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COOKIES
REIMAGINED

EAT THESE
IMMUNITY
BOOSTING
FOODS



"Making sure we're not trying to homogenize the foods everyone eats into the same smoothie, salad or hard-boiled egg is important."

—Joe Wat

ĀINA IN SCHOOLS PROGRAM
COORDINATOR, KŌKUA
HAWAII FOUNDATION

Serving Up Tradition

Across the country, school cafeterias are replacing chicken nuggets and cheeseburgers with more culturally relevant dishes. **By Lucy M. Clark**

It's really easy to show up to a place and tell everyone they should be eating salads. But that's not everyone's culture and there's a reason for that," says Joe Wat, the farm-to-school coordinator for the Kōkua Hawai'i Foundation's ĀINA In Schools program. For example, on O'ahu, where he works with 23 elementary schools, there's a toxic parasitic worm found in locally grown leafy greens and some other produce. "So eating salads is not part of the culture where this parasite is endemic," he explains. Cafeterias in Wat's area are bringing in ingredients that are native to Hawai'i, such as cooked 'ulu (breadfruit—a close relative of jackfruit) and dishes like Filipino pork guisantes (pork and peas in tomato sauce), which are reflective of the traditional cuisine of the state's largest ethnic group.

O'ahu's school system is just one of

many across the United States joining the growing movement to make school food more inclusive, through both culturally relevant cafeteria meals and nutrition education. "It is important to understand how and what our families eat at home and outside of school," says Stephanie Lip, an alumna of FoodCorps, a nonprofit that connects kids to healthy food in school, and the school nutrition director for the Pacific Grove Unified School District in California. "That way, we can serve foods that are familiar to our students—and that can be a teaching opportunity for students to share with peers."

It's a shift that's backed by research: In a review of more than 40 studies across multiple school subjects (math, science, history, English language arts and ESL), researchers found that culturally relevant education improves student's motivation, interest and

ability to engage in their work. The Centers for Disease Control is on board, too, recommending in its guidelines for schools that nutrition education be culturally relevant for students.

"Uplifting our students' cultures is vital because it's in those moments that they feel seen, heard and understood," says FoodCorps service member Genesis Caplan. She points to a nutrition education class she led last fall at Seaton Elementary School in Washington, D.C.—where 42% of students are Hispanic or Latino and 17% are Asian. Caplan, who immigrated to the U.S. from Guatemala as a child, invited a special guest to help with a hands-on cooking lesson: her mom. "We taught the kids how to make one of my favorite Guatemalan foods that I enjoyed growing up—bean tostadas," says Caplan. "One student's face lit up as we passed out the beans. 'I love my papa's frijoles, they're my favorite!' she told me. As we were cleaning up, another student asked if I could write the recipe down in Chinese for her parents. The connections that we were able to make as a class, as a community, will definitely hold a special place in my heart." 🌱