

HOPKINS, MN PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND MINNESOTA-GROWN WHEATBERRIES

Overview

Located just west of Minneapolis, MN, the Hopkins Public Schools system serves nearly 7,400 students. The district is composed of six elementary schools, one magnet Chinese immersion school, two junior high schools and one high school. Thirty-eight percent of the district's students qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

Hopkins Public Schools strives to offer menus composed of minimally processed foods. Approximately 90 percent of the food served in the high school is prepared from scratch, as is 75 percent of the offerings in the district's elementary and junior high schools. The district purchased approximately \$290,000 of locally grown and raised foods for the 2013-14 school year, including milk, yogurt, apples, tomatoes, meat, poultry and wheatberries.¹ The district aims to inspire students with nutritious food and uses locally grown products whenever possible given their freshness and taste.

Hopkins' kitchen facilities include nine on-site full preparation kitchens.

Recipe development and kitchen prep

Wheatberries are the entire kernel of wheat, including the bran, germ and endosperm (and excluding the hull). Similar in appearance to brown rice, cooked wheatberries have a chewy texture and a nutty, earthy flavor and contain significant quantities of fiber, protein and iron.

The local wheatberry recipes used most frequently by the Hopkins district are a lentil-wheatberry soup and a wheatberry Waldorf salad. Recipe development and taste-testing takes place each summer when Hopkins foodservice staff gather to discuss potential modifications to current recipes and brainstorm ideas for new recipes. Students who eat cafeteria lunches in summer school programs taste-test the recipes during the normal lunch period. Findings are used throughout the following school year when new and modified recipes are implemented.

When the relationship began between the local wheatberry vendor and Hopkins Public Schools, the vendor also provided the district with various recipes, including a

lentil-wheat-berry soup that the district modified and continues to serve at the junior high and high schools. Given the mix of grains and pulses, this dish is high in protein, fiber and nutrients.

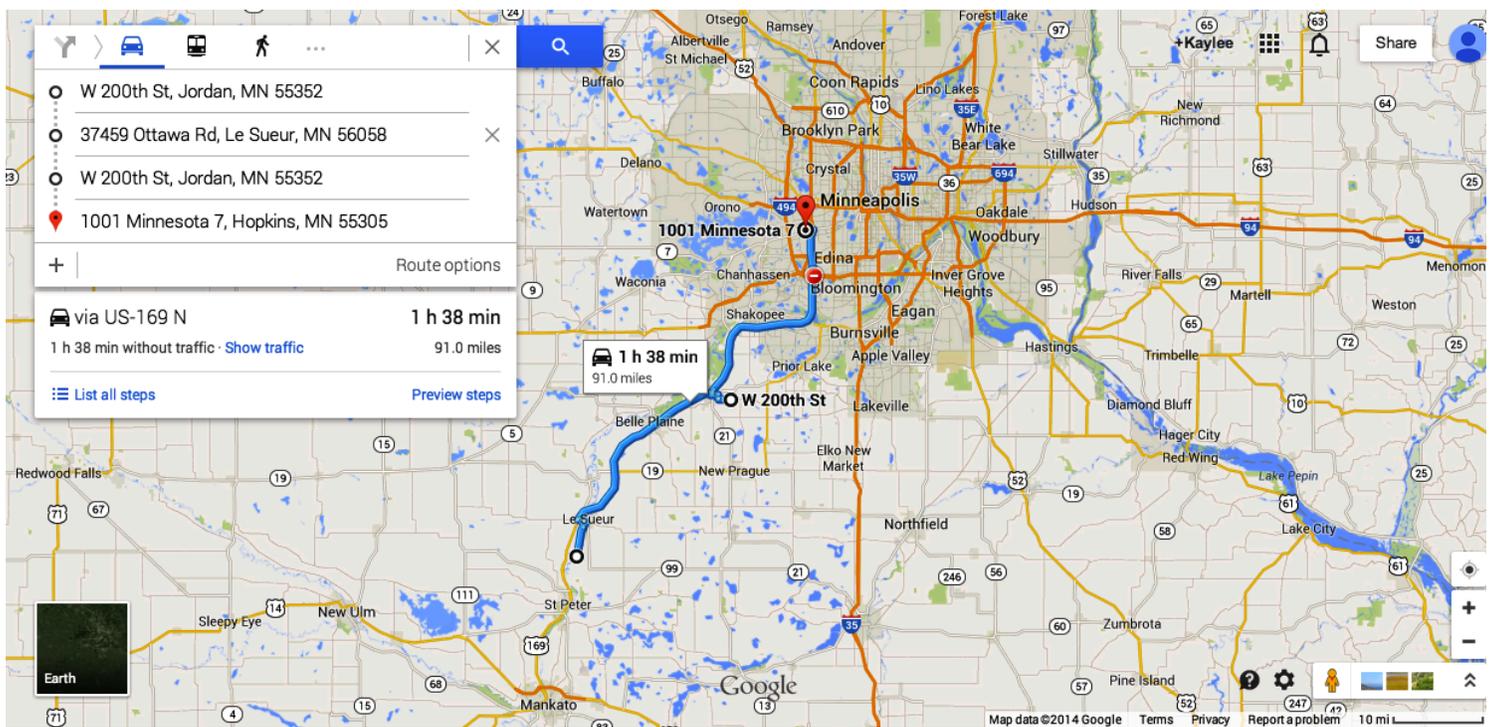
School kitchens prepare the wheatberries in steamers and on the stovetop, using its existing equipment and facilities. Staff did not need any additional training to feel comfortable preparing the wheatberries. Wheatberries are also appealing for school kitchens to work with because they have a long shelf life and can be stored in freezers for long periods if larger quantities are ordered.

