

## Tastings Event Guide

### Food Tasting Events At-a-Glance

#### PLAN:

- [What is the goal of the tasting?](#)
- [What item\(s\) will you be tasting?](#)
- [Where and when will you hold the tasting?](#)
- [Who will procure the ingredients? From where?](#)
- [Who will prepare the tasting?](#)
- [Where will samples be stored?](#)
- [Who will facilitate the tasting?](#)
- [What materials do you need to PREPARE the food samples?](#)
- [What materials do you need to STORE the food samples?](#)
- [What materials do you need to DISPLAY the food samples?](#) (consider contrasting colors, age appropriate creative names for sampled foods)
- [How will you link the tasting to classroom-based nutrition education?](#) What educational messages will your share? How will they be shared (posters/signage, handouts, verbally)?
- [Will students provide feedback on the sampled foods?](#)
- [Will you offer incentives for tasting?](#)



#### PROMOTE:

- [How will you promote the tasting event to students, teachers, staff, parents?](#)
- How will you share the results of the tasting with students, teachers, staff, parents?

#### IMPLEMENT:

- [What materials do you need?](#)
- [How will you set up your tasting station?](#)
- [What verbal nudges and printed educational materials will accompany the samples?](#)
- [How will you reward students for their adventurous spirit in trying new foods?](#)
- [How will you gather feedback on the samples offered?](#)

#### EVALUATE:

- [What tools will you use to evaluate the tasting and inform future events?](#)

## Tasting Events Best Practices

### PLAN

**Identify your goals:** Clarifying why you're facilitating a tasting event will influence decisions about what to taste and how the tasting is implemented. Sample goals include:

- To educate:
  - To understand where and how foods are grown
  - To support/complement a classroom lesson
- To introduce:
  - To introduce new, healthy, nutrient-dense foods (new items that may appear in school meals, in the school garden, or for general experience)
  - To gather feedback on potential menu items
  - To highlight current menu items to increase selection
- To support school meals
  - To increase participation in school meals
  - To improve perception of school meals programs
  - To model best practices for displaying, promoting, and serving healthy foods

### What foods will you taste?

Based on your goals, you may organize an event to taste foods that:

- Are linked to a nutrition lesson or grown in the school garden
- Highlight observance months/days (National Blueberry Month, Homegrown School Lunch Week, National Salad Month)
- Demonstrate seasonality and highlight local farms
- Are low-selling items from the school menu, perhaps presented in different ways (sliced vs. whole)

The resources available for preparation may also impact your decisions...do you have time to prepare guacamole samples for 1,200 students? See the [Logistics section](#) for considerations in planning production of your samples.

Check with the school nurse for student allergy information and try to be as inclusive as possible. Consider having a gluten-free or dairy-free option during your food tasting.

### Where and when will your food tasting be?

Will your tasting event occur...:

- In the cafeteria during lunch?
- At a special event such as a field day or health fair?

#### Plan Ahead for Students with Allergies

- ✓ Ask an administrator if the school has any policies or best practices for addressing food allergies during school events.
- ✓ Request a list of all students known to have allergies from the school nurse (for classroom-based tastings, confer with the teacher).
- ✓ Share the foods being served and all of their ingredients with the school nurse, so s/he can contact students with allergies and their teachers.
- ✓ Put up a sign at your tasting with all of the food's ingredients, and a special notation if it contains any of the "Big 8" allergens (dairy, egg, fish, peanut, shellfish, soy, tree nuts, and wheat).
- ✓ Remember that some students may not be able to articulate that they have an allergy, so never force anyone to take a sample.

- During arrival or dismissal (potentially engaging parents?)?
- In the classroom (as part of a lesson provided to the whole school)?

The timing, the foods you taste, and the number of students participating will all impact where your food tasting is located. You might use a classroom, the school cafeteria, or a lobby. Arrange the time and place by coordinating with teachers, food service staff, and any administrators in charge of common space reservations.

Place your sampling station in a high-traffic area so students will be more likely to try the foods. If the station is too far out of the way, some students may not approach the station.

### **Logistics of a tasting event**

#### *Procurement:*

FSNE funds can be used to provide samples of foods for tasting events at collaborating schools. Tastings should link to nutrition education curricula. A sample should be **one or two bites**.

If your tasting event will occur in the cafeteria, and if your goal is linked to selection of menued or potentially menued items, coordinate the tasting with the cafeteria manager. It's a great way to get them involved in nutrition promotion, and can help support their efforts to move more healthy food. Ask the cafeteria manager if their distributor might provide samples of a produce item you'd like to feature—many will do this for free!

#### *Prep:*

Are you preparing the samples, or will the cafeteria staff? Will you prepare the samples off site, or will you ask the cafeteria manager to prepare samples in the schools' kitchen? If you are sampling a recipe that is prepared in a large batch, consider whether you will portion samples before the event, or spoon out portions as students approach the sampling station.

#### *Storage:*

Where will your prepared samples be stored? Don't assume that you can use the cafeteria's refrigeration—they are often very strapped for space. If transporting and storing samples in coolers be sure that they remain at 41° or below. During service, cold foods can be held at room temperature for up to six hours as long as it never reaches 70°.

#### *Service:*

Arrange to have at least two people at your sample station. This can include FSNE educators, food service staff, parent volunteers, and perhaps even students interested in promoting school nutrition. Be sure that everyone who will be serving is trained on food safety procedures, including proper hand washing.

### **Materials and tools for your tasting event**

#### *Promotional materials:*

Flyers, letters to parents, and sample morning announcements are downloadable from the [Tasting Event Materials Checklist](#).

*Preparation, storage, and display:*

Use the [Tasting Event Materials Checklist](#) to identify the materials you'll need to safely prepare and store samples, and set up a sampling station that makes students want to try new foods!

