

Cafeteria Chronicles: Celebrating the Adventure at the Fall 2024 Healthy Meals Summit

The USDA and Action for Healthy Kids recently welcomed over 700 school nutrition professionals at the Fall 2024 Healthy Meals Summit for three days of learning, innovating, and networking. With the theme “Join the Adventure: Celebrating the Champions of School Nutrition,” this event highlighted collaboration, creativity, and the drive to enhance school meal programs across the nation.

The Summit kicked off on Monday, October 21, with the much-anticipated School Meals Cooking Challenge: Adventure on a School Lunch Tray, hosted by the [Chef Ann Foundation](#). This competition showcased the culinary creativity of local students from Clark County School District’s ProStart Culinary Arts program, part of the National Restaurant Association, who collaborated with chefs from the Chef Ann Foundation to prepare a reimbursable school meal from a basket of mystery proteins and a selection of standard pantry ingredients.

Teams featured student-chef pairs, including Gabriela Lim with Chef Rachel Reed-Sanow, Monse Valencia with Chef Eli Seidman, Nicole Patague with Chef Janien Bishop, and Prinz Villagrancia with Chef Bethany Markee. Among the standout dishes were Fish Tacos, Broccoli Macaroni and Cheese, and the winning [Thai Tofu Tacos](#) with [Spicy Mexican Carrots](#) prepared by Villagrancia and Markee. The judges praised all teams for their innovation, bold flavors, focus on nutrition, and practical approaches adaptable to school meal programs.

Watch this school meals cooking challenge [video](#)!

The evening concluded with the Celebration of School Nutrition Champions Reception & Networking Event, where attendees shared experiences, forged connections, and celebrated their dedication to school nutrition.

The Summit continued Tuesday, with an inspiring keynote address delivered by Chef Curtis Aikens, renowned for his commitment to using fresh, local ingredients and empowering communities. His message underscored the importance of resilience and passion in school nutrition. Attendees also heard important updates from USDA, had the opportunity to explore the School Nutrition Walk & Learn Expedition Hall, and enjoyed a closing keynote from Chef Ann Cooper of the Chef Ann Foundation about scratch cooking in schools.

The final day of the Summit focused on fostering peer connections and translating ideas into action. Attendees had the opportunity to listen to best practices being shared in an

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HMI Recognition Awardee panel, learn about free resources available to them through USDA's Team Nutrition and Institute of Child Nutrition, and learn about the power of joy with Dr. Deonna Smith. Throughout the Summit, attendees also participated in various breakout sessions where school nutrition leaders shared best practices on topics such as plant-based meals, local food procurement, scratch cooking, nutrition and physical activity, and food justice.

The Fall 2024 Healthy Meals Summit underscored the power of collaboration, creativity, and community in advancing school nutrition. The diverse sessions, hands-on activities, and meaningful discussions equipped attendees with renewed inspiration and practical insights to bring positive change to their school meal program.

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