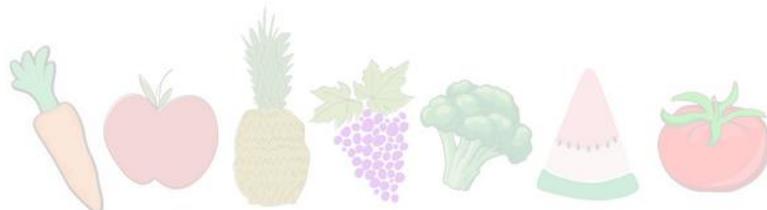


# Taste Test Toolkit



## Table of Contents:

• Introduction	1
• Procedures for Conducting Taste Tests	2
• Equipment Suggestions for Taste Tests	3
• How to Incorporate Taste Test Findings into Menus	4
• Taste Testing Throughout Virginia	5-6
• Resources	7
• Appendices:	
○ Appendix A:Taste Test Evaluation Forms	8
○ Appendix B:Stickers to Use as Rewards for Taste Tests	9

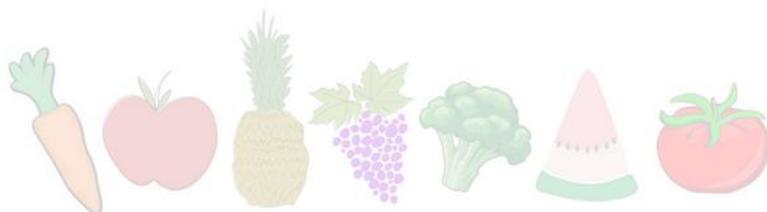


## Introduction

Taste testing is a great way to incorporate children’s feedback into your menus! Feedback from taste tests can be used to enhance breakfast, lunch, and supper menus both during the school year and summer. Updating menus consistently piques children’s interests, increases participation in child nutrition programs, and contributes to the sustainability of programs.

Taste testing is also a wonderful way to introduce kids to new foods. It can lead to lifelong healthy eating habits by introducing children to nutritious new foods as they are still growing and developing their taste buds. Farm to School/Summer initiatives can be easily incorporated into child nutrition programs through taste tests.

As part of No Kid Hungry Virginia’s Meal Quality Initiative, we have created this Taste Test Toolkit to help guide you through a taste testing event. It includes procedures for taste testing, including all of the planning aspects related to promotion, ordering of food, collecting feedback, and more. A list of taste test equipment and utensils as well as how to incorporate taste test hits into menus is featured. You can also learn more about how two school divisions in Virginia have successfully incorporated taste testing into their child nutrition programs; they’ve been able to use taste test feedback to update their breakfast, lunch, and supper menus!



