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## Los Angeles Unified students grade district's new menu choices

### School officials hope to set the table with healthful food that students will actually eat.

By Mary MacVean, Los Angeles Times

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It's a reform effort years in the making in the nation's second-largest school system. Only this one is being carried out around a group of tables at the district's massive kitchen, where the executive chef is serving his latest creations to several dozen teenagers.

On a recent day, student food critics from East Los Angeles sit in judgment, circling thumbs-up or thumbs-down and writing comments on the new menu choices.

Hummus with whole-wheat pita, a farmers market salad and vegetable tamales? Thumbs up.

Ancho chile chicken on noodles and a quinoa salad? Thumbs down.

Israel Morales, a Garfield High School junior, samples a spoonful of *pozole*, the hominy stew, made with chicken.

"It was great, one of the best ones I've had," he said.

The effort is aimed at remaking cafeteria food in the Los Angeles Unified School District. In coming weeks, the district will do away with canned and frozen fruits and vegetables, chicken nuggets and corn dogs and begin incorporating more locally grown produce into the daily fare.

The L.A. school district has become a leader in the movement to improve school food, beginning with the landmark decision in 2004 to ban soda sales on campuses and, more recently, removing chocolate and strawberry milk from the menu. Television chef Jamie Oliver, who criticized the district for not opening its doors to his cameras a few months ago, was among those calling for the flavored milk ban.

Now, districts across the country are embracing similar efforts. In Fresno, the school district is considering the flavored milk ban, and smaller school systems are preparing much of their cafeteria food from scratch.

Over many months, the district has been bringing in students like Israel and others from a variety of schools and grade levels for taste tests at the Newman Center, near downtown, where 225,000 meals are prepared daily and shipped to campuses. For the recent tasting, about 50 students and some parents were served by the district's executive chef, Mark Baida.

Students have rejected some items. The meatloaf, for example, will not appear in cafeterias. But Greek salad and roast chicken will. Ditto for tostada salad that includes shredded cabbage, tortilla strips, corn,

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beans and cheese.

"The sauce has a really good flavor," Angel Medina, a Lincoln High School senior, said of the tortilla salad.

"It doesn't look like school food. It doesn't look greasy," said Josselyn Perez, a Garfield High sophomore.

David Binkle, the deputy director of food services, told the students to take the testing seriously: "We want to make sure you like the food, because there's no sense in throwing it in the garbage."

Between spoonfuls, the students took bites of crackers and sipped bottled water to clear their palates.

"It's going to be a drastic change," said Erika Jimenez, a junior at Roosevelt High School. "People are ready for this."

She and her peers were well-versed in food and nutrition, asking such questions as whether the *edamame* were genetically modified (no, Binkle said). Will they be serving almond milk? (No.)

L.A. Unified feeds 650,000 meals a day, 80% of them to students who qualify for free or reduced-price breakfast and lunch. It's these students, advocates say, who rely on school food for most of their daily nutrition and who are at risk of obesity and related diseases.

The district has been negotiating with food contractors for fewer processed products. It is working with fewer companies too, giving L.A. Unified more buying power. The district has found some savings: The packaged peanut butter and jelly sandwiches that won't be on the menu this year were available from relatively few companies, so they could charge higher prices.

"What we laid out for these companies was: Anything you sell for school lunch, we don't want any of it," said Binkle. "We want restaurant-quality food."

L.A. Unified also is using only bone-in chicken — rather than paying for a processor to turn it into nuggets and other items, said Baida. District officials are talking to Weiser Family Farms and McGrath Family Farm, which supply some of L.A.'s top restaurants.

"We really want to pull as many people into the conversation as we can. How can we do it better as a community? Everyone can help us," Binkle said.

"This is my 17th year in school food, and this is the biggest thing I've seen," said Sean Leer, a vice president at Gold Star Foods, which supplies L.A. Unified and provides private-label foods to retail outlets.

Leer grinned ear-to-ear as he told students at the Newman Center recently that the oranges he handed out were picked from 100-year-old trees in Redlands.

Students will notice right away that the bowls holding many of the new dishes look somewhat like those sold at supermarkets. Salads, for example, have the greens on the bottom, topped with a lightweight tray holding dressing and beans, cheese and other items.

Healthful food, however, costs money. For the 2010-11 year, the district has a food budget of about 95 cents per meal, up from last year because of cost-of-living increases and savings in other parts of the food division. Of its \$120-million food budget, about \$18 million will go to fresh produce, Binkle said.

L.A. Unified also is making changes to reduce calorie counts and sodium and to increase fruits and vegetables in anticipation of regulations expected next summer from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which runs school meal programs.

The school board is also likely to consider an updated nutrition policy this fall. Flavored waters could be one target; their sugar total "far exceeds what the superintendent wants," said Rick Boull't, the district's interim chief operating officer.

Supt. John Deasy has said he wants to make better nutrition a priority; he encouraged the board to ban the flavored milk.

Next up will be a look at the use of paper and plastic and whether the district can increase cooking from scratch in schools in a way that's equitable for all students. Half the schools have no kitchens, others have old, inoperable equipment, Binkle said.

All of this doesn't mean, however, that students can't find unhealthful things to eat. Officials and students acknowledge there's a vibrant underground market, with junk food carried onto campuses and sold by enterprising students and even some teachers.

High school campus vending machines and student stores also carry baked chips, granola bars and sports drinks, meals for some students.

Maria Leon, a mother of two students, attended the recent tasting session and said the district needs to improve all aspects of its food operation. Some students said the cafeterias run out of the best choices or the lines are too long. Others said the food is sometimes cold or overcooked. Several complained that they don't get enough time to get through the lunch line and eat; high school lunch periods are 30 minutes or less, officials say.

It's important for the district to get things right, said Matt Sharp, a senior advocate at the California Food Policy Advocates. "If the move to plain milk and the new menu the district is implementing don't work, there's a danger LAUSD would be back to all nuggets all the time. That would be a shame."

[mary.macvean@latimes.com](mailto:mary.macvean@latimes.com)

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