*Educational materials:*

The [Tasting Event Materials Checklist](#) includes a list of items to help deliver nutrition education messages during the tasting and link to classroom content. The checklist includes links to signage and other educational materials to share nutrition information about samples, remind students of lessons they completed in the classroom, and give creative names to foods. Refer to Sample Food Names for Use with Elementary School Students for ideas for creative names for foods.

If possible, make copies of recipes to send home with students.

Post the [Tasting Rules](#) at the tasting station to set a standard for how students react to the sampled foods. The rules include:

- EVERYONE is encouraged to taste the food (allergy exempt).
- Words such as “yuck” and “ugh” are NOT allowed, especially before tasting.
- Use your VOCABULARY – use adjectives to describe what you like and don't care for about food tastes and textures.
- TASTE FIRST and then decide if you like it or not.
- After tasting, YOU CHOOSE if you want to finish eating the remainder on your plate.
- TASTES CHANGE so try the food again if you have tried it at some other time and place.

*Incentive items:*

The tone of the tasting should encourage students to be adventurous in exploring new and unfamiliar foods. Providing incentives can help students see the experience as fun and exciting rather than scary or unwelcome. Ideas for incentivizing tasting are described in the next section. The [Tasting Events Materials Checklist](#) includes materials through which students earn incentives by tasting, as well as ideas for prizes to award students who try the samples.

*Gathering student feedback:*

Provide a mechanism by which students can express their opinions about the samples using polite and appropriate language. It can also provide valuable information to inform food service operations. Student feedback can be gathered through votes on a favorite item, or asking for more detailed feedback. The [Tasting Events Materials Checklist](#) includes a variety of tools for gathering student feedback.

## PROMOTE

Generate excitement about the tasting by promoting it before the event. Promotional materials should reach parents, teachers, staff, and students with a consistent message. Find out if you can invite parents; their attendance will allow them to see their children trying new foods, and allow them to serve as role models. You may also want to send a note home after the tasting to inform parents about what their child tasted and encourage them to discuss the experience with their child. Materials to help promote your tasting event are included in the [Tasting Event Materials Checklist](#).

## IMPLEMENT

### Set up your station

Employ Smarter Lunchrooms principles in setting up your station.

- Make samples *visible* and *attractive* by serving them on brightly colored trays displayed at eye level to students. Colorful foods stand out nicely when served in [black sample cups](#).
- *Enhance taste expectations* by giving samples creative names (see [Sample Food Names for Use with Elementary School Students](#)) and making the display interesting and attractive.
- Display an example of the whole ingredients included in the sample(s), and/or an ingredient list with nutrition facts.

### Provide sample, nudges, and educational messages

Have two staff members present for the tasting. One staff member can serve the food and encourage the students to sample it. Another staff member can help gather student feedback, administer any incentive programs planned to go with the tasting, and keep the sampling station clean.

Review the [Verbal Prompting resource](#). Use verbal cues to encourage healthy choices and the students' excitement about trying new foods.

### Reward students for their adventurous spirit in trying new foods

Encourage students to participate in the tasting by providing an incentive. Incentives can be as simple as giving students a sticker for trying a sample (see [Tasting Events Materials Checklist: Incentives](#)), or you can get creative in setting up an incentive program. Some ideas include:

- Raffle: Give students a ticket for trying the sample. Have them write their name on it and place it in a jar. At the end of the tasting event, draw three names for a special prize.
- Bingo: Students are given a bingo card with a variety of foods in the squares (different students will have different versions of the card). They receive a stamp on the appropriate square each time they try a food. They earn a prize when they get bingo. This activity works best if you will have a series of tastings throughout a year, and can include foods served at tasting events as well as foods served on the lunch line. A Tasting Bingo card is provided
- Passports: Students are given a card that is stamped each time students try a new food sample. When they fill up their cards they earn a reward. A Tasting Passport is provided.

- **The Name Game:** Invite students to submit their ideas for a creative name for the food(s) they have tried. The winner of the contest will have their creative name shared on the morning announcements and featured on the service line the next time the food is served in the cafeteria.

Discuss the logistics of any of the above incentive activities with cafeteria staff, teachers, and cafeteria monitors. Be aware that introducing additional materials for students to keep track of in the cafeteria can present a challenge to maintaining the fast pace of the service line. Offer your assistance with managing materials related to the incentive—cafeteria staff have their hands full!

Rewards for achieving the incentive can (and should!) include free/non-food rewards. Some ideas for individual rewards (i.e., raffle or bingo) include being first in line the following day, having lunch with the principal or teacher, or wearing a 'nutrition hero' name badge. Group rewards (i.e., if everyone in the class completes a passport) can include extra minutes at recess or playing a physically active game during class. A list of material rewards is included in the [Tasting Events Materials Checklist](#).

### **Gather student feedback**

If students will vote on a favorite item sampled during the tasting event, be sure to share how the voting outcome will be used. This will help the tasting experience provide a sense of agency. Voting outcomes might include having the winning item served on the lunch line, serving it at school celebrations, or providing an opportunity for students to learn how to prepare the food. Report outcomes in a variety of forms, such as announcing preferred foods on the morning announcements, including a write up in the school newsletter, or distributing a recipe for or using the favorite food to the whole school.

### **EVALUATE**

After the food tasting, consider the following questions to evaluate your event:

- What did you learn about student preferences through voting/surveys? How will you use this information in future education lessons or tasting events?
- Review the logistics of the food tasting: did the location work? Did you have enough staff? Did students and teachers know about the event? What changes could be made for next time?
- How can you use future tasting events to engage the family or the community?

This guide was adapted from materials produced by the Maryland State Department of Education

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