## Procedures for Conducting Taste Tests

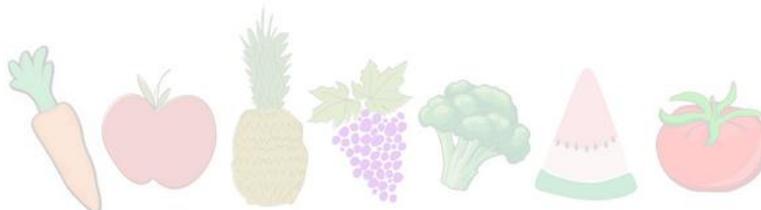
1. Pick a date for the taste test.
  - This may occur during an afterschool program that already exists or a back-to-school night! You may get the best participation by choosing a date when an event is already occurring.
2. Pick a location for the taste test.
  - If using the cafeteria, aim to host the taste test during a non-meal service time.
  - If you are incorporating the taste test into a regular meal service, pick a location in the cafeteria that is convenient for all children.
3. Develop a list of new foods your school division or nonprofit would like for kids to sample via taste testing.
  - Think about healthy and local foods you want to introduce to children, such as in-season produce, whole grains, lean meats, and low-fat or fat-free cheeses.
4. Try to taste the food yourselves first. If you don't like the new item, chances are kids may not either. If this happens, consider sampling another item.
5. Determine how many children will be in your taste test audience and how many staff members you will need to assist with hosting the taste test.
  - Consider hosting taste tests on multiple days, if you wish to gather several children's opinions on a new item.
6. Publicize the event using flyers, announcements, and word of mouth. Give your taste test a creative name to attract more children.
  - Be sure to mention the foods that will be sampled.
7. Order food to be sampled and necessary equipment/utensils.
  - Find utensil and equipment suggestions on page 3.
  - Keep in mind you should offer bite size samples.
8. Develop a method for collecting and evaluating children's feedback.
  - Be sure to make these forms kid-friendly. Using smiling and frowning faces on these forms often help children rate the food.
  - Find a sample evaluation form on page 8.
9. Ensure you have enough food samples, evaluation forms, and pens for all children invited to the taste test.
10. TASTE TEST DAY
  - Enjoy the event and have fun.
  - Place samples in cups or on plates prior to the start of the taste test to allow for easier distribution to the kids.
  - Present the samples in an attractive manner and use creative descriptions.
  - Encourage all children to try the new food item. Remind them to fill out evaluation forms.
  - Reward children for trying new foods. Find stickers to use as rewards on page 9.
  - If hosting a taste test during a regular meal service time, encourage staff to prompt children to try the new item.
11. Evaluate children's feedback and incorporate popular items into your menus.
  - Share overall feedback with your taste test audience, including the number of samples taken, positive responses, and negative responses.



## Equipment Suggestions for Taste Tests

To ensure taste test success, remember to have the following equipment available:

- Spoons, forks, or sporks
- Small cups or plates
- Napkins
- Evaluation forms
- Pens
- Box to collect evaluation forms
- Trays to transport food samples
- Trash cans and recycling bins



## How to Incorporate Taste Test Findings into Menus

After holding a taste test event, you will need to determine how to incorporate the feedback into your menus.

- If children's feedback is overwhelmingly positive, definitely add the new item to your menus.
  - Remember to feature it as new and student-approved!
- If children's feedback is mixed, consider holding another taste test with another group of children OR contact the vendor or wholesaler to see if you can order enough of the item to include as a specialty item on a menu and informally gather children's opinions.
- If children's feedback is negative, don't add the new item to your menu. Keep in mind that this is why you held a taste test- to determine whether children would enjoy the new item.
  - It's important to listen to children's feedback even if you think the item is a good addition to your menus. Including student-approved foods reduces waste and enhances children's interest in your school division or nonprofit's menus because they played a role in choosing items for the menus.



# Taste Testing Throughout Virginia

## Norfolk Public Schools

### **How does it work?**

School Nutrition Services utilize taste testing during the school year to test out new items for their menus as well as to introduce students to seasonal produce. They choose schools with higher breakfast and lunch participation as locations to perform taste testing and cater the samples to the grade level; for example, spicy chicken will be sampled by older grade levels rather than younger grade levels. Staff members taste the new items prior to students, and if staff members do not like the new items, they will not continue on with a taste test.

### **When and where does taste testing occur?**

They incorporate organized taste testing outside of meal service times and when the cafeteria is not in use. Typically this type of taste testing occurs either in the middle of the morning, between breakfast and lunch, or right after breakfast, to catch students who may not have been hungry for breakfast. Casual taste testing, where students sample new items from the meal service line, occurs during regular meal service. Taste testing occurs a minimum of 10 times per year. School Nutrition Services coordinates with teachers to ensure students are not missing out on valuable classroom time. Taste tests are organized in advance so that teachers can adjust their schedules accordingly. Teachers are encouraged to participate in the taste tests.

