Ka Momona O Ka ʻĀina

The Bounty of the Land

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Increasing Local Foods in School Meals: A Step Towards Healthier, More Sustainable School Lunches in Hawaii

Hawaii Child Nutrition Programs (HCNP) has recently been awarded a significant federal grant from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Marketing Service, marking a major step forward in enhancing the nutritional value and sustainability of school meals across Hawaii. The Local Food for Schools (LFS) Cooperative Agreement Grant Program is designed to help schools incorporate more local, fresh foods into their meal programs. This initiative is expected to create a more resilient food system while supporting local farmers and businesses.

Mashed Purple Sweet Potato

The Power of Local Food

The LFS Grant focuses on using locally grown foods that have not traditionally appeared in the USDA recipe database or been widely incorporated into school menus. This includes four key local ingredients:

1. Bok Choy
2. Kabocha (Palaʻai)
3. Sweet Potato (Uʻala)
4. Local Ground Beef

Paniolo Stew

These foods are now featured ingredients in the school meal offerings, creating opportunities to expand the use of locally grown produce and ground beef while meeting nutritional standards set by the USDA. By embracing these unique ingredients, HCNP is supporting local farmers and ranchers, especially those who are small, regional, or socially disadvantaged. In doing so, the program not only enriches students' meals but also boosts Hawaii's local economy.

A Bright Future for Local Foods in Hawaii's Schools

During the 2024-2025 school year, the LFS grant has already invested over $175,000 into Hawaii's local economy, underscoring the program's commitment to farm-to-school initiatives. By sourcing food directly from local farmers, the program is driving change and helping schools provide healthier, more sustainable meal options for students. This is just the beginning of a larger movement to create a fair, competitive, and resilient local food chain that will continue to benefit Hawaii's students, farmers, and communities for years to come. As more local products make their way into school menus, the impact will be felt not only in the lunchrooms but across the entire state, reinforcing the vital connection between schools and the local agricultural community. By investing in local foods, Hawaii's schools are not just feeding students—they're building a brighter, more sustainable future for everyone

Honey Butter Roasted Kabocha

Mashed Purple Sweet Potato

Servings per Recipe: 12 - 4.00 oz.

Ingredients

3 c. Purple sweet potato (Wash, peel, diced, cook, strain, mash)
1 3/4 Tbsp. Garlic clove (ready to use, fine chop)
1 c. Coconut milk (ready to use, canned)
2 1/2 Tbsp. Margarine, low sodium (ready to use)
To taste Salt and pepper table salt, ground pepper
1 tsp. Canola oil (ready to use, to cook ingredients)

Directions

1. Place cut potato in pot and steam or simmer in water until fork tender
2. Heat skillet pan at low heat with oil and cook garlic until fragrance appears.
3. Add coconut milk and simmer until slightly thicker consistency then swirl in butter.
4. Pour coconut milk in mixing bowl with cooked potatoes and stir together until incorporated. Season to taste with salt and pepper.
5. Remove from bowl and place into serving dish. Enjoy!

Why Local Food Matters for Schools

There are several compelling reasons why schools are eager to bring more local food into their cafeterias:

- **Supporting Local Economies:** By purchasing directly from Hawaii's farmers, schools are helping to keep money circulating within the local community, ensuring that small-scale farmers thrive.
- **Better Quality Meals:** Local foods are farm freh and more nutrient-dense, contributing to the overall quality of school meals. Fresh, tasty ingredients can encourage students to eat healthier and try new foods.
- **Reducing Food Waste:** Sourcing local products reduces the risk of spoilage during transportation, making it easier for schools to use ingredients efficiently and minimize waste.
- **Meeting Growing Demand for Local Food:** Legislators, students, and the wider community are increasingly advocating for more locally produced foods to be included in school meals. This aligns with the broader community goals of sustainability, food sovereignty, and wellness.
- **Aligning with Wellness Policies:** School wellness policies often emphasize the need for nutritious, locally sourced foods. This initiative supports those priorities while contributing to a healthier school environment.

Benefits of Gardening: Promote healthy eating habits by having a home garden. Plan a family trip to a Garden Shop to select vegetable and fruit plants to grow. Children's consumption of vegetables and fruits are more likely to increase because they were involved in the activity. Gardening is a powerful tool for environmental awareness, family bonding, eco-friendly habits, learning more about the growth cycle, and promoting and nurturing a sustainable future. A deeper appreciation and understanding of where food comes from and how it was produced will impact lifelong eating habits.