



FARM TO SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT

Fond du Lac Ojibwe School

At Fond du Lac Ojibwe school in Northeastern Minnesota, the culinary team uses the kitchen as a place to reaffirm the mission of the school — to educate and highlight Ojibwe culture and language. Kitchen supervisor Mace Fonoti notes, “We are educating about food, explaining why we are serving it.” Farm to School has been a logical extension of this mission and an invitation to connection for the staff: “When we can connect with people according to how their grandparents might have done it, or something that’s not prepared anymore, but they used to see from elders where they come from — it means more to them. And that is why they’re buying into it.” School lunch menus have highlighted traditional Ojibwe foods such as bison, wild rice and venison, served in the kid-friendly forms of meatballs and nachos. (See insert for menu highlights from 2023’s Native Nutrition month!)

Expanding local purchasing, integrating student education and serving culturally relevant foods has been a team effort. The COVID-19 shutdown in 2020 brought more staff to the kitchen to assist Fonoti and the rest of the kitchen staff with the new challenges of packaging and delivering bag lunches and dinners for children doing distance learning from home and providing additional meals for students’ families and elders in the community. Speech language pathologist Michelle Hamski pivoted from her usual role to help in the school kitchen and became a key part of the team. With this added support, the team began participating in Minnesota’s Harvest of the Month program in Spring 2021. Harvest of the Month is a free marketing



program for K-12 schools, highlighting locally grown, raised and harvested products. Hamski took on the coordination role and some Farm to School support, reaching out to new local vendors, maintaining purchasing records and integrating the Harvest of the Month resources in the cafeteria. The education efforts spread throughout the school, with gym teacher John Babineau also integrating Harvest of the Month nutrition and health education into gym classes. This team approach allowed them to think creatively and collaboratively, as well as build systems to track and sustain local purchasing.

Harvest of the Month spurred Fond du Lac’s interest in buying local, and with the support of Farm to School grants through the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA), Fonoti notes the school has

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been able to “open doors and tear down walls” to expand local purchasing. MDA’s Farm to School grants gave them additional incentive and financial support to source and purchase locally grown and raised, culturally relevant products. With this support, Fonoti has built relationships with local farmers and noted the elevated quality of these local products. He can see the difference these changes have made on both staff and kids’ perceptions of the school’s food: “The high quality could change the way you look at something you may not have liked to prepare. All of a sudden, it changes because the quality’s different. And the same for the people receiving the food. You may get a different response because the quality is different.” Fonoti also emphasizes the power in advocating for food distributors to carry more local foods. “It’s just another resource in the back pocket. And it’s helping other people too. It’s not just for me, it’s for any of the schools that are doing Farm to School.”

Fonoti sees the value of cooking from scratch for engaging students, despite the extra time it takes. “We want to cook the food during the day when the kids are coming in for breakfast because they can smell it. It gives them something to look forward to. We want them to see us preparing foods as much as possible.” Their reputation for cooking culturally relevant foods from scratch using fresh, local produce has brought attention to the Fond du Lac Ojibwe School kitchen in the community. Outside of the cafeteria, they also cater for community events, utilizing their expertise of culturally relevant foods to serve the community.

Fonoti also emphasizes the importance of leveraging the school’s purchases to have a positive community impact. Beyond simply buying local from the state, he proactively seeks out farms that are part of the school community or geographically close, as well as those run by Tribal members or Indigenous farmers and producing traditional Indigenous food items. He combines different distribution methods to include a broad range of farmers, purchasing directly from some and getting other items through local distribution companies. Hamski

MENU HIGHLIGHTS

- Chicken wild rice soup
- Fried walleye wild rice with red bean mix
- Ground venison nachos
- Bison wild rice meatballs
- Soft shell shredded bison tacos
- Three sisters chili with beans, squash and corn



is back in her role as a speech language pathologist (but still supports the nutrition team when she can), and the team is serving meals directly out of the kitchen once more. However, the systems the team implemented and the relationships it developed during the pandemic put Fond du Lac Ojibwe School in a position to continue purchasing local products and implementing grant opportunities effectively: “Coming out of all of that, it’s not so hard to track for grants, as long as you are consistent. You have to really be on top of it.”

Looking ahead, Fonoti plans to continue to build Fond du Lac Ojibwe School’s Farm to School program and hopes to widen the foods purchased with grant support, including more culturally relevant foods. Through MDA Farm to School grants and a committed culinary team, Fond du Lac Ojibwe school has been able to build a robust system of local buying they will carry forward for years to come.

Recommendations from Kitchen Supervisor Mace Fonoti for schools interested in Farm to School:

- Have “go-to” farmers for specific menu items to simplify your purchasing processes.
- Use a mixed purchasing strategy to maximize local purchases. Consider buying some items directly from farmers and some through a food distributor — ask your distributor for more local options.
- Build long-term relationships with your farmers and distributors.
- Obtain SERV safe and GAPS food safety training if you can.
- Take the time to get your staff to buy in at the beginning, and then you can get the students. It can be a challenge to overcome hesitation if kitchen staff are not used to doing food preparation this way, and your team will be the biggest asset for your Farm to School program if they are onboard. Recruiting great staff is always important—Fonoti has hired school alumni and former restaurant employees to make a stellar team.

- For Food Services, go with a little better quality when given the opportunity. It can change how both staff and students react to the food.
- Build consistency in tracking for grants.

Impact of MDA Farm to School Grant at Fond du Lac Ojibwe School:

The AGRI Farm to School grant provided the incentive for the program to go local. Mace has sought new local products, built relationships and figured out ordering and delivery logistics with local farmers, and integrated local items into the menu because of the grant funding and the encouragement to purchase local products. Now that Fond du Lac has these systems in place, it will be easier to sustain local purchases going forward.

“Farm to School has been huge for us—the local producers we have come across and made connections with—it gave us a chance to put us in a direction that’s hard to come back from. We’ve set up systems so purchasing local is just the way we do things now.”



The Fond du Lac Nutrition Team (left to right): Mace Fonoti, Alex Gokee, Shawna Shabaish, Starr Shabaish, Tommy Aho, Michelle Hamski.