

Cafeteria Chronicles: Palo Alto Unified School District

Students' voices are key to making successful menu changes.

At **Palo Alto Unified School District** in Palo Alto, CA, students made it known they wanted more scratch prepared meals on the lunch menu, including ingredients grown locally in California. This feedback was collected through suggestion boxes in the cafeterias, during food samplings and student leadership groups.

Taking their feedback to heart, Child Nutrition Manager Alva Spence and Chef Justin Jatiram collaborate and develop new recipes each year, which debut at their Annual Tasting Day event. To prepare the staff for the annual event each fall, the district uses staff development days during summer break to train the staff in scratch cooking techniques and preparing the new recipe concepts.

Check out the Annual Tasting Day event at Palo Alto in this [video](#).

New recipes from the district's Annual Tasting Day included:

- Vegetarian Chili with Homemade Cornbread
- Jerk Chicken
- Chicken Pho
- Tofu Pho
- Bahn Mi Tofu
- Chana Masala with Rice

In developing the recipes for Chicken Pho and Tofu Pho, the team included reduced sodium chicken base (Chicken Pho) and vegetable base (Tofu Pho), charred onion, ginger, cinnamon sticks, cilantro stems and serrano chiles. Using these herbs and seasonings in place of salt helped to reduce sodium by over 400 milligrams and earned the district two Healthy Meals Incentives (HMI) Recognition Awards for Innovative School Lunch Makeover and Innovation in the Preparation of School Meals. These two dishes were added to the lunch menu after Annual Tasting Day, and the district saw a 12% increase in participation when these dishes were served on “Pho Fridays.”

Let's hear it for the team at Palo Alto Unified School District for leading the way in school nutrition!

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