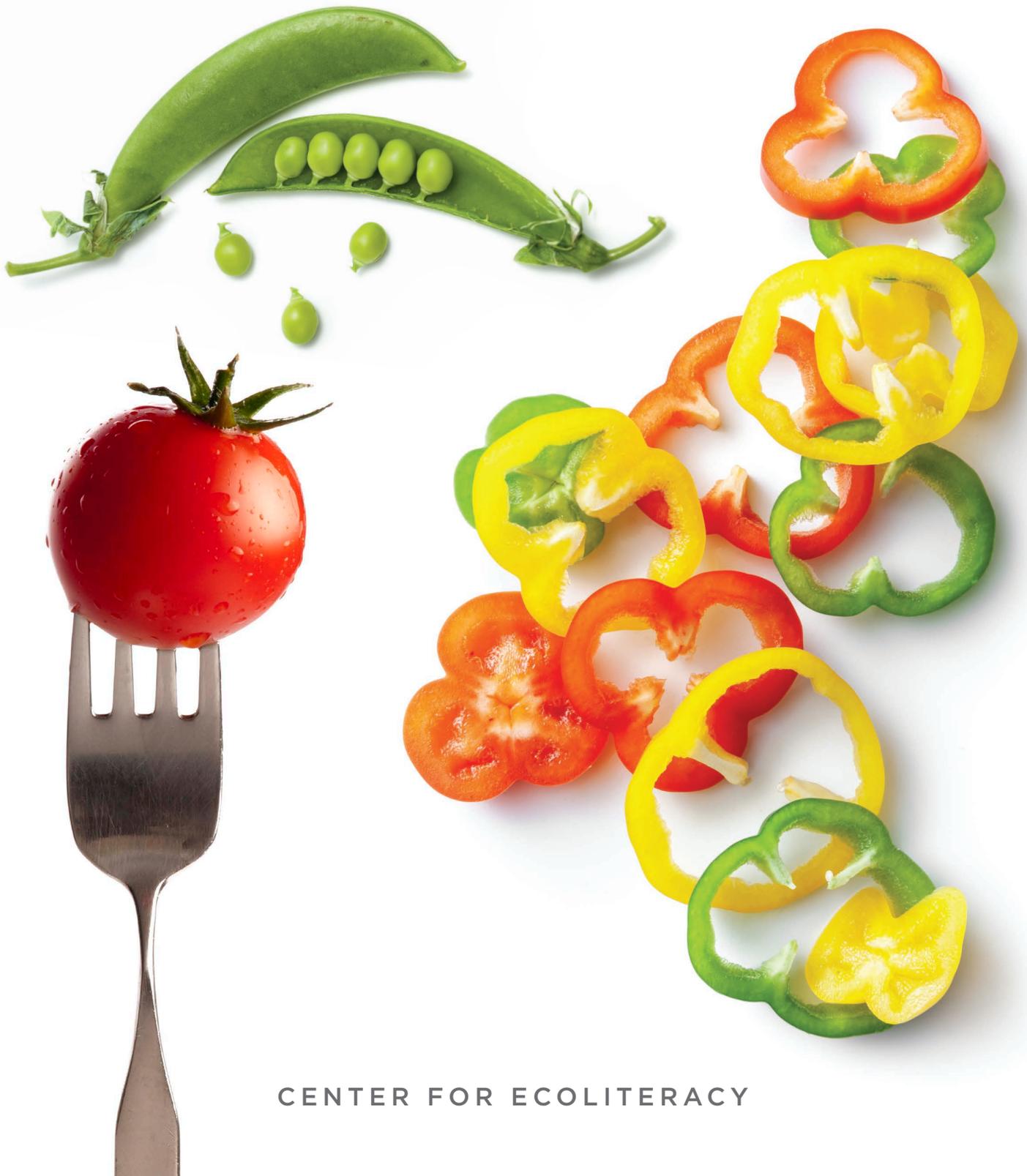


# Success with Plant-Forward Meals

IDEAS AND RESOURCES FOR ENGAGING STUDENTS



CENTER FOR ECOLITERACY



CENTER FOR  
ECOLITERACY

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Published by Learning in the Real World

