Branding Wisconsin Meat

The quest to make locally crafted meats as renowned as the state’s artisan cheese
A program with deep roots at CALS helps school districts around Wisconsin serve fruits, vegetables and other goods from local farmers—and introduces children to the joys and benefits of healthy eating.

By Joan Fischer
The setting seems unlikely, but Sara Tedeschi discovered one of her life’s passions in a noisy Madison elementary school lunchroom, where she helped as a parent volunteer.

Tedeschi was already working at CALS’ Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems (CIAS) on a program called Farm to College, which sought to increase purchasing of locally grown foods by Wisconsin colleges and universities. But looking around her children’s cafeteria, she saw another arena for improvement.

Kids were being served plastic-sealed lunches in the form of “hot packs” and “cold packs” featuring meal components delivered largely through national distribution companies or the USDA commodities program. Hot packs contained items to be heated up—a meat patty and french fries, for example—in a school kitchen so minimally equipped that no real cooking could take place there, a typical set-up in many school buildings. Cold packs contained accompanying items—a bun and ketchup for the burger, for example, and a serving of a raw fruit or vegetable such as carrots.

“There were no choices or self-serving that would allow children to take ownership of what they ate,” recalls Tedeschi. It also squandered “a potential learning moment,” she says, for teaching children all kinds of things about food—what makes a good portion size, the pleasures of colors and textures, what nutrients are found in different foods and why they’re good for you—in a hands-on way that could set kids on a course of healthier eating for life.

That was in 2001. And Tedeschi and her fellow parents weren’t the only ones who wanted to make some changes. In lunchrooms around Wisconsin and, indeed, the nation, parents and professionals in nutrition, agriculture, food service, health care and education were starting to envision and create improvements. Their efforts emerged alongside growing interest in strengthening local food economies and concern about the consequences of poor diets such as the rise in childhood obesity, particularly in areas with limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

Their grassroots initiatives became known as “Farm to School,” programs that connect schools with local or regional growers in order to serve their produce in school cafeterias, often drawing many other types of food businesses—food processors, manufacturers, distributors and related operations—into the process. Farm to School also encompasses educational activities such as school gardens, field trips to farms, food tastings and cooking classes with local chefs and farmers, all focused on growing, preparing and eating healthy food.

Resources serving Farm to School sprang up as interest grew. Today they include the nonprofit National Farm to School Network (NFSN), a USDA program and numerous grant opportunities at federal, state and local levels. According to NFSN, Farm to School programs now operate in more than 10,000 schools in all 50 states.

From the beginning the movement had a vibrant presence in Wisconsin. When Tedeschi had her “cafeeteria moment,” she shared her ideas at CIAS, most notably with her mentor, Jack Kloppenburg, a CALS professor of community and environmental...
sociology who had long been working to strengthen ties between urban communities and area food growers. He and Tedeschi received federal and other funding to launch “Wisconsin Homegrown Lunch,” essentially Wisconsin’s first Farm to School program, with Tedeschi serving as coordinator. The program was carried out in partnership with REAP Food Group, a Madison-based nonprofit that Kloppenburg helped found and that remains a Farm to School leader in southcentral Wisconsin.

The Wisconsin program had a wide influence and helped ignite other Farm to School initiatives nationwide. CIAS remains a leader in the field, providing technical assistance and resources throughout the state and region. Activities include working with the state Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) on a Farm to School AmeriCorps program that provides staff for eight Farm to School sites around the state; serving as host of the Great Lakes Region Farm to School Network, one of eight regional groups comprising the national network; and advising on Wisconsin’s first Farm to School legislation, passed in 2009, which among other things calls for a new staff position at DATCP to foster development of Farm to School. And CIAS last year convened the first statewide Farm to School summit in Wisconsin to serve the growing demand for information, networking and assistance.

**Wisconsin Farm to School**

programs are blooming in school districts large and small. Chilton, a district of nearly 1,200 students in Calumet County, has set the gold standard for what Farm to School can be by incorporating not only fruits and vegetables but also meat and dairy from area farms into a healthful, varied menu of scratch-cooked meals. Middleton–Cross Plains, a district feeding 6,250 children, during the fall features a local item on the menu almost daily and, with such long-storage items as apples and potatoes, maintains a regular appearance of local foods throughout the school year.

