New Jersey develops school program

08/03/2012 11:58:42 AM
Sarah Krause

Eating locally might get a little easier for students in the Garden State.

The New Jersey Department of Agriculture recently commissioned the Rutgers Food Innovation Center to research and develop school cafeteria-ready products made with New Jersey fresh produce, said Diane Holtaway, associate director of client services for the center.

“This is an idea that everyone — parents, school foodservice directors, teachers, administrators and students — is interested in,” Holtaway said.

The intent of the project, funded by a U.S. Department of Agriculture grant, is to develop school breakfast and lunch items using local produce that also meet the requirements of the national school meal programs, Holtaway said.

While the program is still in its initial stages, the center — a food business incubator and processing facility in Bridgeton, N.J. — has helped research parameters involving cost, preparation, nutrition and taste.

It plans to commercialize the test products and integrate them into distribution so schools have access for their cafeterias.

That is, a farmer can’t simply back a truck up to a school and dump a load of fresh greens or a pile of eggplant, Holtaway said.

Providing cleaned, trimmed fresh vegetables or a sauce to be used with menu items, like pasta or lasagna, is the goal, she said.

“We need to figure out a way to bring fresh, local value-added products into the school,” she said, predicting it would be a year or two before their goal was realized.

Each year more than 800,000 pounds of locally grown produce is distributed to New Jersey schools.

On the menu

One challenge is that much of the growing season and the school year don’t coincide. The food project would, however, help create fresh, healthy products to serve to elementary through high school students throughout the entire school year.

Some kid-friendly menu items being tested:
- A breakfast yogurt-berry parfait using cranberries and blueberries;
- A vegetable sauce that blends tomatoes with zucchini, yellow squash, onions and herbs;
- An Asian stir fry mix of peppers, broccoli and onions; and
- A fajita filling using peppers, onions, herbs and seasoned peach cider.

An eggplant rollatini made with ricotta cheese blended with a sauteed mix of collard greens, kale, spinach and topped with the vegetable tomato sauce is being tested at the high school level.

“(Kids) are excited to see these new ethnic-based foods in their cafeterias,” Holtaway said.
“Kids’ palates are really expanding. Gone are the days of just chicken nuggets. They are looking for exciting new flavors and are appreciative of interesting new foods.”

For Tom Hoversen, president of Camden, N.J.-based Comarco Products Inc., getting involved with the center has been a new segment for the company and an exciting way to expose children to eggplant in school lunches.

Comarco, a vegetable processor, provides the eggplant cutlets for the eggplant rollatini.

“We see it as a new business opportunity,” he said.

“We’re behind it and we’re very hopeful.”

Holtaway said that as the idea catches on interest will spike, but everyone wants to see how it will work in a real-life market situation and how the food products are accepted.

Currently, 15-20 schools have participated in the project in some way.

“We know what our challenges are — it has to makes sense profitability-wise for farmers, and foods have to taste appealing to kids and be easy to prepare on the foodservice side,” she said.

Find this article at: