

School lunch gets 'ready to eat' makeover

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STARKVILLE - Fourth graders going through the cafeteria line at their schools are no different than 40-year-olds. They want food that looks good and is easy to eat.

"Take two wedges of the kiwi and then add a strawberry, and look how nice that looks with the red and green," said chef Cyndie Story, a consultant for institutional food service providers, who works with mostly schools to teach them how to serve healthy foods like fresh fruits and vegetable and to serve them in a way they will be attractive to kids.

In another demonstration, Story, who was speaking to the cafeteria workers from the Starkville School District Monday, quartered and cored a pear in one motion using Armstrong Middle School's Sunkist Sectionizer, which can slice and core other fruit like apples along with dicing dozens of fruits like kiwi, tomatoes or lemons. She then sprinkled the wedges with Jell-O to make them more attractive to students.

"Now, which would you rather eat," Story asked the roomful of school cooks, holding up a single whole pear, or a small dish holding pear wedges with their cores removed.

"It's called 'ready to eat,'" she said.

And like a Food Network performer, Story clipped through demonstrations of how to peel cantaloupes without having them roll around the counter - she cuts off each end and stands the melon up, then shaves the skin off with her knife - or how to quickly peel a kiwi, which involves cutting off the ends then wedging a spoon between the skin and the fruit and just working the spoon around the edge. It came right off.

"I've picked up some pointers," said Nancy Selvie of Starkville, and who works with the Ward-Stewart Elementary School Cafeteria.

"Especially, when it came to peeling that kiwi; I'd never seen it done that way," she added.

A big part of Story's message is getting food service workers to make healthy food more attractive to eaters, but also to make the preparation job quick and easy for workers.

This is why she made ample use of the school's electric fruit and vegetable slicer, which gives machine-precision slices of tomatoes, strawberries, kiwi, peppers, cucumbers and nearly anything she put inside the device, making the foods easier to eat and also more attractive and easier to serve and portion.

"I'm a big fan of sticks," said Story.

"Anything a person can reach for and grab is good," she added, putting a green bell pepper in the slicer. The peppers could become part of a vegetable tray for dipping.

"You have to make it doable," explained Story as she pointed out features of the electric slicer, which can greatly reduce time spent over a chopping board with a knife.

"But it has to look good," Story stressed, as she paired up diced pineapple with a couple grapes in a small plastic serving dish, giving a hard-to-resist color splash.



Chef Cyndie Story slices an orange with the Sunkist Sectionizer Monday at Armstrong Middle School in Starkville during a cafeteria worker training workshop geared toward healthy eating. (Photo: Descant) [Photo Gallery](#)

“And the students do eat fruits and vegetables,” said SSD Director of Child Nutrition Beverly Lowry, who asked Story to bring her demonstration to Starkville because of the district's commitment to having its students eat healthier and learn to make healthier choices.

“But if the food is more appealing, they will eat more of it,” said Story who recalled a school whose servings of oranges went from 50 to 300, and all because the oranges were sliced and “ready to eat.”

And don't think even fourth graders can't be food critics. They know what they like, said cafeteria workers.

“Believe me, they'll tell you if it's not right,” said Selvie.