

# Buffalo wrap is a winner

Atholton students' recipe will be used next year throughout school system

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A group of students at Atholton High School thinks a healthier spin on a spicy restaurant favorite will get their classmates excited about school lunch.

The six students in Liela Razik's culinary classes won the right to have their recipe for a spicy buffalo chicken wrap served in cafeterias throughout the Howard County school system this fall.

"We realized we can make something that tastes great," said Mary Geiser, an 18-year-old senior member of the winning team. Geiser and her teammates served the meal to 150 students and received rave reviews before submitting the recipe for the competition. "People are getting excited about school lunches."

School cafeteria food has taken a healthier turn in response to the epidemic of child obesity, according to experts. The biggest challenge has been balancing better nutrition with tastes that appeal to fast-food-addicted students. Howard and other school systems in Maryland and across the country are involving students in an effort to upgrade cafeteria menus and entice younger palates.

In addition to the recipe contest, the school system will use feedback from an annual tasting of prospective food items by students in making menu decisions. At the January taste-testing of 66 "healthy food items" at Howard High School, 12 students sampled items including fruit smoothies and teriyaki chicken. Students' feedback will factor into the decision on what food is purchased for the coming school year, according to school officials.

In the recipe contest, students had to strike a balance between taste, nutritional value and budgetary restraints.

For example, a dish in the contest could not exceed 750 calories (no more than 30 percent of the calories from fat) or 150 milligrams of sodium. Deep-fried food was a no-no, and an item could not cost more than \$1.22 to make.

Classes in five of the county's 12 high schools participated in the competition. The submissions ranged from various sandwich wraps to pizza bagels to baked sweet potato wedges.

The Atholton team, which also included seniors Niusha Abdeshah, Oren Lefkowitz, Natalie Muhlbock, Steven Ludwig and junior Chelsea Ponce, brainstormed a slew of options such as chili, chicken salad and a Caesar chicken wrap before deciding on their winning submission.

"One of the big trends is to put hot sauce on everything," Geiser said. "It is a big trend in the restaurant industry. It is going to go over well."

The Atholton students "tweaked" the traditional recipe for their version of a spicy buffalo chicken wrap. The original recipe calls for a deep-fried, breaded chicken breast doused in a mixture of butter and hot sauce with blue cheese. The healthier version uses oven-baked chicken and a whole-wheat tortilla instead of a white-flour tortilla. The healthier version also uses light ranch dressing, a sparing amount of cheddar cheese and lemon juice to cool the spicy hot sauce.

The combination of the ingredients made for a thick, rich sauce with a toned-down heat, Geiser said.

"It goes to show that something healthy can taste great," Geiser said. "I think we knocked this one out of the ballpark. It's restaurant quality."

Finding the perfect mix was a bit of a challenge for the Atholton students, Razik said.

"They had to know how to use flavorings correctly," she said. "That's the tricky part. To make it taste good and be healthy. That is a fine balance."

The students learned numerous lessons during the activity.

"Our biggest challenge was keeping the calorie restraints," Geiser said. "We only had a certain amount of food that we could get. A lot of this was piecing together things with what we had."

The students also gained a better understanding of the work of employees from the system's food and nutrition services department.

"It gave them an appreciation of what they did," Razik said.

"It has changed how we think about school lunch," Geiser said. "There is an assumption that school lunch isn't healthy and doesn't take a lot of thought. [Food and nutrition services employees] have enormous budget and ingredient constraints."