The supply chain

Sutton Ridge Farm^{2,3} supplies locally grown wheatberries to the district. This organic, family-run farm is located 30 miles from the community of Hopkins. The farm also produces 100 percent grass-fed beef, milk-fed pork, free-range eggs, organic berries and wool products.

Haas Seed Processing in Le Sueur, Minnesota cleans and packages wheatberries from Sutton Ridge Farm. The facility handles a range of products and specializes in organic and non-GMO food grains. After Haas cleans and bags the wheat berries, the product returns to Sutton Ridge Farm. District staff place orders directly with Sutton Ridge, and farm staff deliver the product to the district for a fee, providing full transparency about the product's source.

The relationship between the vendor and district staff formed as a result of an event hosted by area nonprofits several years ago to make connections between producers and K-12 buyers.



A grains and pulses supply chain in Minnesota



Education and Promotion

Hopkins has also supported the introduction of new foods through its innovative Food Coaching program.⁴ Through the program, nutrition staff and parents/guardians encourage children to taste new foods and educate them about healthy options. A training manual offers strategies and talking points that can be used with students in the cafeteria.⁵

Foodservice staff report that students generally enjoy locally grown foods and appreciate the positive impact that cooking with local products has on the local food system. Hopkins' Director of Student Nutrition Services, Barb Mechura, notes that it is not uncommon for parents to contact the foodservice office in search of recipes for dishes like squash and Brussels

sprouts after students share their school lunch experience at home with their parents. Some parents have even said that their children's school food has inspired them to do more scratch cooking at home with locally grown ingredients.

The innovative work of the school nutrition staff has also caught the attention of teachers, including those focused on health and nutrition. Every year, the district's director of school nutrition services is also invited to speak to a journalism class as students conduct research for an article assignment on school lunches.

Best Practices

- The district has found that some wheatberry dishes are challenging to make appealing to students' tastes without added sugar. For instance, a breakfast porridge made with oatmeal and wheatberries was introduced at the high school but did not go over well with students. Adding sugar to the recipe might have improved student reception, but the district opted to discontinue the dish altogether rather than add the sugar.
- Most students were unfamiliar with wheatberries when the district began introducing them. Foodservice staff have tried successfully to overcome this by adding wheatberries to existing recipes that students already enjoy such as popular soups and salads.

- The delivery charge for small product quantities can present a challenge to the overall cost of the product. The district has been paying the supplier \$1.09 per pound for the wheatberries, but a \$25 delivery fee for a 25-pound order almost doubles the total price. The district has found ways to mitigate this by placing larger, less frequent orders. Hopkins has sufficient cold storage space, making larger orders a viable option for them.
- Staff commitment to local sourcing is a key success factor, given the additional legwork that may be involved in identifying suppliers, testing recipes and purchasing outside familiar channels. Hopkins has also made a concerted effort to hire staff with cooking skills. This encourages creative applications of local products in the recipe development process and facilitates high-quality cooking.
- Outside organizations, like local farm organizations, nonprofits or University Extension Services can be helpful partners in identifying potential suppliers and fostering relationships in the local food system.
- Making the school dining experience enjoyable for students can excite both students and parents about the benefits of local foods. Hopkins has found that strong promotional efforts and engagement strategies like their cafeteria Food Coaching program have been very helpful in generating student and parent support for expanded Farm to School programming.

Endnotes

1. Mechura, Barb. Director of Student Nutrition Services, Hopkins Public Schools. Personal interview. July 8, 2014.
2. "Home", Sutton Ridge Farm. Accessed June 30, 2014. Available at: <http://www.suttonridgefarm.com/>.
3. Jensen, Jennifer. Owner, Sutton Ridge Farm. Personal interview. June 12, 2014.
4. "Volunteer to Become a Food Coach", Hopkins Public Schools. Accessed June 30, 2014. Available at: <http://www.hopkinsschools.org/servicesdepartments/student-nutrition-and-lifestyle-services/volunteer-become-food-coach>.
5. "Food Coach Manual", Hopkins Public Schools. Accessed June 30, 2014. Available at: http://www.hopkinsschools.org/sites/default/files/public/downloads/page/food_coach_manual_revised.pdf.