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**CALIFORNIA FOOD**  
FOR CALIFORNIA KIDS®

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## NURTURING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

*by Zenobia Barlow*

Food service staff are among the most dedicated and talented professionals in public schools. They have discovered something classroom teachers know well—their success is directly connected to students' enthusiasm and engagement. To nurture this enthusiasm, the Center for Ecoliteracy has developed this guide that provides ideas and resources for successfully engaging students in discovering and enjoying plant-forward meals in their school meal programs. Our aim is for students to benefit from these healthy, freshly prepared, locally-grown meals and for food service staff to develop a deeper understanding of students' values and desires around their diet, their health, and the environment.

Like you, the Center for Ecoliteracy is motivated by the potential for positive change. We believe your success directly affects student health and learning readiness. It also supports communities of farmers and others who contribute to your meal programs. We honor the dedication and hard work of all who nurture every step of the journey of food from seed to cafeteria. We hope this guide provides you with easy-to-use tools to make your job more impactful—and more fun—as you witness the obvious enjoyment and enthusiasm of students who become active partners in your success.

Schools, like all communities, are supported by nurturing healthy relationships. Thank you for using this guide to deepen your relationships with students and support them in engaging more fully with you and your meal programs.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Zbarlow". The signature is stylized with a large, looped 'Z' and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Zenobia Barlow  
Executive Director, Center for Ecoliteracy

Enthusiastic students help school nutrition programs succeed. Engaging students' interest is especially important when introducing new food items and recipes. This guide supports your efforts in fostering student acceptance and enjoyment of freshly prepared, plant-forward meals.

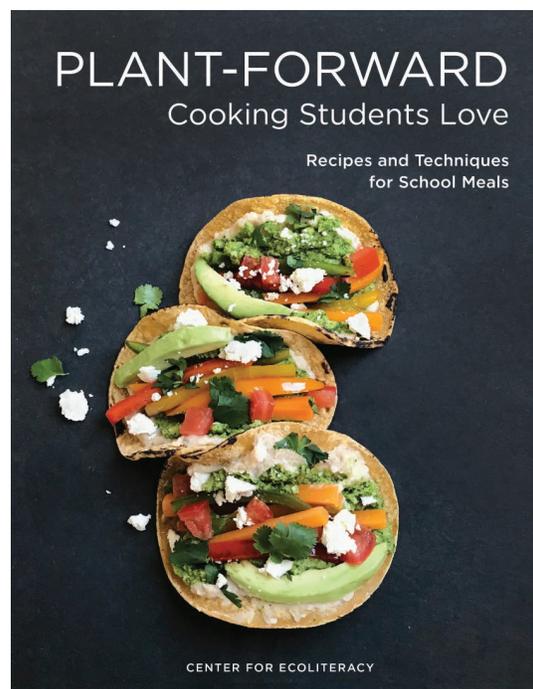
### **PLANT-FORWARD MEALS FOR STUDENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH**

About **seven billion** school meals are served every year in the United States. Improving the quality of these meals—making them healthier, fresher, and more plant-forward—provides an unparalleled opportunity to make positive, long-lasting contributions to student health, learning readiness, and the ability of young people to succeed in school and life. These meals can connect to students' diverse cultural backgrounds because many traditional cuisines rely on plant-based foods. Because plant-forward recipes use less animal protein, this approach to school meals can also contribute to better and more sustainable outcomes on our farms and in the natural environment. According to the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, “Human diets inextricably link health and environmental sustainability, and have the potential to nurture both.”

### **OUR CHEF'S GUIDE—A SOURCE OF DELICIOUS AND HEALTHY RECIPES**

The Center for Ecoliteracy's chef's guide, *Plant-Forward Cooking Students Love: Recipes and Techniques for School Meals*, is a source of menu ideas and plant-forward cooking techniques. Most of the recipes are provided by public school districts as examples of popular, student-tested favorites. They meet USDA meal pattern requirements and are suitable for school menus across the United States. These recipes are not strictly plant-based or vegan. Many feature flavorful plant-based foods as the main part of the meal with accents of dairy or eggs to round out the plate. *Plant-Forward Cooking Students Love* will help launch your success in bringing more plant-forward meals to your students.

This guide and the resources that follow are available at no cost at [www.ecoliteracy.org/resources](http://www.ecoliteracy.org/resources).



## PLANT-FORWARD STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

This guide integrates three strategies that provide enjoyable, enriching, and educational experiences for students during meal service and the school day. These plant-forward strategies are:

- Meaningful interactions in the dining environment
- Student voice and choice
- Relevant learning experiences

## MEANINGFUL INTERACTIONS IN THE DINING ENVIRONMENT

Meaningful interactions build student interest, trust, and loyalty in your nutrition program. These interactions include how you talk with students and the ways that food is presented and promoted.



**Greeting Students.** Fresh well-presented food, colorful promotional posters, and a warm smile welcome students to healthy, plant-forward meals. As students enter the dining environment, greet them with a friendly “hello,” saying their name if you know it. Use moments like these during food service to introduce students to new menu options and answer any questions they might have about unfamiliar ingredients. Your efforts will help students feel comfortable with plant-forward flavors and build loyalty in your nutrition program.

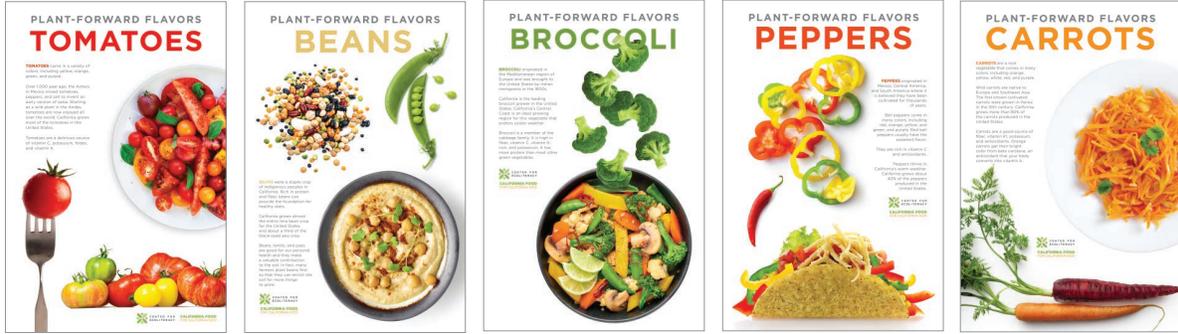
**FOOD PROMOTION** helps nurture student awareness and acceptance of plant-forward meals. You can generate awareness through well-designed menus, digital and print advertising, PA announcements, special events, and partnerships with farmers, vendors, and brands. Enhance the attractiveness of food through appealing display techniques, food packaging, and food labeling. Holidays provide special opportunities to serve dishes that connect with students' cultural backgrounds and observances.



**Food Presentation.** Use salad bars to introduce new flavors and textures, including fresh and roasted vegetables. For the greatest success, keep salad bars colorful, well-supplied, and frequently refreshed. When food needs to be wrapped, consider sandwich bags with clear-view windows or other kinds of clear packaging that allow students to see the fresh, healthy ingredients inside. Stickers help promote your programs and menu items.

**Food Sampling.** Tasty samples can generate excitement, provide immediate feedback, and reduce students' uncertainty when trying something new. Attractive no-cost samples—usually about 1-3 ounces each—can be self-serve, offered by food service staff, or handed out by students. Consider offering samples near the beginning of the lunch line so that students can try them before they make their meal selection. Need a sign? Just print a page from our chef's guide, *Plant-Forward Cooking Students Love*.





**Promotional Posters.** These plant-forward posters promote fresh, healthy plant-based foods. Display them in the dining environment to beautify your space and educate students about California crops.