The message: Successful Farm to School programs come in all shapes and sizes, depending on each school district’s needs and resources. And it’s a good thing that Farm to School can be so varied, because the challenges school districts face feeding vast numbers of children day in and day out—the context in which any Farm to School program must function—are immense.

Consider the following:

- The Madison Metropolitan School District feeds kids some 20,000 meals a day, a logistical feat involving receiving deliveries from several large food service vendors and sending five refrigerated trucks out to schools twice a day, in addition to doing a considerable amount of food prep and cooking at a central commissary. But even districts much smaller than Madison wrangle with the complications of serving hundreds or thousands of meals each day.

- Just over 40 percent of Wisconsin schoolchildren (some 355,150 kids) qualify for a free or reduced-price lunch, up more than 10 percent from 2005, according to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. For many of these children, schools may offer the only balanced meals they get all day.

- Schools are on tight budgets. They are reimbursed for meals under the National School Lunch Program, but that usually does not cover all costs—and schools must always seek the best deals in order to qualify for reimbursement.

Given those circumstances, larger districts in particular rely on national food service companies and “hot packs/cold packs” for a reason: They feed huge numbers of children reliably and affordably. Local products certainly can be a much bigger part of the mix than they are at present, but at least for now they can’t fill the bill entirely.

Beyond scale and budget, Farm to School advocates face other challenges:

- Even minimal food processing—washing, peeling, cutting—is extremely labor-intensive. And many schools, as noted, are not equipped for cooking; they don’t have full working kitchens and instead rely on a central commissary for the district.

- Regulations and guidelines can be tough to navigate. For example, some districts require that any grower
selling to schools be certified through the USDA Good Agricultural Practices (GAP), which is intended to ensure food safety but imposes requirements that many smaller, diversified growers find difficult to meet.

- Growers and school food buyers are still learning to communicate with each other, whether about matters as apparently simple as getting their measurements to jibe (pecks or pounds?) or as complex as understanding how the variables of a growing season may affect a lunch program.

Yet all these challenges haven’t put the kibosh on Farm to School; rather, they’ve infused Farm to School with versatility and creativity in meeting them. Amid the wide range of Farm to School programs, a number of markers for success have emerged and serve as pearls of wisdom for anyone contemplating introducing Farm to School:

Engage your district’s school nutrition or food service director.

These hardworking and mostly unsung professionals live where the rubber meets the road in implementing Farm to School. “That’s the department that has a responsibility for making this happen,” notes CALS food science instructor and administrative dietitian Monica Theis. “They’re the ones that have the opportunity to make it happen and need to do all the work behind it.”

Start small. “Baby steps are best,” advises Michelle Denk, food service director for the Mount Horeb Area School District, which feeds about 1,600 students. “Try doing a Harvest of the Month—a program highlighting and serving a locally grown fruit or vegetable during that period—or just purchasing one locally grown item and going from there,” she says. Denk started small and now runs a program in which local food purchases make up about 6 percent of her budget—a share she hopes to increase in coming years.

Susan Peterman, school nutrition coordinator for the Middleton–Cross Plains Area School District, runs a vibrant Farm to School program and serves as chair of the state advisory council to the governor for Farm to School. For Peterman, it all started with apples.

CIAS had a grant to connect school districts to local apple growers. Lapacek’s Orchard in DeForest couldn’t find a market for their grade B apples, which are smaller than the grade A prized by supermarkets.

“But for K–5 children, that apple is perfect,” says Peterman. “We’ve partnered with Lapacek’s for six seasons now, and my students have the opportunity to taste 28 different varieties of apples between the start of school and the middle of January.”

From the start Peterman paid recognition to Lapacek’s Orchard on school menus that kids carry in their backpacks to more than 6,000 households. So not only did Frank Lapacek sell his apples, he got free advertising that drew families out to his orchard for all kinds of fun (and profitable) activities, including a pumpkin patch and fruit-picking.

Develop something doable.

Can’t do lunches for an entire district? Identify something more manageable. Madison’s REAP offers a weekly snack program at 10 elementary schools that introduces some 4,500 children to the joys of fruits and vegetables, including such initial nose-wrinklers as kohlrabi. Sourcing locally straight through the winter means offering kids things like sweet potatoes and spinach as well.

