

ANTICIPATING, SAVORING & PRESERVING THE HARVEST

Hands-On Training Workshops To Increase Local Farm Products in Cafeterias



This “How to” presents how we used several hands-on, farm produce preparation workshops to connect farms and cafeterias. Our goals were to:

- Increase season-long connections between local farms, their harvests, and local cafeterias serving their products
- Emphasize farm produce and products that were often overlooked or underused in institutional cafeterias.
- Promote menu planning that considers future harvest peaks and flexible recipe development based on produce availability .
- Encourage preservation by freezing and dehydrating selected farm fruits and vegetables.



Introduction

Local farms can provide a wide array of price competitive, fresh, nutritious, delicious culinary offerings with short travel distances to the cafeteria table.

Local farm harvest often comes in abundantly available waves or short-lived peaks during the growing season. Using farm products at their peak harvest times has many advantages, such as ample availability and variety selection, reduced cost, high quality, and freshness.

Because local cafeteria workers are often not aware of when harvests are beginning, peaking, or ending, or how to prepare fresh produce in their kitchens, we needed to find ways to bridge cafeteria workers and managers with what's in season on local farms. One way to connect farms to cafeterias was using local farm products in hands-on cooking workshops. The workshops were for food service managers and cafeteria support staff and were designed to support the goals defined above.



Our Approach-Basics for Workshop Setup

Training Facility

A professional culinary training facility was available to us (New York State Wine and Culinary Center, Canandaigua, NY) but we also successfully used a well equipped high school kitchen for one workshop. Classroom size should be considered closely when using cafeteria kitchens or other local facilities. Kitchen size and equipment will guide the total number of participants. Training stations with 4-6 participants work best for hands-on workshops.

Training Staff

A professionally trained chef and an experienced food service director served as our trainers for two of the workshops. We also successfully used the food service director as the workshop leader for one of the programs.

Organize and Set the Series

We offered a series of three, three-hour long "hands-on" workshops specifically planned to span most of the local harvest season. The workshop themes each supported our goals of improving menu planning to match harvest abundance, exposing participants to produce and products less commonly prepared in institutional cafeterias while introducing produce preservation methods during peak harvest periods.

Invitations

We invited food service directors, cook managers, dieticians and all food preparation staff from local public and private cafeterias such as schools, hospitals and nursing homes, and county meal preparation facilities. Invitations were sent to obtain pre-registration and to accommodate planning and staffing for the

events. A good contact list is critical to reach desired participants. Ours had been developed from previous Farm to Cafeteria events.

Cost and Credits

We charged a nominal \$15.00 fee with the remaining costs offset by outside grants and sources. Continuing education credits were offered through the New York State Nutrition Association and the workshops qualified for American Dietetic Association credit requirements. Although fees and credits could be optional, we used them to secure registrations and to promote the "value" of the workshops since space was limited.

Event Preparation

To the extent possible, all produce and products were purchased from local farms, and local farmers were invited to the events. Recipes were provided and were modified for large and small groups to account for the various sizes of participating cafeterias.

Added Features

- Round table discussions were added to facilitate exchange over recipe variations, success stories using local products, and identifying and navigating farmer connections.
- Participating farms were highlighted in the workshops and a list of local farms was provided.
- Basic and advanced training in knife skills were offered during the workshops.
- Pre- and Post-workshop questionnaires were used to determine the usefulness of the workshops and skills that may have been acquired.



DETAILS WORKSHOP 1: Anticipating Fall Harvest

Purpose

Assist cafeteria managers and staff to become familiar with new recipes for local farm items and increase menu planning by anticipating future autumn farm harvests.

Timing

An early summer workshop was used to prepare school and other cafeterias for the autumn peaks of warm weather vegetables such as tomatoes, squash, eggplant, black beans, peppers, onions, fresh herbs, local dairy products and more! This required purchase of some “non-local” produce that was not currently in-season to emphasize the coming harvest.

Recipes Ideas

Several recipes that would seldom be used in institutional cafeterias were used such as black bean burgers, black bean hummus, pasta primavera and harvest vegetable frittata.



Preparation Skills Highlights

Participants were introduced to a number of advanced preparation skills including:

- Knife skills used in making garlic paste and slicing cherry tomatoes.
- Grilling produce such as corn, beets, peppers, and peaches.
- Using a food processor to blend sauces.



DETAILS WORKSHOP 2: Savor the Spring Harvest

Purpose

Increase the use of fresh springtime produce from local farms that is less commonly used in cafeterias and to become comfortable with preparing menu items “on the fly” using available ingredients.

Timing

We used an early spring workshop to emphasize early spring leafy greens, asparagus and new ways to use spring fruits such as strawberries and juneberries.

Recipes Ideas

Asparagus was highlighted in various forms including: asparagus soup, quinoa asparagus salad, and dressed asparagus. Also created were spinach-strawberry salad, spring vegetable frittata, fruit and yogurt parfaits, and ideas for using local artisan cheeses in institutional recipes. To stimulate “on the fly” preparation, we used a team challenge to create a novel dish with skills learned in the workshop from a “mystery basket” of eggs, juneberries, millet and a local cheese.

Preparation Skills Highlights

Participants were introduced to a number of advanced preparation skills including:

- Making an emulsification or vinaigrette,
- Making a reduction with berries or other fruits.
- Making a roux (cream soup base).
- Cooking grains such as quinoa and millet.
- Using a food processor to blend sauces.

