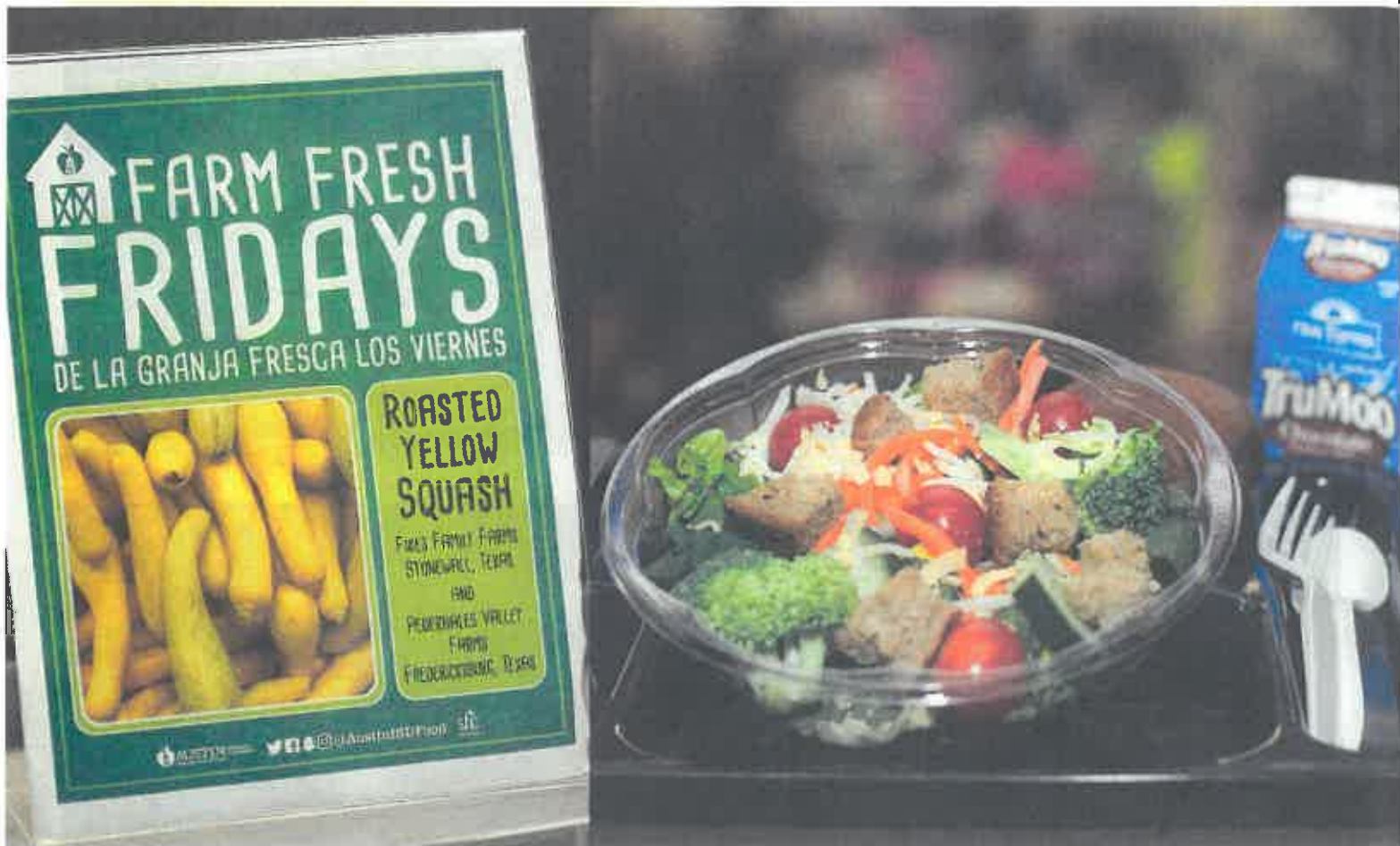


# SCHOOL FOOD GETS REAL

BY ANNE MARIE HAMPSHIRE • PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDY SAMS



With the support of Sustainable Food Center, the Farm Fresh Fridays program brings local produce to AISD's salad bars, strengthening the connection between healthy food and the local farms that grow it.

If the thought of school cafeteria food conjures memories of cooked-'til-they're-slimy green beans, grease-soaked pizza and gravy-covered mystery meat, here's some news to savor. Kids in Austin today are enjoying an entirely different school-lunch experience. Thanks to the strategic vision of Austin Independent School District (AISD) and the financial and moral support of nonprofit Whole Kids Foundation, lunch in the cafeteria is evolving to be more nutritious, more locally sourced and far more hip than what most of us remember. Here are some of the innovative ways the two organizations are working together to ensure Austin's youngest generation has access to not only healthy food, but delicious food they're excited about eating—and growing.

