VINELAND -- A willing taste tester, Leylanie Gomez sampled eggplant rollatine with a chunky primavera sauce that may become a Sabater Elementary School lunch staple.

On Friday, Leylanie savored the dish made with eggplant picked
fresh from Flaim Farms, just six miles from her school.

"It tastes like broccoli and a red sauce," said the 7-year-old nodding her head. Deeming it her new top lunch choice, she gushed, "I like it."

What was her previous favorite?

"Chicken nuggets," she said.

For kids to eat healthy school lunches, School Principal Monica Dannenberger said they must have access to them.

There's now a team effort to make that happen on a regular basis.

The state Department of Agriculture received a $51,125 federal grant and teamed up with the Rutgers Food Innovation Center in Bridgeton to develop school menu entrees featuring Jersey Fresh.

It's difficult to feature locally grown produce in school cafeterias because most crops peak during the summer break, said Diane Holtaway of the food innovation center.

The goal of the "Made with Jersey Fresh" initiative is to develop pre-packaged easy-to-assemble school meals that will put Garden State produce on student lunch trays throughout the school year.

"It's important to farmers to have new venues for their products," Holtaway said, adding there are also nutritional benefits for students.

The food innovation center contracted Chef Anthony Geraci to develop some sample recipes. The former food service director for Baltimore Public Schools, Geraci is now working with the White House in support of First Lady Michelle Obama's push to get children eating healthy.
"I want to reintroduce real food to kids that touches some of the roots of their culture," Geraci said, developing school meals featuring new vocabulary including "sassy," "savory" and "tangy."

Geraci encourages introducing youngsters to new foods.

"Don't assume kids won't eat it," he said.

Geraci was given some guidelines for the new recipes.

The dishes have to be affordable, meet nutritional guidelines and be easy to prepare in school kitchens. They have to feature local produce supplemented with government commodities, including chicken and cheese, and appeal to students.

The chef came up with eight dishes, influenced by Italian, Hispanic and Asian cultures, that could be ready for sampling in Vineland Public Schools within a few months.

Leylanie was among the first Vineland students to taste one of the dishes when state officials gathered at Sabater on Friday to celebrate the first ever Jersey Fresh Farm to the School Week.

The dish Leylanie gave a thumbs-up to was eggplant slices rolled around a blend of low-fat ricotta cheese and savory greens, including kale, collard and spinach topped with a sauce of Jersey Fresh vegetables tomatoes, zucchini, fennel and basil.

"It's packed with nutrients," Geraci said. "It's a super food."

Based on the feedback from students, the recipes will be finalized and then made by a Jersey-based food processor. The new produce-based items will not only promote healthy kids but a healthy economy with taxpayer money being spent in their own communities, Geraci said.

Keith Nocco of Sodexo Inc., the district's food service management firm, stepped up to be a part of the pilot program by hosting the taste tests.

The Made with Jersey Fresh concept dovetails into Sodexo's goal of using local products and promoting healthy eating habits.

"I volunteered us," Nocco said. "This is something I want to be involved in -- it's a win-win."
The goal is to have two products on the school menu for a six-week test, Holtaway said.

The effort to have kids eating local produce doesn't have to be limited to school lunches, Geraci said, noting the local farm market can often provide the best values.