



**Green Beans. Apples. Frozen Diced Chicken. Sliced American Cheese.**

There are some items you expect to see each year on the USDA Foods Available List for schools participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). And then there are other products whose presence might come as something of a surprise. (Did you anticipate Dried Cranberries, Mashed Sweet Potatoes, Diced Mushrooms, Breaded Catfish Filets and Whole Grain Tortillas when you first saw them on the list?) Ever wonder how the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) compiles this list each year?

In this article, we offer a look at the process used by the staff at USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, Food Distribution Division to compile the USDA Foods Available List for schools. We apply five categories of standards in our rigorous review:

- quality and safety standards
- nutrition standards
- American-grown
- flexibility and versatility
- customer feedback

As you place orders for the upcoming school year, be confident that USDA has kept all of these factors in mind in providing you with this valuable resource for your school meals program. We are always striving to ensure that the USDA Foods program continues to evolve in ways that reflect both current school meal requirements and student preferences.



**QUALITY AND SAFETY STANDARDS**

USDA understands how important it is that school districts be able to rely on consistent, high-quality food products. As you know, USDA is a large federal agency, managing many important agriculture-, food- and nutrition-related functions, such as administering the federal child nutrition programs and overseeing the grading and inspection of meat, poultry and produce.

These different areas of expertise make the agency well-equipped to support a food purchasing program that emphasizes only the highest-quality agricultural products that meet strict inspection requirements, such as product size, color, formulation, nutrients and packaging. Those that do not meet the requirements are rejected. For example, in order to be cleared for distribution to schools, a product like spaghetti sauce must meet certain formulation requirements, while also passing inspection for color and thickness. All USDA Foods meat products undergo microbial testing to ensure the highest standard of food safety. Fruits and vegetables must come from growers that follow Good Agricultural Practices and meet stringent food safety protocols.

USDA stands firm in its commitment to prioritize quality and safety and only offers products that meet the defined specification requirements. Should you ever have concerns that a USDA Food is not meeting quality standards, simply contact your state agency staff to make a report, and they will work with USDA to investigate and resolve the issue.



**NUTRITION STANDARDS**

It should be no surprise to learn that nutrition plays an important role in determining the formulations of various USDA Foods. After all, since USDA sets the nutrition standards and meal pattern requirements for school meal programs, it's our charge to ensure that USDA

Foods are similarly aligned—we want to make it easier for schools to meet these requirements! What you may not know is how USDA accomplishes this goal.

At the core is a commitment to work continually with growers, manufacturers and processors to get the right products to you. For example, since all grains must be whole grain-rich in the upcoming 2014-15 school year, USDA is offering *only* whole grain-rich items for direct delivery beginning in July 2014. This includes a selection of grain products that includes whole-wheat pasta, whole-grain tortillas and brown rice—even the breadings on the catfish strips will be whole grain-rich this year!

While a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, beans, chicken, beef, cheese, flour, pasta and rice always has been available through the USDA Foods program, long-time school nutrition veterans may have noticed significant changes to the types of products in these categories that have become available. Once again, the specifications for these products incorporate recent nutrition priorities and accommodate the changing needs of schools. In fact, over the past 10 years, USDA has made changes to product specifications in every food category to improve the nutritional value of the items provided to schools and be firmly aligned with school meal pattern requirements.

For example, USDA offers only low-sodium and no-salt-added canned and frozen vegetables. You'll only find canned and frozen fruit that is unsweetened or in extra-light-syrup. USDA Foods also offers a wide range of meat and cheese options featuring reduced-sodium and -fat profiles that are equal to or lower than similar commercial products. The result of these and other improvements is a product list that features an array of fresh, frozen, canned and dried fruits and vegetables; numerous whole-grain products; and lean meats, poultry, fish and other proteins.

And you'll find some newer additions to the USDA Foods list to further support you in meeting the meal pattern requirements. These include:

- frozen spinach and broccoli, which will help you serve more dark green vegetables;

- bulk pinto beans to offer more legumes as finished items through the processing program;

- applesauce cups, which are popular for grab 'n' go breakfasts and lunches;

- dried cranberries to provide yet another fruit option; and

- lower-sodium mozzarella cheese sticks, which students enjoy with chef salads or as snacks.

Going forward, USDA will continue to review product specifications to determine where changes can be made to improve the nutrition profile, while still providing appealing products. This ongoing process involves nutritionists, food scientists and industry experts all working together to understand how changes to an item's nutrition profile might affect other factors, such as its appearance, texture, taste and performance. All of us want to ensure that school districts can rely on USDA Foods as key components of nutritious *and* delicious meals.



### AMERICAN-GROWN PRODUCTS

**Y**ou may have wondered why USDA does not offer its school customers menu items like bananas, pineapple, mandarin oranges or olive oil? These products are primarily grown *outside* of the United States, *and* the USDA Foods program has a dual mission of providing healthy food and supporting American farmers. For USDA, this means that 100% of the products it purchases must be grown, processed and packaged in the United States or its territories. And since USDA supplies food to schools all across the nation, it must work with a domestic supply that is large enough to provide food to thousands of schools across the country. With a low volume of olive and banana trees grown in the United States, for example, USDA would be hard-pressed to add such products to the USDA Foods Available List.

Fortunately for schools, our country has several diverse climates and lots of

wide open space that is perfect for food production. The United States agricultural system produces an amazing variety of foods, from berries to broccoli, plus beans, beef, brown rice and much more. That's why USDA Foods currently offers more than 50 separate agricultural products available in different forms for a list that features more than 200 individual items!

This commitment to domestic products may seem like a limitation to some, but it offers a tremendous opportunity to states and school districts that have made a commitment to prioritizing more locally and regionally sourced menu items. Indeed, USDA facilitates the support of local agriculture in a variety of ways. For example, did you know that USDA tracks the state of origin for all USDA Foods? In 2012 data, we learned that more than half of our 50 states provided a minimum of 10 million pounds of agricultural product to schools through the USDA Foods program, making them local to someone!

In addition, schools can use their USDA Foods entitlement to order local produce through the Department of Defense Fresh Fruits and Vegetables (DoD Fresh) program. DoD contracts with produce vendors that deliver regionally, so the produce you receive often supports regional and local growers. For more information about DoD Fresh, visit <http://tinyurl.com/dodfreshfvp>.

USDA Foods depends on a healthy, vibrant agricultural system to continue to supply menu items and ingredients to schools. While USDA will continue to honor its commitment to supporting domestic agriculture and American farmers, as well as school districts, it's important to note that uncontrollable factors like weather can greatly affect the domestic supply of items. For example, the drought in California that is expected to continue this year may affect the availability of certain fruits on the USDA Foods Available List for the upcoming school year. Be assured, however, that USDA will make every effort to provide schools with as many choices, in all categories, as possible.



As school menus continue to change and reflect both nutrition standards and student preferences, USDA is committed to ensuring you have access to high-quality, healthy ingredients that can serve as staple items in your school meal programs.



**FLEXIBILITY AND VERSATILITY**

**H**ave you ever wondered why there are no less than 14 different apple products available to you through the USDA Foods program? Well, consider the varied needs of our customers! School districts participating in the NSLP and receiving USDA Foods are as diverse as you can imagine. They are very large and quite small. They are located in crowded urban cities and spread out across wide, rural areas. Some have the capacity to prep meals onsite from scratch while others must satellite meals from a central location. They serve a variety of ages and cultural backgrounds.

To meet such disparate needs, USDA Foods strives to offer school districts a great deal of menuing and preparation flexibility. You can order many individual menu items or ingredients in various forms (fresh, canned, frozen, dried or bulk for processing) and in different packaging sizes. We understand that you may serve pre-sliced apples in single-serve bags for a breakfast-in-the-classroom program, cooked as a topping for pancakes, puréed in an applesauce cup for field trip lunches and served fresh in the Afterschool Snack Program. For you to do so with just one form of apple ordered through USDA Foods would be impossible.

Similarly, USDA Foods continues to offer items in very basic forms, because of the versatility these have in different recipes. For example, the menuing options are limited with items like chicken patties or nuggets. Diced chicken, on the other hand, can be served on a salad bar, used in a chicken soup or a casserole recipe or featured as an ingredient in burritos,

stir-fry or barbecue sandwiches! Offering products in such basic forms allows individual school meal operations to season and prepare menu items in ways that meet regional and cultural preferences, operational restrictions and nutrition standards. As the needs of schools continue to evolve, USDA Foods will continue to adapt to accommodate these changing needs, so that all schools are able to take full advantage of their entitlement funds.



**CUSTOMER FEEDBACK**

**C**ustomer feedback from school nutrition operators is one of the most important factors that USDA takes into consideration when making decisions about future products to make available. After all, no one benefits from the considerable time and effort made to purchase items that schools do *not* order. That's why we use a variety of methods to gather feedback about new and existing products in an ongoing effort to understand how you are using food items and how they are being received by your staff and their student customers.

Do students like and accept the menu items you have ordered from USDA Foods? Are package sizes easily handled by staff? Do you have a list of new item suggestions or changes you wish you could see implemented in USDA Foods? Speak up, because USDA is listening!

Actually, USDA's customer feedback process involves *many* different components. We assess ordering patterns. We work with partners such as SNA and the American Commodity Distribution Association (ACDA) to collect feedback. We conduct taste

tests and pilot purchases with small groups of school districts or selected states before offering a product nationally, to ensure that it's going to be the right fit for the most end users.

School districts also can provide direct input to USDA at any time by sending an e-mail to [USDAFoods@fns.usda.gov](mailto:USDAFoods@fns.usda.gov). If you have a good experience with a product and want to share the creative ways that you are using the item, send an e-mail to this account. Do the same if you have a suggestion for how to improve an item. USDA relies on all these forms of feedback to consider new products, reformulate existing product specifications or discontinue products that no longer meet your needs.

You also are encouraged to keep your state agency in the loop! Be sure to let your state agency staff know as soon as possible if you have any concerns about product quality, taste, performance or packaging so they can send feedback to USDA for further investigation and resolution.

As school menus continue to change and reflect both nutrition standards and student preferences, USDA is committed to ensuring you have access to high-quality, healthy ingredients that can serve as staple items in your school meal programs. Be a partner in the process and know that we are eager for your feedback to ensure that USDA Foods *always* meet your needs. For all the latest information about the USDA Foods program, including links to numerous resources, visit [www.fns.usda.gov/fdd/USDAfoodfacts](http://www.fns.usda.gov/fdd/USDAfoodfacts). **SNA**

---

**Laura Castro** is director of Food Distribution for USDA's Food and Nutrition Service. Photography by **Mahesh Puranik** and **Maren Wischniewski/Jiunlimited.com**.