DETAILS WORKSHOP 3: Extending the Harvest

Purpose

This workshop taught strategies for preservation of fall produce using safe and easy techniques available to institutional kitchen facilities. Three dehydrators were purchased and made available for participants to use after the workshop was completed.

Timing

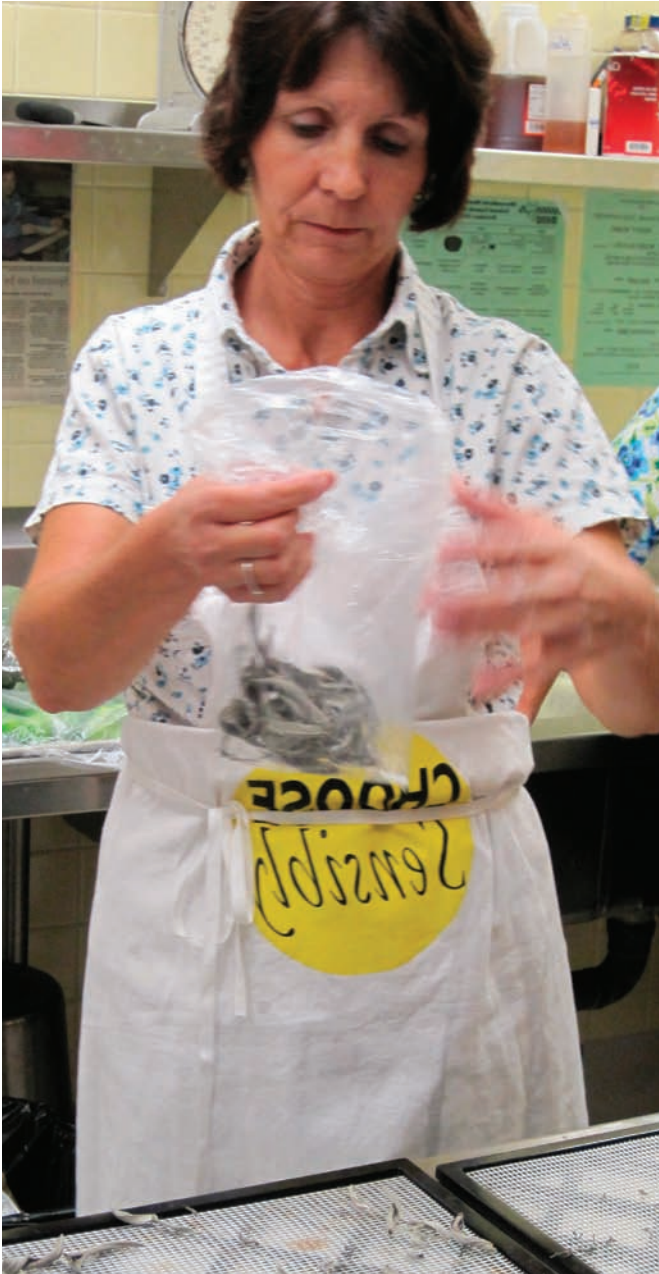
The workshop was conducted in early fall when a wide array of fall harvested fruits and vegetables were available such as tomatoes, peppers, broccoli, cauliflower, apples, grapes, leafy greens and herbs.

Recipes and Approaches

Dehydration – Nine tray, table top, thermostatically controlled dehydrators were used to demonstrate drying garlic, sliced apples and pears, drying and seasoning sweet corn, and drying seedless grapes. Low temperature dehydration was demonstrated to emphasize preservation of natural enzymes and nutrient value. Samples of dehydrated apples, pears, zucchini, tomatoes, corn, herbs and garlic were prepared beforehand for tasting and to distribute to participants in the workshop.

Blanching and Freezing – Broccoli and cauliflower were used to demonstrate cleaning, preparation, blanching, ice-water cooling, packaging and freezing these vegetables for later use. A standard protocol for freezing vegetables was provided to the participants. Other fall produce that could be preserved using similar techniques were discussed along with direct freezing of produce such as tomatoes and peppers.





Workshop Results and Outcomes

- The three training events were attended by 60 local participants.
- In the Savor the Spring Harvest training, 100% reported learning new useable, local foods recipes, 83% reported learning new technical skills, and 89% reported new farmer connections.
- Participants in the Anticipating the Harvest reported that 92% acquired new skills and 4 new farmers were recruited for our FingerLakes Farm to Cafeteria effort.
- Extending the Harvest resulted in at least 800 pounds of broccoli, 200 pounds of cauliflower and 70 pounds of winter squash being frozen by seven school districts.
- Frozen vegetables were estimated to be high price competitive with purveyor products, with the added advantage of being locally grown and processed.
- One school experimented with dehydrating an array of fall fruits and vegetables after the workshop.



This project was generously funded by a Northeast SARE Sustainable Communities Grant. See the full report at www.nesare.org, project report CNE10-069. The project was managed by Seeking Common Ground, www.seekingcommonground.org.

Feedback from Workshop Participants

“Thanks for the great variety of fresh fruits and veggies—everything tastes better with the fresh produce”

“Great class—gave me a lot to think about for our lunch program”

“How to prepare and work with ingredients I have not used before”

“I’ve never tried grilled beets—I will”

“Cooking with vegetables is easy if you think it is and just do it”



Virtually all participants were newly introduced to a local cheese company, showing the ease of including value added local farm products.