“ Good morning Hillcrest students, this is Alexa with a lunch announcement. Today in the cafeteria Denise and Eli are serving Angie’s Burrito. This is a vegetarian item with beans and roasted peppers and is available to all Hillcrest students for free! Happy Taco Tuesday. I will see you in the cafeteria. ¡Buen provecho! ”

**PA Announcements.** Many students report that PA announcements are their favorite way to learn about what is served in the cafeteria. A fun and effective way to connect with students is to enlist students to read the announcements. Be sure to identify staff by name. Sample PA announcements that promote plant-forward meals are included on page 13 of this guide.

## STUDENT VOICE AND CHOICE

Invite student feedback, ideas, and suggestions to discover improvements that can make your plant-forward meals a success. When their voices and choices are amplified, students can become loyal customers and active partners in the menu and recipe planning process.

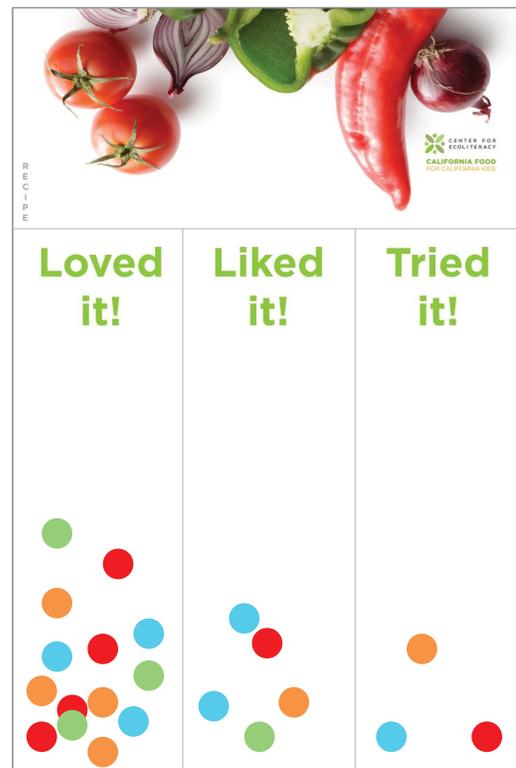
Methods for opening a dialogue and engaging students include:

- Taste tests
- Surveys
- Student groups, including focus groups and student advisory councils

**TASTE TESTS** are a popular and practical method for encouraging feedback from students of all ages. They are a fun way to engage students in trying new foods and flavors, including plant-forward recipes. You can conduct taste tests before, during, or after meal service. A staff member or fellow student can hand out food items or students can serve themselves.

**Interactive Taste Test Posters.** Students enjoy taste test posters that allow them to use stickers to share how they feel about a recipe or food sample. Some tips that can help your taste tests be successful include:

- Offering taste tests on a regular schedule, for example, twice a month. As students become familiar with taste tests they will look forward to them and participate with enthusiasm.
- Repeating tests for new foods you want to include on the menu. Many students may need to try something more than once before they begin to like it. As you refine a recipe, continue to test it to ensure its success.
- Listening to conversations students have with each other while they taste foods. Sometimes you will learn as much or more from their candid remarks as from the test itself.
- Being patient. Remember that you are nurturing relationships and helping students learn about and enjoy new, healthy foods. This is a process that provides them with experience and knowledge that can benefit them for life.



**SURVEYS** solicit student comments and suggestions. Quick surveys can be conducted using comment cards.

**Comment Cards.** Comment cards can be completed in a minute or two, providing immediate feedback for food service. They can be an everyday addition to the dining experience. Make a place in the cafeteria for a stack of cards, some pencils, and a suggestion box in which to drop completed cards. To encourage participation, remind students regularly that you are interested in their feedback. A set of comment cards is included in this guide on page 14.

## PLANT-FORWARD FLAVORS

Recipe name: \_\_\_\_\_

Loved it!       Liked it!       Tried it!

