



Students create their own recipes in a fun cooking competition involving local chefs.

Objective

Build food preparation skills and motivate students to try fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and other healthy food options prepared in new ways.

The Event

Student teams work with local chefs to create their own recipes. Later, during a schoolwide event, students prepare the dishes they envisioned, and judges (a panel of local chefs or the student body) evaluate each dish. The team with the highest-scoring dish is named the winner. The competition can involve multiple award levels or even different categories of awards (e.g., best vegetable dish, best whole-grain dish).

Planning

Form a “Chef in You” planning team. Involve wellness committee members, school nutrition directors, teachers, afterschool program directors, students, local chefs, and registered dietitians from your community. Hold an initial planning meeting 2 months prior to the event to determine event details. What will constitute a student team? Who is eligible to enter (for example, what grades)? How will students register for the competition? Where will the competition be held?

During the initial meeting, committee members should determine when and where to hold the competition. (For instance, consider using the school auditorium in order to accommodate friends, families, and other guests.) Who will secure the availability of this space? How will ingredients be stored?

Determine the date of the “cookoff” event. Consider holding the event after school hours in March, during National Nutrition Month, and invite the whole school, as well as families and friends, to attend and cheer on student teams. Determine how long each student team will have to prepare their recipe (try 45 minutes) and how each will present its dishes. Try holding the competition in conjunction with a nutrition and wellness fair, with displays about healthy food choices and physical activity.

Plan for how chefs (and others) will work with student teams. Local chefs can meet with students prior to the event to help develop recipes and conduct taste-tests of healthy food choices the students can integrate into their dishes. The day of the event, local chefs can assist students on stage while they prepare their chosen dishes in front of the audience.

Identify the type of dishes students will create. The competition doesn't have to involve cooking over a stove or using an oven – students can create a yogurt-based vegetable dip with a variety of spices and prechopped vegetables, or a salad made from locally sourced produce. Think about the equipment and resources you have available for storing and preparing food. Alternatively, consider filming student food demonstrations from a test kitchen and then showing the videos of the finalists during the event (making sure to obtain release forms for all participants). If your school has a culinary program, this may provide both a location and a chance for students to work under the guidance of a culinary professional.

Select healthy ingredients. Featuring beans, peas, whole grains, and multicolored vegetables (especially dark green, red, and orange) is a great way to generate interest in and excitement about these typically underconsumed foods. Determine how to solicit ingredient donations from local grocery stores, farms, or restaurants. Decide how and where to announce the key

Planning (cont'd)

ingredients. Consider adding in a “mystery ingredient” unveiled the day of the event or as a part of the recipe criteria shared ahead of time. Also consider generating awareness about farm-to-school by asking students to create recipes with regionally produced foods.

If you plan to establish nutrition requirements for eligible recipes, consider who will assist students with the nutrient analysis, such as community dietitians or older students. For example, the *Recipes for Healthy Kids Competition* set the following nutrient requirements per serving: < 35 percent of total calories from fat; < 10 percent of total calories from saturated fat; < 35 percent of calories from sugar; < 480 mg sodium for side items; and ≤ 600 mg sodium for entrées (main dishes). For more information on the *Recipes for Healthy Kids Competition*, visit <http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/resource-library>.

Establish safety rules. Talk with your school district, principal, and local health department about food allergy and food safety policies. Give contestants and volunteers safety and hand-washing training. Also, provide information about rules of conduct in the food demonstration area, checking with the school administration regarding the need for permission slips, liability waivers, proper clothing, etc.

Define judging procedures and criteria. Decide what factors judges (or students) will use to evaluate the dishes and how your school will reveal the winning recipe. Consider judging against criteria such as ease of preparation and nutrition. Determine how many rounds of judging will be involved. Will you first select a group of semi-finalists based on recipe submissions and then hold a cookoff competition to determine the winner(s)? Will there be public voting? Is the student body allowed to vote on their favorite recipe?

Promote the competition. Posters, announcements over the loudspeaker, school newsletter placements, and emails are a great way to get the word out. (See page 3 for more promotion tips.) You can also promote the event through your school parent organization (e.g., PTA, PTO). If possible, consider providing student participants with paper chef hats (your parent organization or a local community organization may be willing to donate these).

