



# Good Food and Teamwork

**Student culinary team provides new set of opportunities and learning experiences for students**

*Shelby Anderson*

**F**or the past six years, a unique event in western Wisconsin has challenged students to think differently about food. The Harvest Challenge, appropriately taking place during late fall, challenges teams of students from western Wisconsin school districts to create healthy meals with local and seasonal ingredients that meet school lunch regulations and cost about \$1 per serving.

"I have participated in the Harvest Challenge three times and every time it is eye opening to try

and meet the regulations of a school lunch," said Gwyneth DeLap, a senior at Viroqua High School. "When you want to create a dish that meets the nutritional and financial guidelines, that is practical for a school cafeteria and incorporates local foods, you are in for a challenge."

The student culinary teams work with a mentor, usually a local chef, and learn about food preparation, and much more. Over the course of several sessions during the fall, each team develops a recipe and presents it to their district's food service

coordinator for approval. The student teams then serve their meal to judges and students at the annual Harvest Challenge competition. The competition moves between school districts each year. Last year, it was at Viroqua High School, this year's Harvest Challenge will take place Nov. 7 in the Westby Middle/High School.

## Judges' Choice

Last year, the student culinary team from Viroqua High School won the Harvest Challenge with a butternut squash lasagna made with local ingre-

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dients. The Viroqua students met several times before the competition with their chef mentor, Luke Zahms who owns the Driftless Café in Viroqua. Robin Hosemann, the librarian at Viroqua High School, served as the school advisor to the team. She said the team was comprised of a variety of students, some of whom didn't necessarily have a lot of knowledge about food preparation.

After several team-cooking sessions with Zahms and Hosemann, the team quickly developed their skills and learned about a variety of aspects of the culinary arts from food science to sourcing local and seasonal ingredients.

"Watching the students grow in a

relatively short time is one of the most gratifying parts of teaching in the program," Zahms said. "All of us can cook in some capacity — but they learn quickly that it's a much different process to cook in volume and in a professional setting."

When it came time to develop the recipe for the Harvest Challenge, Hosemann said students were ready to take the lead.

"It was virtually all student driven," Hosemann said. "Luke was good at throwing ideas and challenges at them and they would get to work and try different things out."

Once the Viroqua team had their dish ready, they presented it to the high school's food service staff. The

team couldn't have had a better team to present their dish to. Marilyn Volden, the district's food/nutrition supervisor, helped start the Vernon County's Farm to School Initiative.

With some tips from the school's food service staff, the team refined the recipe and conducted a taste test with their fellow high school students. As may be expected, some students were hesitant to try something new for lunch, but Hosemann said the students on the culinary team did a good job of promoting their dish.

After running the recipe through





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► *Robin Hosemann, school advisor to the team*

several tests at the school, the team took their butternut squash lasagna, paired it with a Waldorf salad, and presented it to judges at the Harvest Challenge. Competition night was a bit stressful as students had to prep the food ahead of time, get it plated, and present it to the panel of judges. The team was rewarded for their hard work and the judges selected their dish for first place.

### ■ Whipping Up Wellness

After winning the Harvest Challenge last fall, the team continued to work together and competed in the Whipping Up Wellness Competition

hosted by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) in May on the UW-Madison campus. This state-wide competition selected five teams from a field of 150 high school and middle school culinary teams from around the state.

For the Whipping Up Wellness Competition, a new set of nutritional standards was thrown at the students and the Viroqua team had to rework their recipe. Dishes were evaluated on creativity, flavor, texture, visual appeal, and team presentation. Judges were selected from the food industry and education sector.

Remarkably, the Viroqua team also took first place in the Whipping Up Wellness Challenge. Their recipe,

along with those of the other finalists will be featured in the third-annual student-chef cookbook published by the DPI.

### ■ A Learning Experience

While winning was nice, Hosemann said the real story is what the students gained from the experience.

"I've been in education for 15 years and this is probably the most rewarding program I've been a part of," Hosemann said. "The skills that students learn transfer so readily outside of the classroom. Students are learning to work together, they're developing problem-solving skills, and, of course, they're learning cooking skills."

In addition, the students learned



## ► Focused on Local

The Viroqua Area School District has been a leader in school nutrition and developing relationships with local farmers. The district's enthusiasm for local food is evident in its school meals, which regularly feature locally produced fruits, vegetables and other products. Last school year, instead of holding a traditional pep rally, the high school held a live cooking competition.

The district was also critical to the formation of the Vernon County Farm to School Initiative – one of the strongest and most successful Farm to School programs in the country. The initiative was started in 2008 with the goal of improving not only student health but also the local economy and environment. In addition, the initiative has worked to bring food education into Vernon County schools in the form of farmer visits, new food tastings, and curriculum related to healthy food choices.

Viroqua Superintendent Bob Knadle is grateful for the work of Marilyn Volden, the district's food/nutrition supervisor, who has developed the district's food service program into one of the district's strengths. Student participation in the school's meal program has increased and, by purchasing food from local farmers, the district has helped support the local economy.

"What we've done with our food service has been appreciated by our parents and community members," Knadle said. "It's good for our students, our schools, our local farmers, and our community." □

to use and cook with local and seasonal produce. The Viroqua School District is a member of the Vernon County Farm to School Initiative and processes hundreds of pounds of local fruits and vegetables for use in school meals. The student culinary team had access to this selection of local produce and saw the process of getting produce from local farmers and then using it in the kitchen.

"I feel that it's imminently important for high school students to learn about real food," Zahms said. "We live in a society that is increasingly reliant on fast, processed foods — it's important to realize where your food comes from and how it gets to your table."

"I think it is essential for students to learn about food," DeLap said, who graduated from Viroqua High School in the spring. "There is so



much to learn about food from the science behind it to production and to cooking. Food is universal."

Despite its accomplishments, the student culinary team at Viroqua High School is an informal group formed in the fall prior to the Harvest Challenge. Hosemann said

student interest has increased and there is talk of developing a more formal culinary club.

"The group really bonded," Hosemann said.

One of the students on the team was hired by Zahms to work at the Driftless Café and plans on pursuing a career in the culinary arts. At the time of the writing of the article, the student was headed to a boot camp at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York.

"He jumped into the restaurant as a dishwasher and we quickly put him in situations where he was assisting the lunch crew with prep and execution of menu items," Zahms said. "He worked so hard and was excited about his work." ■

*Shelby Anderson is editor of Wisconsin School News.*

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