### **How is feedback captured and incorporated into menus?**

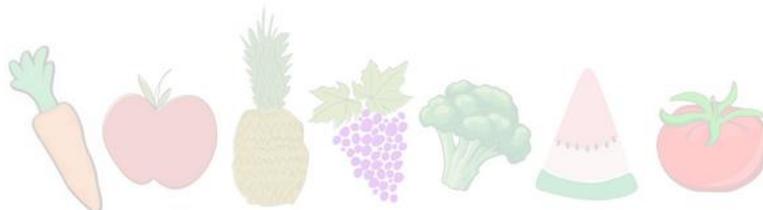
Students fill out evaluation forms that are catered to the type of taste testing. If two products are sampled, the evaluation form simply asks- “Did you like product A?” and “Did you like product B?” If one product is sampled, the evaluation form asks more in-depth questions, such as “How did it taste?” and “How did it smell?” After all of the students’ feedback is gathered and evaluated, food items with overwhelmingly positive responses will be incorporated into menus. Positively rated entrees are incorporated into menus either during the second half of the school year or the following school year, while positively rated sides are incorporated into menus the following month. If students’ feedback is mixed, staff will evaluate other factors, such as price, to see if the product will be successful if added to their menus. If more feedback is needed to ensure student approval, the new item will be added to the supper menu.

*“Taste testing in general creates a better relationship with students. It shows we care about what we serve and that their opinions really matter to us. We want to ensure the food we serve is taste-tested, student-approved. If you take time to find out what your students like, you’ll have a successful menu with less waste.”*

- Hannah Carroll, Nutrition Education Coordinator

### **What are some lessons learned?**

In elementary schools, taste testing works best with 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders since younger grade levels are often overly excited and do not provide accurate responses on feedback forms. Sampling at events, such as a career fair at the local technical high school, captures a broader student response and can elicit more extensive feedback as teenagers like to express their feelings.



## Taste Test Highlight

In an effort to swap out a frozen product for a fresh product, Norfolk School Nutrition featured roasted and lightly seasoned tricolor potatoes this past November during lunch. The sample was added to the lunch line with a “Please try one. It’s free.” sign. The potatoes were a huge hit among students; many had never seen purple potatoes before and loved them. They were added to the lunch menu later on during the school year.

## Orange County Public Schools

### How does it work?

When School Nutrition Services is interested in adding new products to their menus for the following school year, they will test products out over the summer to make sure kids enjoy them. They incorporate both formal and informal taste testing; formal taste testing involves evaluation forms to collect children’s feedback whereas informal taste testing involves casual conversations with the children to gather feedback. Informal taste testing involves locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables, such as watermelon, black and yellow tomatoes, and squash. Formal taste testing includes new products from vendors, such as General Mills.

### When and where does taste testing occur?

Taste testing is incorporated into one summer site’s activities. This site is part of the Boys and Girls Club, located at the school with the central kitchen, and has about 100 kids of all ages. There is no summer school at this site, so it is easy to incorporate taste testing into daily activities.

### How is feedback captured and incorporated into menus?

Feedback from informal taste tests is gathered via conversations with children. Staff will ask them how they like the samples. Feedback from formal taste tests is collected through evaluation forms; these forms are simple, with smiling and frowning faces and a comment area. Based on feedback, updates are made to the school-year menus.

*“I came across these breakfast boats that I was sure kids would like since they looked really cool. We sampled them at one of our Summer Meals sites, and they were not as popular as I expected. So we ended up not adding them to the breakfast menu for the school year. Taste testing lets us know what kids like and don’t like.”*

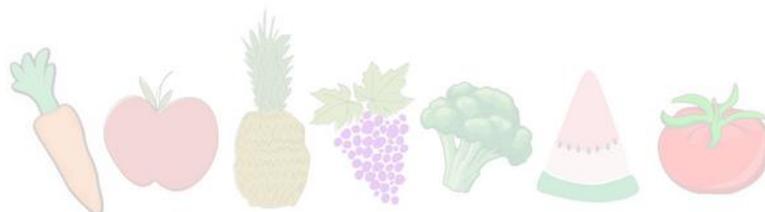
- Linda Blair, Coordinator of Food Service

### What are some lessons learned?

Last summer during a carnival day, a vendor provided samples of several types of pizza that are compliant with USDA guidelines. While kids loved the pizza based on evaluation forms, the pizza was not part of Orange County Public Schools’ bid, so they were unable to incorporate the pizza into their menus. Vendors are more than happy to provide samples to children at no cost, with no strings attached.

