

Coming soon to school menus: Buffalo chicken wraps

Atholton students win schools' healthy lunch competition

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Spicy buffalo chicken wraps will be added to cafeteria offerings at Howard County schools come fall, thanks to the ingenuity of culinary students at Atholton High School.

The wrap was declared winner of this spring's healthy lunch competition, in which high school students devised recipes to appeal to fellow students while meeting the school meal program's budgetary and nutritional standards.

In crafting their recipe, Atholton's culinary and advanced culinary students considered restaurant trends and observations inside the school cafeteria.

Most importantly, they were guided by their taste buds.

"We took something that people would like and something that would look appetizing," student Mary Geiser, 18, said.

Atholton teammate Natalie Muhlbock, 18, said she and classmates experimented with several recipes, including fajitas, chili and chicken salad wraps before deciding on the buffalo wrap.

Teammate Steven Ludwig, 17, who purchases school lunches more frequently than other team members, said his favorite existing menu item, a southwest chicken club sandwich, influenced his decision on the wrap, along with what he sees as his peers' penchant for spice.

"I've seen kids drown their fries in hot sauce," he said.

Of cafeteria meals in general, he added, "The flavor does lack a little bit, because they do have a budget crunch."

Delivering a buffalo sauce with the appropriate kick turned out to be one of the group's toughest challenges, considering that many restaurants add butter to their hot sauces — something of a cardinal sin under national school meal standards.

"We couldn't use any butter because we had calorie restraints," Geiser said, adding that her group tweaked their sauce many times, adjusting the amounts of various spices like garlic to add flavor in lieu of butter.

The finished product: strips of chicken tossed in the buffalo sauce, paired with shredded lettuce, cheddar cheese and a touch of ranch dressing, wrapped in a whole-wheat tortilla.

Muhlbock was responsible for calculating costs — the wraps cost \$1.03 per serving — while Geiser and classmate Oren Lefkowitz, 17, were charged with determining the meal's nutritional value.

Students were limited to the ingredients available to local cafeterias, preventing them from adding any bleu cheese to the wrap.

Atholton Family and Consumer Science teacher Liela Razik said she was thrilled at her students' winning recipe.

"I think that my students are not recipe followers," Razik said. "They take a recipe and have learned to develop it."

In the end, the challenge turned out to be a taller order than some of the students expected.

"We came up with a new appreciation for what (cafeteria staff) do. It's really difficult," Geiser said. Added Muhlbock: "Let's face it, what tastes good is not always healthy for you."

Atholton's spicy buffalo chicken wrap faced competition from Wilde Lake High's pizza bagel with spinach and low-fat pepperoni on a whole grain bagel (tied for second place), Howard High's mango salsa (tied for second place) and chipotle chicken wrap, Marriotts Ridge's baked sweet potato fries, and Oakland Mills' baked low-fat mozzarella sticks, according to Laurie Collins, instructional facilitator of the county's Family and Consumer Science program.

Students in Long Reach High School's culinary program were responsible for recreating each recipe for the judging panel, which consisted of Long Reach students and representatives of the county health department, school system's Food and Nutrition Services, Howard County Medical Society and Nutrition and Physical Activity Coalition of Howard County.

Following a student-run marketing campaign aimed at familiarizing students with the new item, the buffalo wrap will be piloted in certain school cafeterias in early October, Collins said. If it attracts enough buyers, it will stay.

Collins said the recipe contest will be repeated in the fall, in hopes that more high schools will participate along with middle school taste-testers.

“After this very successful pilot, we know a lot more about what it takes to develop a healthy but appealing lunch menu item,” she said.
