

## Harvest Week in Cherry Hill



RON TARVER / Staff Photographer

Soffia Woodruff, a first grader at Stockton Elementary School in Cherry Hill, reaches for an apple during a fruit and vegetable wholesaler's visit.

## 'Jersey Fresh' a hit in school lunch

By James Osborne  
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Over the cafeteria's loudspeaker, a produce salesman dressed in a rough approximation of a farmer's outfit quizzed Cherry Hill elementary students on the fruits and vegetables grown in New Jersey.

Do we grow blueberries in New Jersey? asked John Hayden. Affirmative cheers erupted. Do we grow apples? Squash?

The mass "yeahs" continued even as Hayden moved on to oranges and bananas, tropical produce not grown in New Jersey.

But the goal, to get children excited about eating fruits and vegetables grown locally, seemed to have been met when students mobbed a wooden cart, loaded with New Jersey apples and sweet potatoes, set up against the cafeteria wall.

"We have to stay healthy and not eat junk food," said Sydni Simmons, a fourth grader at Stockton Elementary School. "Sometimes we have ice cream after dinner at home, but mostly my mom makes us eat healthy."

The Wednesday event is a sign that the "localvore" movement, in which consumers buy

locally grown produce for the dual benefits of fresher food and reducing the carbon footprint of eating, is moving beyond restaurants and foodie circles into school cafeterias.

In Cherry Hill, school caterers say they try to buy local produce wherever they can through fruit and vegetable wholesalers like the one Hayden works for, putting New Jersey peaches and apples on the lunch line alongside government-issue powdered mashed potatoes and cheeseburgers.

"This has sort of filtered down from the See **FARM** on B9

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# School cafeterias get Jersey Fresh

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college level, after students there started asking for salad bars and then, more recently, for locally sourced produce," said Bill Walker Jr., a marketing official with the New Jersey Department of Agriculture. "These sorts of programs are becoming increasingly common."

Not coincidentally, the push to bring locally farmed produce into the schools comes as health officials work to get children to eat healthier and to reduce obesity rates. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the obesity rate among U.S. children 6 to 11 increased from 6.5 percent in the late 1970s to 17 percent in the mid 2000s — with similar increases seen among younger children and teenagers.

But the fast foods and sugary beverages blamed for that widening of the national waistline are becoming increasingly rare in schools, as education officials across the country have rewritten the rules on vending machines and the nutritional content of school meals.

Parents in Cherry Hill can even monitor what their children eat for lunch through the school district's online payment system.

At the Cherry Hill High School East cafeteria on Wednesday, students had the option for traditional school lunch fare like cheeseburgers and pizza — though with whole wheat buns and crusts. But most of the activity was centered on the deli counter, where students waited for made-to-order sandwiches with salad items that appeared fresh and crisp. Tables were littered with water bottles rather than soda.

"I think I'm eating healthier now than in middle school. Back then, it was all reheated tacos and other junk," said Dittmar Gagnon, a senior football player. "Just today, they added cherry tomatoes."

In truth, most of the produce for sale in Cherry Hill's schools, at least this time of year, is not grown in New Jersey.



Sofia Benedetto, a fifth grader at Stockton Elementary in Cherry Hill, enjoys a fuji apple at lunch. RON TARVER / Staff Photographer

The cherry tomatoes, for instance, come from California — New Jersey tomatoes went out of season last month and won't be available again until July.

The relatively short farming season in New Jersey, combined with the fact that school is out of session during the peak produce months in the summer, to some degree limits how "local" school cafeterias can go.

But Walker, the public face of Jersey Fresh, the state campaign to promote local farming, said the fact that farmers here weren't necessarily seeing significant dividends now was not as important as getting children in the habit of eating fresh produce.

"So much of what they eat now is processed," he said. "This is a sector of the market farmers haven't really penetrated, so for them, any fresh food is a plus."

What many state agriculture officials would like to see

is more local produce incorporated into actual menu items; almost all of the hot food items served at Cherry Hill schools are either canned or frozen, and simply reheated.

But cafeterias aren't equipped to take raw ingredients and prepare them into meals, as they might have been decades ago.

"We're hoping we're going to get to that point, but we're not there yet," said Alicia Kent, the regional manager for Aramark, the global food service company that runs the food program for the Cherry Hill School District.

Only about 40 percent of elementary school students in Cherry Hill eat a school lunch, with the majority bringing a bagged lunch from home, Kent said.

While staple cafeteria items like chicken nuggets and pizza might be a hit with small children — the majority at Stockton lunchtime Wednesday bypassed the salad bar —

they are not so with some parents.

Known by school officials as "activist" parents, they have been vocal in pushing school officials to bring locally grown produce to their children's schools.

But many remain unconvinced the schools are able to meet the nutritional standards they set at home.

Christine Benedetto, who sits on the Cherry Hill Parent Teacher Association and has three children at Stockton, has been an active voice in making school lunch healthier. While she said strides have been made, every night she and her husband take turns packing their children's lunch for the next day.

"It's almost there," she said. "My daughter is going off to middle school next year, so I guess I'll lose control then."

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