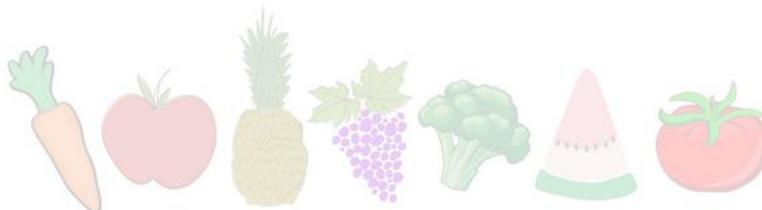
## Taste Test Highlight

In an effort to enhance their school-year Breakfast in the Classroom menu, Orange County School Nutrition purchased a small amount of mini waffles and added them to their Summer Meals menu last summer to gauge children’s interest in the new portable breakfast item. They evaluated children’s feedback based on informal conversations with them about the mini waffles. The mini waffles were so popular that they were added to all breakfast menus the following school year!



## Resources

1. USDA Team Nutrition has a host of resources for taste testing. At this [link](#), find a taste-testing ballot, taste test materials from the Ohio Smarter Lunchrooms Movement, a taste test planning guide, standardized recipes, and a guide to ensure food safety protocols are followed.
  - o From here, you can find the [Taste Test Evaluation Form](#) from Appendix A and [Stickers to Use as Rewards](#) from Appendix B.
2. The Alliance for a Healthier Generation teamed up with the School Nutrition Association to provide procedures on taste testing in their resource which can be found [here](#). It includes evaluation forms for elementary, middle, and high schools!
3. Action for Healthy Kids lays out several tips for hosting successful taste tests [here](#). They suggest making the overall taste test experience fun for kids and using this time to share the health benefits of sampled foods.
4. No Kid Hungry presents 5 easy steps to organize a taste test in their [resource](#). It explains how one school incorporated taste testing into their morning routine!
5. Growing Minds describes how to host a Farm to School Taste Test [here](#) in order to introduce kids to locally grown and in season foods. They review working with volunteers, taste test logistics, and ways to order local foods.
6. Vermont FEED created a toolkit to guide you through holding a taste test in various school settings- in the cafeteria, in the classroom, and part of an afterschool program. Learn how to incorporate sampling of local foods from their resource [here](#). It includes a timeline, taste test tips, and case studies along with suggestions for purchasing local foods!



# Appendix A: Taste Test Evaluation Forms



United States Department of Agriculture

## Try-Day Taste-Testing Ballot

Copy, cut out, and distribute the ballots to elementary school students so they can share their thoughts on new foods they have tried.



### Make Today a Try-Day!



It's fun to find new favorite foods!

Write the name of the food you tried and then circle the faces below to tell us how you feel about it.

The food I tried: \_\_\_\_\_

The food looked:

The food tasted:

The food smelled:

The food made me feel:

### Make Today a Try-Day!



It's fun to find new favorite foods!

Write the name of the food you tried and then circle the faces below to tell us how you feel about it.

The food I tried: \_\_\_\_\_

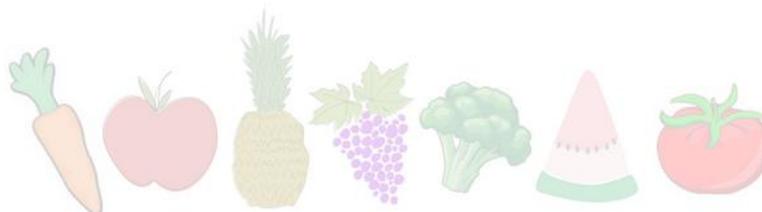
The food looked:

The food tasted:

The food smelled:

The food made me feel:

Team Nutrition Popular Events Idea Booklet (2014) | <http://teamnutrition.usda.gov> | USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.



**Appendix B: Stickers to Use as Rewards for Taste Tests**