## Garden to Café

Getting hands in the dirt during the school day is becoming the new normal for many kids in Central Texas, and the Whole Kids Foundation and AISD are doing everything they can to support the habit. School gardens are sprouting up all over the city, many of them started or enhanced by grants from Whole Kids. In fact, over the past five years, the foundation has awarded garden grants to more than 40 schools in AISD and around 60 in Central Texas. For the 2016–2017 school year, the foundation accepted more than 1,200 U.S. and Canadian applications and anticipates awarding more than 500 \$2,000 grants.

For its part, AISD recently launched the "Garden to Café" pro-

gram to deepen the connection between these school gardening efforts and the food that students consume at school. The program allows the schools to grow produce that can be served in the cafeterias of all schools, not just those with gardens. But how do you source enough of one vegetable to make it on the menu for the whole district? “When we’re doing Garden to Café, one of our biggest challenges is the volume,” says Anneliese Tanner, nutrition and food services director for AISD. “We serve 45,000 lunches a day, and when we have a program like this, we want to do it for *all* students. We don’t do local and organic and Garden to Café only at schools where a parent has asked for it. We want to make healthy, tasty food accessible to everybody.” Tanner and her team found an ingenious way to meet the required volume by putting out a “Call to Plant” to every school at the beginning of the 2016–2017 school year, encouraging them to plant any variety of greens to be used in a recipe for the whole district.

### Salad Bars

Another new AISD initiative that the Whole Kids Foundation is helping to fund is the introduction of entrée salad bars in each of the 80 elementary schools in Austin. Two or three new salad bars are being rolled out every week, so by Spring Break, every student can opt for fresh, seasonal veggies and fruits—many of them locally sourced from Johnson’s Backyard Garden, local distributor Farm to Table or, thanks to the Garden to Café program, their own school garden. And lest you think kids are turning their noses up at all that green, Nona Evans, executive director of the Whole Kids Foundation, says that they’re already seeing gratifying results: When 138 entrée salads are chosen on Pizza Day in just one school, you know you’re doing something right. “And that’s just a reinforcement of what we’ve seen all over the country,” says Evans. “When you give kids good choices, they *make* good choices. I’ve seen it thousands of times and it will excite me every time.”

Recent research from the Pew Charitable Trusts supports Evans’ observations, with studies showing that salad bars are the number one way to increase fruit and vegetable consumption at school. To make the salad bars even more popular, the schools rotate four themes (Chef, Asian, Fiesta and Mediterranean) every two weeks to expose students to new veggies and new combinations in different seasons, such as different colors and kinds of peppers, rainbow carrots, bok choy, etc. “Salad bars put a lot of color on the line,” says Tanner. “We’ve paid attention to our presentation to make sure it looks like a restaurant experience and that it’s very colorful and fun.”

### Food Trucks

Elementary students aren’t the only kids benefiting from these kinds of forward-thinking initiatives. Lunch at high school is about to get more “lit” (current teenspeak for “cool”) with the addition of a mobile food truck that will travel to the city’s high schools on a rotating basis. AISD piloted its first food truck, “Nacho Average Food Truck,” on the Anderson High School campus in 2015. Anderson students not only named it; they also did all the branding and painting themselves and voted on the first menu:

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food truck in Austin that's doing those two things." The food was so well-received that AISD put the same menu on the cafeteria line at other high schools. "When we first opened the food truck, some of the feedback we got from students was, "This is great. This is like Torchy's," Tanner recalls. "I think it's one of the best compliments, because people don't think of school food as good, but kids are comparing it to a really successful chain."

A new food truck—kicking off in the 2016-17 school year with funding from Whole Kids Foundation and help from Tien Ho, the global vice president of culinary and hospitality for Whole Foods Market—will feature Ho's recipes for a Vietnamese menu, such as lemongrass chicken and lemongrass tofu banh mi sandwiches, ginger sesame spinach, and banana tapioca. Aside from being undoubtedly tasty, the new menus will offer opportunities for students at every high school in AISD to explore different cultural foodways that they might not have experienced otherwise.

Clearly, times are-a-changin' for AISD students, and the evolution of their school food scene has become a model to follow for other districts around the country. "AISD is doing so much to energize our kids and honor the flexibility and curiosity they have around food," explains Evans. "One of the reasons Whole Kids is involved is that we have to help our community understand the new brand of school food, because so many adults have that stereotype. It's just as important for us to help parents understand that it's not your mom's cafeteria anymore or the fast food environment it might have been a long time ago."

street tacos that included barbacoa, carnitas, veggie and fish options, with sides like escabeche and chili-lime watermelon. "Honestly, I think they did a great job naming it, because we're *not* your average food truck," says Tanner. "We have to meet all the nutrition regulations and we make our food available to all students, regardless of their ability to pay for the meals. There's no other



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