“We process with industrial french fry cutters, so they make the carrots and sweet potatoes and kohlrabi into these uniform, perfect little sticks—which makes them appealing to the kids as well,” says REAP Farm to School manager Sarah Elliott. “The kohlrabi is really crunchy and juicy. It has a great texture, which is why I think the kids like it so much.”

But it’s the accompanying education that makes the difference, Elliott feels. The schools receive a USDA Fresh Fruit and Vegetable grant due to their high percentages of free and reduced lunch recipients. Three times a week the kids get a raw fruit or vegetable snack; once a
week it’s from REAP, which sends AmeriCorp staffers to offer tasty lessons along with it.

“Just giving the kids carrots isn’t always enough,” Elliott says. “We have these smiling, enthusiastic people getting them excited and offering fun facts about the nutrition and history of the vegetable or information, with pictures, about the farmer who grew it.” And it helps that kids are not offered a choice, Elliott notes; it’s the vegetable or no snack at all, which is incentive enough to try it, and maybe come to like it.

REAP exemplifies, too, the use of creative partnerships to overcome obstacles. Processing 26,000 pounds of produce a year is a challenge. For years REAP did all the washing, cutting and packaging with a crew of some 30 volunteers every Sunday, using a kitchen lent to them by RP’s, a local pasta producer. Last year they acquired a whole new labor force by partnering with the Catholic Multicultural Center in south Madison in a program providing hard-to-employ persons with food service skills. And the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) kicks in by distributing snacks to schools once they’ve been processed.

REAP and MMSD also hold several “Fall Farm Days” featuring local produce in lunches at four elementary schools. And this year they’re pilot testing “gar- in lunches at four elementary schools.

Based in Viroqua, Fifth Season is building up a membership that com- prises a complete supply chain for offering schools locally and regionally grown foods. Services will include aggregat- ing produce from growers of all sizes, processing, sales and distribution— exactly the level of scaling up that’s needed for local growers to go from bit to major players in school cafeterias. Members already include such giants as Organic Valley/CROPP and Reinhart FoodService, the nation’s third-largest food service distributor.

Farmers and chefs are your stars. Kids in Madison know Farmer Rufus Haucke (Keewaydin Farms), Farmer Judy Hageman (Snug Haven) and Chef Tory Miller (L’Etoile, Graze). Kids in Holmen know Chef Thomas Sacksteder (Gundersen Lutheran Hospital). Kids in Middleton know Beekeeper Eugene Woller (Gentle Breeze Honey), who sold honey to the district and then visited schools with his colleagues in full beekeeper regalia to hold tastings with kids and talk about their work. Their visits also served to enrich an accompa- nying science curriculum about bees.

Few things are more memorable for children than having a farmer or chef visit their schools for something as small as a classroom tasting or as grand as an all-school cooking event. Putting a face on the experience can make things click for kids: where food comes from, who grows it, how it’s prepared.

For farmers and chefs it’s just as grat- ifying. “The kids are so excited about having a farmer in the classroom, and that’s the part I really love,” says Haucke. “I’m always surprised at the reaction we get when we serve them our raw veggies. They absolutely love it.”

Farmers are willing to put in the time even if the business isn’t quite profitable for many of them just yet. Haucke works with four school districts and sold them about $7,000 worth of produce this past season—“A relatively small portion of our business, but it does continue to grow,” he says, echoing several other farmers. Haucke made an investment in Farm to School by obtaining federal grant funding to build a processing kitchen. “Once that’s fully operational, I think school sales could really take off and become a bigger part of what we do,” he says.

I f you offer it, will they eat it? Midway through the fall 2012 semester, which debuted new National School Lunch Program guidelines mandating more fruits and vegetables—students must now put a fruit or vegetable on their tray every day in order for the school to be reimbursed—the news media ran stories about student opposition across the nation, including photos of cafeteria garbage cans heaped with rejected veggies and even a protest video (“We Are Hungry”) with more than a million views on YouTube. (The USDA eventually responded by doing away with daily and weekly limits of meats and grains.)

The reaction came as no surprise to CALS nutritional sciences profes-
Nutritional sciences professor Dale Schoeller and his team did “before and after” evaluations of lunch trays to see what kids were eating (photos below). Among their findings: kids participating in Farm to School programs ate more fruits and vegetables.