Tell us how you feel about this recipe:

**FOCUS GROUPS AND STUDENT ADVISORY COUNCILS** are facilitated groups, usually of five to 20 students. Student representatives should reflect the demographics of the general student body, including age and grade level, ethnicity or race, nationality, and gender identity. Students should also represent a variety of diets and food preferences, such as plant-based, Kosher, Halal, allergen-free, and more. These groups can convene in-person or virtually. Groups reveal students' perspectives, including attitudes about menus, the dining environment, marketing, and broader social issues.

**Focus Groups.** Student focus groups can be facilitated on a variety of topics. One practical approach is to use them when you are refining menu options. For example, if you have multiple versions of the same recipe and want to know which one would be most successful on the menu, conduct a focus group with student volunteers. Serve samples of each variation, ask questions, and listen to their views.

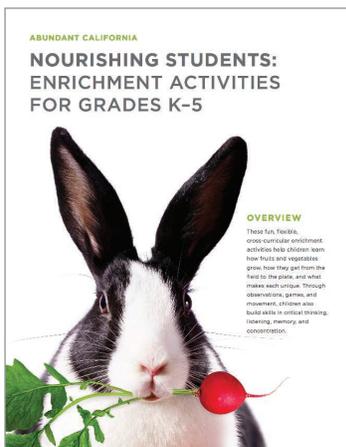
**Student Advisory Councils.** By interacting with students in their own advisory councils, you can foster high engagement on a variety of issues that interest them, including how their food is sourced, its cultural relevance, and its impact on the environment. Although you may not be able to act immediately on some of the feedback, these groups can provide valuable insights on issues that concern students deeply and affect their trust and loyalty in nutrition programs.



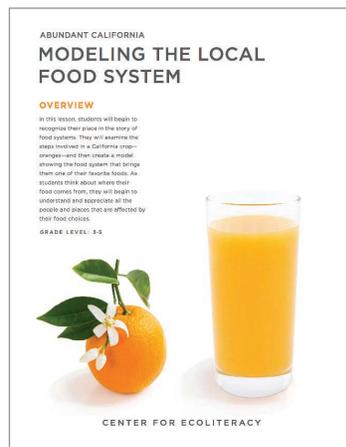
## RELEVANT LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Many students want to know where their food comes from and how it benefits their health, their academic performance, and the environments in which they live. Students' desire to learn about their food provides schools with an opportunity to expand their teaching and learning in the dining environment, the classroom, or the school garden. Learning experiences can include classroom lessons and activities, nutrition and culinary education, student leadership initiatives, farm and school garden activities, and expression through the arts.

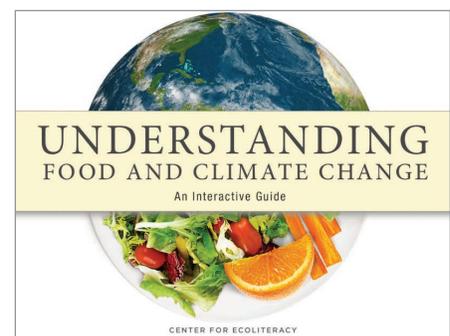
**Resources for Teaching and Learning.** For over 25 years, the Center for Ecoliteracy has offered standards-based educational resources using food as a focus. For more information visit: [www.ecoliteracy.org/resources](http://www.ecoliteracy.org/resources).



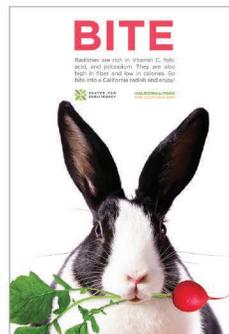
**Nourishing Students.** Enrichment activities that engage grades K-5 students in after-school, out-of-school, and summer programs.



**Abundant California.** A suite that teaches grades 3-5 students about California crops and introduces them to the food system.



