

**Cranston Herald**  
**Fruit For Thought**  
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By ELIZABETH SEAL

An entire produce section descended on Park View Middle School on Monday, as Director of Food Services Michael Marrocco endeavored to introduce the kids there to new – and tasty – fruits and vegetables.

The colorful spread was certainly eye-catching, and students seated at the lunch tables strained to get a glimpse of Marrocco and Kimberly Sporkmann, a 2006 Johnson & Wales graduate who works as a healthy food system specialist for Kids First, cutting up kiwis and figs and shucking pomegranates. Kids First coordinates the Rhode Island Farm to School Project, which aims to put more Rhode Island farm products in local schools.

“Everything here is in season right now,” Marrocco said. “What we don’t give them [to taste] we use in the kitchen.”

When given the OK by the lunch monitors, the kids raced up to stand in line for a cup of samples. Some kids glibly rattled off the names of the offerings, others got stuck trying to identify common produce like eggplant. One boy pointed out there was no way the fruit being served was in season because “how do you grow this stuff when its 40 degrees outside?”

Marrocco conceded the point and told him the avocados, pomegranates and figs may not be in season here, but they

are in the Middle East and the other parts of the world they are native to.

“You’d be surprised how many kids knew what a pomegranate was,” Marrocco said.

Sporkmann offered cups with fresh figs and pomegranate seeds as Marrocco doled out slices of starfruit; “it tastes like an apple,” he reassured those with quizzical looks. All the produce came from Siravo’s, a Cranston produce supplier.

“He did donate some items,” Marrocco said. “I don’t know which, because I haven’t seen the bill yet.”

Cranston has been engaged in an ongoing drive to increase the quality of school lunches and add more fresh produce to kids’ diets. Earlier in the year, the school kitchens served fresh corn-on-the-cob, which was donated by Confreda Farms and shucked by parent volunteers. The schools Wellness Committee, Marrocco said, is hoping to get gardens going at some schools, so kids can grow their own produce and then taste the results at lunch.

The tasting program is going to make the rounds at the other two middle schools; years ago, Marrocco said, the program was even offered at elementary schools and was held in the evening so parents could try new foods, too.

Lunches at Park View are a far cry from the days of mystery meat and slabs of government pizza. On Monday, kids got the option of a salad bar, sandwiches and wraps, American chop suey – some things don’t change – and pizza from Ronzio. Side dishes included fresh

apples from Hills Farm, containers of fresh-frozen peaches and baked slices of zucchini.

“They don’t like zucchini and tomato sauce, so we put a little breading on it, a little cheeses,” Marrocco said, explaining how the kitchen tries to respond to student tastes.

Food Services still sneak in healthy options wherever it can. White bread has been banished from the kitchen and replaced with whole-grain bread, rolls and wraps. Even the pizza is healthy.

“Whole wheat pizza dough, low-fat mozzarella cheese...turkey pepperoni,” Marrocco said, showing off Monday’s offerings. “We don’t tell them [it’s healthy].”

The student response to the produce display was as varied as the offerings. Some kids were obviously dubious about putting unfamiliar foods in their mouths – one girl refused to try anything, saying she was allergic to “all fruit” – while others gulped down their first portion and later came back for more.

Eighth-graders Janice Cepeda, Erin Enos and Lauren Abbenanti asked for a run-down on what they were eating before trying anything.

“What are these red things?” Enos said, poking at the pomegranate seeds with a distrustful look on her face.

Cepeda talked her into trying one before enthusiastically eating her way through her own cup of samples. Even after chewing and swallowing, though, Enos still didn’t look thrilled about the new food.

Another eighth-grader, Allison Miller, said she’d wanted to try figs and starfruit for a while and was happy to take advantage of this opportunity to do so.

“Everything’s really expensive [at the supermarket],” she pointed out. “[I wish] that every Monday there’d be a tasting.”

Miller and her friends are among those students who would prefer school lunches to be even healthier. They said they all usually bring their lunch and talked about the greasiness of the pizza.

“Even the milk has corn syrup in it,” said Amanda Way, pointing to the back of her strawberry-flavored milk carton.

At the moment, though, the kids in Cranston are eating some of the healthiest lunches in the country, according to Sporkmann.

“Rhode Island is really progressive,” she said. “Right now we have the highest standards in the nation.”

There’s always room for improvement, of course, and Sporkmann said Kids First is always working to increase the percentage of fresh foods in school lunches and cut back on the salt.

“The lunches...look phenomenal,” she said.