

COLORADO PROUD SCHOOL MEAL DAY IN THE SAN LUIS VALLEY

By Abe Rosenberg

Note: Abe Rosenberg is the new Local Foods Local Places Director at the San Luis Valley Local Foods Coalition – working to infuse SLV tables with SLV farm produce and products.

As I walk into the Sangre De Cristo School, I hear the sound of a chicken clucking in the halls. I am then greeted by Sarah Jones of Jones Organic Family farms where they have a display for the local potatoes going into today's school meal.

It's all for the state-wide, annual event called Colorado Proud School Meal Day where school districts across the state are encouraged to participate by sourcing local ingredients for the meal to celebrate Colorado agriculture and to educate school children about healthy eating. The Colorado Department of Agriculture and Education invited all Colorado schools to participate on September 18, 2019. It was no easy task to see multiple school lunches in the same day, but I was able to visit three of the schools in the San Luis Valley that were participating.

Sangre de Cristo had some help from the Beth and Sarah Jones of Jones Organic Family Farms who greeted each student as they entered the cafeteria with a top-notch agricultural display. This interactive educational experience included a chicken with a variety of eggs and a pamphlet about eggs followed by the Jones' multicolor medley of potatoes with purple and reds cut in half to show the inside of these diverse potatoes.

Towards the entrance to the cafeteria there was a huge banner stating, "Colorado Proud" and an interactive grain display that featured a hand grinder and two historic metates (mealing stones) that were once used by indigenous people on this land.

Sangre Food Service Director Barb Grandell displayed her "Awesome Blossom" project where she had photographed potatoes and quinoa and other crops in blossom during the summer and created a photo presentation with the students teaching them that there are no fruits and veggies without the blossom. Her crew then had an exhibition of local ingredients that grew from those blossoms followed by the salad bar that featured an assortment of Colorado fruits and vegetables for them to eat. Agriculture from field to fork!

In Alamosa, Ortega Middle school was hosting a group of college students from Adams State University for lunch that day as well as its usual 524 students and I came right in the middle of serving. The cafeteria staff was all amped up for the event with carrot costumes, a beautiful

display of fruits and veggies, and signs. I was able to grab some quick photos and ask about the meal which included Colorado Sweet Corn and some other items for the salad bar.

South Conejos School District made a beautiful display for Colorado Proud School Meal Day and featured a rainbow of fruits and vegetables in their salad bar from Southern Colorado. They featured chiogga beets and crispy turnips from White Mountain Organic Farm in Mosca, red fingerling potatoes from White Rock Specialties, spicy jalapeno peppers and juicy cucumbers from our farm friends in the lower Arkansas Valley Milberger and Hobbs Family Farm. They also featured Colorado sweet corn and made a delicious fruit infused water beverage for their students. I was told that the students were very excited to see the balloons and carrot costume as they entered the lunch line.

As the Local Foods Local Places Program Director for the SLV Local Foods Coalition, I get to see the local food movement in action frequently. There is something quite special about Colorado Proud School Meal Day though. Seeing students smile at a purple potato or learn about whole grains like quinoa that is grown right here in the San Luis Valley, it tells me that we are moving in the right direction. Today, school cafeterias are sometimes criticized for not having healthier meals and the purchasing budget for food service in schools is extremely limited – But walk into your local school and check out what our food service directors are doing. They are cooking local ingredients from scratch in tasty healthy recipes. The San Luis Valley Farm to School Task Force is available to support schools who really do make a huge effort every day to serve the healthiest meal possible to their students and who value local agriculture.

The Valley Roots Food Hub is an excellent source for supplying local ingredients to schools in the San Luis Valley and we at the SLV Local Foods Coalition encourage and support schools to continue getting local ingredients on a regular basis. Colorado Proud School Meal Day is a really important day for kids and agriculture and it makes school lunch an exciting and educational experience.

Here's looking forward to next year!