

School food program – a necessity for many in LTUSD

By Kathryn Reed

Using a spork, Odette Sosa eagerly scoops out the fruit of the kiwi that has been cut in half. She got it off a friend's tray. She had already eaten her orange – what she said at the time was the best part of the meal. But she wanted more fruit.

This Bijou Community School first-grader said she's used to eating lots of fruit at home.

Natalie Bedlre, her friend sitting next to her, says one of her favorite school lunches is the chicken with gravy over brown rice. Good thing – because that was on the menu Monday.



The cafeteria staff at Bijou serve about 400 lunches a day.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

But pizza is still an all-time favorite at all grade levels. Only these slices are healthier than what their parents were likely served when they were in school. Crusts are at least half whole wheat, cheese is reduced in fat and sugar content of sauces is noted.

While the elementary kids probably don't know it or even care, the tray of food before them is designed to ensure they have a well-balanced meal.

Because Lake Tahoe Unified School District is part of the National School Lunch Program it must follow all of the federal guidelines. This includes having five components with each lunch – meat or meat alternative, fruit, vegetable, grain, and milk.

The offer vs. serve aspect allows a youngster to choose three of the five choices and still meet the federal guidelines. This recognizes not everyone is going to eat everything – whether because of taste or dietary restrictions.

Plus, food waste is something to consider. No reason to pile something on that won't be consumed.

On Monday, most of the trays are empty. But Patty Lefteroff, who runs the Bijou kitchen, knows to cut the whole grain bean and cheese burritos in half for the younger students. If any of them were still hungry, they just had to ask for more.

With about 60 percent of LTUSD students qualifying for a free or reduced lunch, it means the feds are paying for the bulk of the food program. It also means having to follow their rules and most of their recipes.

Even though the feds released regulations Jan. 25 about what districts must serve, California's rules are stricter and therefore LTUSD is already doing what much of the country will have to do to meet the federal rules.

Deep fat fryers left LTUSD school kitchens in 2001, trans fats were eliminated in 2008, sodas have not been allowed at the high school for years and never were at the elementary level, whole grain regs are the norm now and flavored milk is already nonfat.

Shelley Giannotta, director of LTUSD food services, said the one item she will struggle with is sodium content. Salt is in everything. The just released federal rules say by 2014-15 current sodium levels must be cut by 5 percent to 10 percent; going up to a 25 to 50 percent reduction from today's baseline in 2022-23.

But LTUSD does not have to offer a food program. California law leaves that choice up to the districts.

"If we did away with it, we would have a lot of kids going hungry," Giannotta said while in the Bijou cafeteria Feb. 6. "We are here for the kids."

Giannotta knows if they didn't eat at school, some may not eat anything – and if they are given food at home, it may not be a hot, balanced meal.

Most of the kids in the room are eating the school lunch. Very few lunch boxes are visible.

But it's impossible to know who has paid or who is getting a subsidy. This is because kids give their student number to one of the lunchroom workers and it's calculated via the cash register.

About 1,800 lunches are served a day and 700 breakfasts throughout the district.

The magnet school has a different menu than the other three elementary students because fewer students eat the hot lunch. This means they are given one choice of entrée instead of two like the other students.

The middle and high school students have another menu. But that is likely to change next year when the student union opens at South Tahoe High School.

With that addition comes the opportunity to offer more items in a food court setting. South Tahoe High School's food area

will be set up to have eight points of service, though it may start with fewer offerings. One area may be soup and salad, another for burgers (not just beef), another for rotating world themes – it's all still being worked out.

New dishes will be incorporated to balance out the favorites.

Entrée salads are offered to elementary kids in the fall and spring, to the older kids year-round.

When meat is on the menu food preparers are always able to accommodate the vegetarians in the crowd.

Lfteroff said a handful of kids at Bijou don't eat meat. Grilled cheese, a cold cheese sandwich or PB&J are back ups.

To avoid the expense of tahini and possible peanut allergies, the hummus is made with sunflower seed butter.

Giannotta wants to provide locally grown food, but being in the mountains makes it difficult. Mt. Moriah Farms in Davis supplies pesticide-wax free apples. She works with Bonanza Produce as well. Money is an issue, but there isn't an idea she isn't willing to pursue.

Being part of the federal program means getting the commodity discounts that are offered.

Lunches at the six Lake Tahoe Unified schools are probably the cheapest place in town to eat – especially considering the nutrients involved. Elementary lunches are \$2.25, while it costs \$2.75 to eat at the middle or high school.

While some districts subsidize their food programs, the opposite happens in LTUSD. In the 12 years Giannotta has been at the helm, she keeps making changes. Besides food content and nutritional upgrades, she returns more than \$50,000 a year to the general fund that can then be used for textbooks, class size reduction or whatever the school board deems necessary.

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