

'Throwdown' focuses on healthy, cheap school lunches

May 31 2018, by Dave Collins

Some top chefs are converging in Connecticut to help answer a question being asked every day in school cafeterias across the country.

What kind of tasty dishes can be served for [school](#) lunches that students actually like and can be produced at rock-bottom costs while meeting federal government nutritional requirements?

The 10 chefs, including some James Beard award winners, will take part in the first "\$1.25 Throwdown" contest in New London on Saturday, trying to create dishes that cost no more than \$1.25 apiece to make.

That's the amount event organizer Dan Giusti and his team of fellow chefs are limited to when they prepare daily meals for New London's 3,900 school children.

Giusti is best known as the former head chef of one of the world's top-rated restaurants, Noma, in Copenhagen, Denmark. His company, Brigaid, has been making New London's school meals for the past two years and partnered with New York City schools this year to begin serving six schools in the Bronx.

Giusti invited the 10 chefs to this weekend's contest, which will serve both as a fundraiser for New London schools and an idea generator for Brigaid. Each chef will compete against another chef for the best tasting dish as judged by students and food writers, and Giusti is hoping to add some of the recipes to the lunch rotation. A \$50 ticket will allow you to

enjoy one of meals.

Some of the expected dishes include a vegetable-only, sushi-like roll and a jerk Caribbean fish sandwich.

"The whole point of this is to bring some of the best culinary minds in the country to think about this," Giusti said. "At the end of the day, hopefully we'll come up with more recipes that are usable and that kids like."

Some of the guest chefs include James Beard award winners Stuart Brioza and Nate Appleman, "Top Chef" Season 12 winner Mei Lin and James Wayman, the 2016 Connecticut Restaurant Association Chef of the Year.

Giusti formed Brigaid to offer more wholesome food choices to students and ditch the frozen, processed meals that have dominated school menus—an idea pursued by other chefs and former first lady Michelle Obama.

More than half of New London students qualify for free or reduced-price meals and the federal government reimburses the school system for most of its food costs, Giusti said. That reimbursement is \$3.31 per meal. Subtracting labor and maintenance costs leaves \$1.25 for the food, he said.

"The budget is the most challenging thing," Giusti said. "There are legitimately things that you cannot get into using. As chefs, we like to use fresh herbs. That's just something we can't do."

New London's lunch menu includes only items made from scratch. Instead of frozen chicken tenders, fish sticks or sloppy Joes, Giusti and his team offer up curry chicken with ginger brown rice, chicken gumbo,

beef enchiladas and homemade cheese pizza. That's in addition to the fruits, salads and sandwiches that are available every day.

The city's program has been hit or miss with students sometimes. While they have liked the new barbecue chicken thighs, they just weren't that interested in butternut squash soup or a sandwich containing roasted turkey, cranberry sauce and stuffing-flavored mayonnaise.

"A lot of this stuff is in the delivery of how it's presented, how it's communicated," Giusti said. "You have to figure out ways to present it so that they'll at least give it a shot."

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