Team Up Success



School

- Involve the entire school in the cookoff event through a “Popular Choice” award, where students vote for their favorite recipe.
- If the school has a garden, have teams incorporate the garden’s food into their recipes.

Classroom

- Use Team Nutrition curricula and lessons (see appendix, page 94) to teach students about your competition’s featured ingredients in a way that also meets educational standards for math, science, or English and language arts.
- Specifically, refer to Team Nutrition’s two garden-related curricula, *Dig In!* and *The Great Garden Detective Adventure* (see appendix, page 95), for ways to give a broader range of students an opportunity to create a fruit or vegetable dish. *The Discover MyPlate* curriculum (see appendix, page 94) also includes simple “Look & Cook” cards for use with kindergarteners.
- If your school offers family and consumer sciences (or home economics) classes, consider having students plan out a day’s worth of meals for a family of four. The teacher should give students a budget and a set of nutrition criteria. Tailor the degree of difficulty according to grade level.



Team Up for Success (cont'd)



Cafeteria

- School nutrition services staff can be part of teams or the judging panel and can adapt the winning recipe for inclusion on the school lunch or breakfast menu.
- The school nutrition director can recommend available ingredients and equipment to prepare the recipes and also provide suggestions on how the dish can be easily integrated into a meal that meets meal pattern requirements.



Community

- Contact local culinary programs (possibly at universities or area food banks), restaurant associations, and large hotels to solicit chef and judge volunteers.
- Ask local kitchen supply stores for prize donations to give to the winning students (such as chef's coats or gift cards).
- Consider forming a chef-school partnership through the *Chefs Move to Schools* program (<http://www.letsmove.gov/chefs-move-schools>).



Media

- Invite media to attend the competition; ask if the local newspaper will include the recipes developed in the kids' or food section of the paper.
- Invite school broadcast students to film the cooking competition and share the videos on the school's cable network or online. (Make sure to secure video release forms for students featured in videos.)
- Post blogs about the different recipes and students' experiences creating and tasting them, with students contributing to the writing.
- Share photos of the submitted dishes on the school's social media channels or Web site.



Home

- Your school's parent organization (e.g., PTA, PTO) may be able to assist you by providing volunteers for the event or funding for purchasing food and supplies.
- Invite families and friends to the cookoff event, and consider holding a meet-and-greet in the school lobby with guests and staff to taste-test creations.
- Following the event, compile all of the recipes (as well as some additional healthy school favorites) into a cookbook. Students can hold a fundraiser (for example, during Global Child Nutrition Month in April) and offer these cookbooks to families and friends for a small donation. Students can also demonstrate how to cook these recipes at home.

Schools **IN** Action

Providence Career Technical Academy in **Providence, RI**, hosts an annual *Future Chef Cook-Off*. Each year, the school selects a different group of students to participate and identifies a different recipe category for the challenge. The first year, middle school students were tasked with developing and cooking a healthy breakfast recipe; another year, students in elementary school came up with healthy salad options. Local chefs mentored the students as they developed their recipes, and guests were able to taste competition entries.

Orange County Public Schools (OCPS) in **Florida** took this one step further, partnering with *Chefs Move to Schools*. The schools participated in an event at **Edgewater High School** in **Orlando**, where chefs, school food nutrition managers, and students from 10 schools cooked healthy “chef inspired, kid approved” recipes in front of hundreds of students wearing chef’s hats in the auditorium. The students later had a chance to sample the food items, which debuted on the school menu that year. They created nutritious items such as fish tacos with tilapia, shredded carrots, red and green cabbage, bok choy, and avocado in a whole-grain tortilla; and a fruit roll with cantaloupe, melon, strawberries, and pineapple rolled in rice paper.

Six of the new recipes from the event were also submitted to the *Recipes for Healthy Kids Competition*, which provides another opportunity for chefs to work with students to enhance the school food environment. OCPS’s accomplishments through the *Chefs Move to Schools* program have earned the district national recognition, and the program serves as a model for other schools around the country.



[Photo] (L) A student chops vegetables as part of the 2012 Future Chef Cook-Off.
[Photo] (R) One of the Future Chef healthy breakfast entries: a mini mushroom quiche.