

Milk Fat Chit Chat with Chef Sharon Schaefer



Chef Sharon Schaefer, SNS, is the Assistant Director of School Food Service Programming at the Culinary Institute of America (CIA). SNA recently sat down with Chef Schaefer to talk about her experiencing helping kids discover delicious dairy milk and foods on school menus and how school nutrition professionals can 'meet the moment' at any moment when it comes to promoting school meals.

HOW DID YOU FIND YOURSELF A CHEF WORKING IN SCHOOL NUTRITION?

For a long time, I said that I was a 'classically trained chef turned lunch lady.' When I moved from catering/fine dining and food service management into a K-12 position, my son was in preschool. I came home and said, "I am going to be an executive chef at a school district!" and he responded with, "Mom, you're gonna be a lunch lady!"

It wasn't said in a way that felt like the role was diminished. He was so happy for me, [and] I decided to see my role through the eyes of a child as opposed to the eyes of a chef. As part of the CIA Consulting team, the team and I share a profound appreciation for school nutrition professionals and are here to support states, school districts and industry.

WHAT ARE SOME OF YOUR FAVORITE WAYS TO MENU DAIRY, OR MAYBE SOME "DAIRY WINS?" FROM YOUR PAST?

Dairy wins are parfaits, smoothies, yogurt-based sauces and of course highlighting CHEESE!

In between the two school district [positions] that I [held] in Omaha, Nebraska, I was the K-12 sales specialist for Hiland Dairy. The first time I did something that I was really excited about with dairy was a pumpkin spice parfait with Westside Community Schools. Everyone was putting all their pumpkin spice information out there, and I thought, "Wait a minute, if we take plain yogurt—adaptable, likable—and we add puréed pumpkin to it (and the storerooms are filled with pumpkin that nobody knows how to use!), [then some] pumpkin pie spice—could I make a pumpkin-flavored yogurt with these ingredients that I have on hand?" And the answer was yes.

Then we had a serendipitous moment where our Thanksgiving dessert had used graham cracker crumbs, and we ended up with leftovers. So instead of doing granola, we did a graham cracker crumb parfait layer, so we could really play off that pie concept.

When it comes to yogurt-based sauces, Greek-inspired Tzatziki, an Indian condiment known as Raita or even as a base for a homemade dressing is a great way to menu dairy and, based on the recipe and use, possibly even receive some meal pattern credit for the sauce. Whether it is in a smoothie or part of your Greek chicken flatbread, plain yogurt seems to be not only a true WIN but one that adds another layer of flavor and richness to recipes.

CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE REALITIES OF MENUING DAIRY VS. STUDENT CONSUMPTION OF DAIRY IN SCHOOLS?

Whether you're looking at low-fat or full-fat dairy, you have the same challenges. Whatever kids experience at home is normal to them. If you're doing something in your school meals program that's different from home, that could go [either] way. There are families that buy skim or low-fat milk, and if the program were to increase the fat [content], then maybe the challenge is "it feels slimy in my mouth, it's too rich." Same thing when you put the shoe on the other foot. A family that has 2% or whole milk in the refrigerator, they come in and the skim milk, it tastes like water. [Acceptability] has more of a direct correlation to what [students are] used to and every family is built different.

That's why when we talk about the milk cooler, I really like the concept of options. To offer variety so kids can pick what tastes delicious to them. This is also where satiety comes into it for me. Kids need a certain amount of fat, more so than adults, for a lot of great reasons. Your brain is programmed to react when you have that satiety of "my needs have been met." Using higher-fat [foods] as an ingredient [you get those things] like mouthfeel, taste, fat is flavor, fat transporting other flavors and enhancing them. But [fats] also will give us that brain message that "my needs

have been met,” and as a chef I see that as just as big of a reason to use them.

Being mindful of offering nutrient-dense ingredients and recipes is so important to menu planners. Dairy on menus can be one of the ways to accomplish it.

HOW DO YOU RECOMMEND SCHOOL NUTRITION PROFESSIONALS “MEET THE MOMENT” –AS WELL AS THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS AND PARENTS?

I do think that the milk cooler [provides] the opportunity to provide flexibility, and then the outreach to parents and to students is [communicating] “we’re here to meet you where you’re at, through variety.” Right now, schools already do that! Most schools are doing fat-free white and/or 1% white, and maybe they’re doing chocolate or strawberry [or other flavors]. There are all shapes and sizes out there, but the milk cooler by and large is continuing to be an opportunity to offer variety.

And then to communicate about [changes] in recipes, I think learning a little bit about why higher fat is important for brain development and brain health in kids and sharing that out. Everybody wants kids eating healthy meals. We want them to take the vegetables and eat the vegetables! So maybe a little bit of butter or a yogurt-based curry sauce on top of your cauliflower is something where kids think, “Oh, wow, now this is delicious and interesting!” and a child’s willing to take a bite and try it.

I think it’s Purdue University that proposed fat as the sixth basic taste, kind of like umami was added years ago. They’re like, we need to have, like, basically fatty acids or like fat is a flavor amongst itself. We crave it, so don’t overdo it anything in excess is exactly that: excess. It’s a unique and powerful experience to have food that tastes great, and fat is one of those vehicles.



Congratulations to the 2026 FAME Award Winners!

School nutrition has some new stars to celebrate! Basic American Foods™ has announced the recipients of the 37th annual Foodservice Achievement Management Excellence (FAME) Awards, honoring professionals who are redefining what’s possible in K-12 meal programs. Whether it’s transforming menus, strengthening operations or building more inclusive and student-focused programs, this year’s honorees demonstrate exceptional leadership and an unwavering commitment to feeding kids well.



GOLDEN DIRECTOR AWARD

Ken Yant

*Executive Director of
School Nutrition
Gwinnett County
Public Schools, Ga.*



SILVER DIRECTOR AWARD

Kim Kilgore, RD, SNS

*Director of Food and
Nutrition Services
Cherry Creek School
District, Colo.*



SILVER SPIRIT AWARD

Amy Faricy, RD, SNS

*Manager of Menu Services
Douglas County School
District, Colo.*

Nominated by industry peers and selected by a committee of past winners, SNA leaders and industry media, honorees represent excellence across menu creativity, operational management, community impact and student well-being.

The 2026 FAME Award winners will be recognized during a special reception at SNA’s 2026 School Nutrition Industry Conference (SNIC), held January 11–13, 2026, at the JW Marriott Austin.

To read more about dairy’s impact, see “Beyond the Carton: The Contribution of Dairy Foods to Nutritious Diets and School Meals” on pg. 20.