

# Planning, Implementing, and Assessing Taste-Test Surveys

Numerous tools help to determine students' meal preferences—taste-test surveys are one option. Student taste-test surveys provide menu planners and production staff feedback on menu item popularity. This information can also be shared with brokers, manufacturers, and distributors. Taste-test surveys are used to convey student preferences for the items sampled. Menu planners can decide whether to add these items to the menu based on the results and student feedback. Here are some considerations while planning, implementing, and assessing taste-test surveys.

## Planning

- Determine the purpose of the taste-test:
  - ▶ Is it to sample a potential new menu item?
  - ▶ Is it to gather student feedback on three to four versions of one menu item for bid purposes?
- Ensure the potential menu items you want to sample are appropriate for your program.
- Plan to test no more than three or four items with any one group of students to avoid overwhelming them.
- Decide:
  - ▶ Who will participate in the testing – specific grades, meal periods, student groups, etc.?
  - ▶ When and where will you hold the testing – during a meal period in the cafeteria, in a classroom, etc.?
  - ▶ Who is going to set up and facilitate the testing?
  - ▶ How much time is available for the taste-test?
  - ▶ How will you gather your survey results – paper surveys, QR codes, etc.?
- Develop a summary sheet to record the survey results.

### Menu Item Considerations

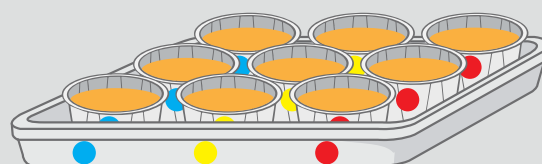
- Does it meet the nutrition standards?
- Does it meet the budget or desirable price point?
- Is it available for delivery?
- Do you have the equipment to properly prepare the product?
- Does your staff have the time and skill to prepare it properly?
- Do you have adequate storage for the item?
- Is it appetizing (appearance & plate coverage)?
- Will it hold well on the serving line?



- Before assessing the taste-test results, decide on an “acceptability” rate to help you determine whether or not to modify or menu the item.
  - ▶ For example, Wisconsin Team Nutrition used an 85% acceptability rating when conducting student taste tests of recipes featuring local agricultural products. Recipes that did not meet the 85% acceptability rating were modified based on constructive student feedback obtained from the [Wisconsin Team Nutrition Taste Test Ballot](#).

## Implementing

- Use disposable soufflé cups or boats for the samples. Students may pick up the samples from the serving line, or cafeteria staff may take them into the dining room, a classroom, or another designated area.
- Use color-coded dots or numbers to prevent biased answers instead of labeling the samples with their description ("current," "new," "low sodium").
- Provide a taste-test ballot for each item sampled.
- Display a sample plate of the complete serving for reference, ideally with other meal components, so students can see what the served meal will look like.
- Follow food safety and sanitation standards. Keep hot samples hot and cold samples cold and cover as needed.
- Explain to the students that you value their opinion and want their feedback to encourage them to participate and share their ideas.
- Provide sample items in a manner that promotes customer acceptability. For example, if testing a sauce, accompany it with an appropriate “food partner.”
- Note verbal comments made during the taste test that may also be helpful in menu development.



### Taste-Test Resources

- Check out USDA Team Nutrition's [Taste-Testing Event Resources](#) page for posters, stickers, and social media graphics that can be downloaded, printed, and ordered by schools that participate in the USDA Child Nutrition Programs.
- Wisconsin Team Nutrition provides a [sample taste-test ballot](#) for middle and high school students on ICN's [Child Nutrition Sharing Site](#).

# Assessing

- When assessing a recipe, refer to the product evaluation phase—formal evaluation procedures outlined in the [USDA Recipe Standardization Guide for School Nutrition Programs](#).
  - ▶ Generally, if the product or recipe is found acceptable ...
    - Menu and assess student satisfaction of the item three times on the serving line before incorporating it into a cycle menu.
    - You may need to modify how often the item is offered within a cycle menu; students can even become tired of the most popular items.
    - Continue to monitor your production records and plate waste for the item; adjust your menu accordingly.
  - ▶ If the product or recipe is not found acceptable ...
    - You will likely need to reject the product (do not purchase it).
    - You might be able to revise the recipe based on constructive student feedback if descriptors regarding taste, texture, etc. were included in the taste-test survey. Refer to the [Wisconsin Team Nutrition Taste Test Ballot](#) for ideas. Upon revision, the recipe would need to be retested.
    - You should verify that the recipe was prepared correctly to ensure the steps were followed. For example, if they were tasting a chicken product plain, and the feedback was that there was not enough breading, they could try preparing it in a sauce and re-testing.

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