

Evaluating Youth Taste Tests: How Programs Can Shape Healthy Food Preferences

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Background

Youth taste tests:

- help introduce new foods,
- offer repeated exposure to novel foods,
- help establish healthy food preferences,
- create opportunities to explore foods – *particularly valuable for households with limited resources,*
- shape preferences and increase willingness to try and ask for foods – *all positively associated with consumption.*



Objective & Methods

Cooperative Extension programs deliver series-based nutrition education using a variety of age-appropriate, SNAP-Ed approved curricula with taste tests to expand food preferences and reinforce healthy eating. CFHL, UC evaluates the large-scale implementation of classroom food tastings to capture short term outcomes (student preferences/intentions) that help inform future programming.

In 2018-2019, educators administered the Taste Testing Tool (TTT) immediately following 2,291 food tastings with 48,881 K-8th grade students during school and afterschool programming. The large majority (82%) of tastings occurred with K-6th graders.



Results

Foods most commonly tasted were fruits, vegetables, nuts, and legumes. Typically, they were served raw, paired with a familiar food, or included in a mixed dish.



Top 15 Foods Tasted	N
Sweet Potatoes	221
Mandarins	216
Strawberries	105
Sunflower Seed Butter	104
Cranberries	93
Brussel Sprouts	78
Fuyu Persimmons	78
Dates	71
Almonds	68
Edamame	67
Beets	65
Apples	64
Sugar Snap Peas	64
Avocado	57
Black Beans	51

Grade	Average of % try before	Average of % try today	Average of % try again	Average of % ask at home
Kindergarten	38%	93%	68%	65%
1-3 grade	48%	93%	72%	67%
4-6 grade	53%	93%	73%	66%
7-8 grade	59%	88%	65%	55%
Grand Total	47%	93%	70%	65%

Note: Results for "multiple/mixed grades" are not displayed here.

On average, 47% of students tasted the food before, 93% tried it today, 70% were willing to eat it again, and 65% were willing to ask for it at home. Younger students were less likely to have tasted foods before, whereas older students (7th/8th) were less likely to taste the food today, try it again, or ask for it at home.

For the majority (57%) of target foods (n=118), fewer than half of students had tasted the food before. Only one food (Lima Beans) stood out for having low appeal.

For six target foods, less than half of students were willing to try the food again.

For 12 target foods, less than half of students were willing to ask for the food at home.

Food Tasted	% Will Try Again
Cheese	33%
Dates	37%
Milk	42%
Garbanzo Beans	45%
Brussel Sprouts	46%
Beets	47%

Food Tasted	% Ask for Food at Home
Dates	32%
Cheese	33%
Chick peas	34%
Eggs	38%
Broccoli	38%
Garbanzo Beans	40%
Persimmons	41%
Brussel Sprouts	42%
Beets	44%
Sweet Potatoes	46%
Wheat Tortilla	47%
Tofu	48%

Conclusion & Next Steps

CFHL, UC food tastings:

- introduced novel foods to many students
- included foods appealing to at least half of students
- showed student willingness to try foods again and ask for them at home – *older students may show less willingness to try/ask for foods*
- can be improved by replacing or adapting target foods with low appeal

Increasingly, youth taste tests are also conducted in the school cafeteria through partnerships with food service programs that feature and promote menu items to help increase appeal, reduce waste, and improve meal participation.