnamon but no salt seasoning. Sweet potatoes are already sweet. Why mess them up with cinnamon?

The goal of the Healthy Kids Recipe competition is "to create tasty, healthy, exciting new recipes for inclusion on school lunch menus across the country" -- school food that kids will actually eat.

As commendable as this effort is, maybe recipes are not what we need to teach kids how to eat. Maybe we just need to let food be naked, and speak for itself. A stalk of celery is a stalk of celery. An apple is an apple.

Of course, this is naïve. Advertising speaks so much louder than food, as demonstrated by the new ad campaign from the baby carrot marketers. "Eat 'Em Like Junk Food," is the trademarked command.

For the school teams competing in the Recipes for Healthy Kids challenge, \$12,000 in prizes will be shared. If you're wondering what's for dinner this week, take a gander at the recipes. Voting for the popular choice winner lasts through the month.