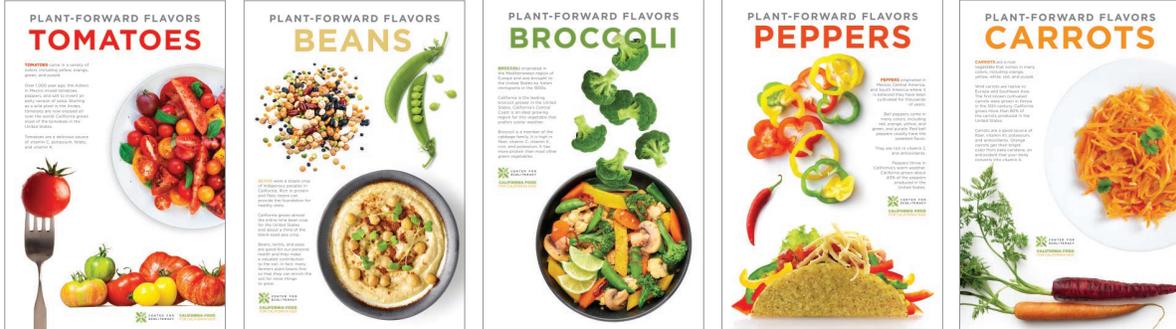
**Understanding Food and Climate Change.** An interactive guide for educators, and middle and high school students that explores relationships between our food system and our changing climate. Included in NAAEE *Guidelines for Excellence*.



**Nourishing Students Posters.** Five award-winning posters that connect children with nature and nutritious California-grown fruits and vegetables.

## SUCCESS WITH PLANT-FORWARD MEALS: A RESOURCE KIT

In addition to this guide, the Center for Ecoliteracy provides the following resources to support your success in offering plant-forward meals to students. All resources are available at no cost at [www.ecoliteracy.org/resources](http://www.ecoliteracy.org/resources).



**Promotional Posters.** These plant-forward posters display five popular California-grown crops. Each poster provides nutrition information, history about the crop’s origins, and its importance to California agriculture. Display these in the dining environment to beautify your space and educate students about California crops and plant-forward eating.

**Taste Test Posters.** Use this poster with peel-and-stick stickers so that students can “vote” for how they feel about a dish or ingredient. Stickers that are  $\frac{3}{4}$ ” to 1” in diameter work best.

You can write the name of the dish or ingredient here.

<p><b>Loved it!</b></p>	<p><b>Liked it!</b></p>	<p><b>Tried it!</b></p>

## **SAMPLE PA ANNOUNCEMENTS**

These announcements can be customized to include the names of your staff and featured recipes. Announcements are particularly effective when you enlist students to read them over the PA system.

**Note:** Although each announcement ends with “Bon appetit!” consider translating those words into a language spoken by students at your schools. A translation reference for “bon appetit” is available at: <https://omniglot.com/language/phrases/bonappetit.htm>.

**Good morning [Hillcrest] students, this is [Mrs. Johnson] with a lunch announcement. Today in the cafeteria [Denise and Katie] are serving Thai Basil Burgers with Cabbage Slaw. This is a vegetarian meal and is available to all [Hillcrest] students for free! I enjoyed the burger last month and highly recommend it. Please stop by the cafeteria and give it a try. Bon appetit!**

**Good morning [Hillcrest] students, this is [Mrs. Johnson] with a lunch announcement. Today in the cafeteria [Denise and Katie] are serving a Buffalo Chickpea Salad. This is a vegetarian meal and is available to all [Hillcrest] students for free! You can pick up a salad during lunch and enjoy it outside, in the cafeteria, or even after school. Bon appetit!**

**Good morning [Hillcrest] students, this is [Mrs. Johnson] with a lunch announcement. Today in the cafeteria [Denise and Katie] are serving Pasta Onofrio. This is a vegetarian pasta with roasted peppers and broccoli and is available to all [Hillcrest] students for free! This is [Mr. Duncan]’s favorite lunch so say “hi” when you spot him in the cafeteria. Bon appetit!**

**Good morning [Hillcrest] students, this is [Mrs. Johnson] with a lunch announcement. Today in the cafeteria [Denise and Katie] are serving a Roasted Vegetable Wrap. This is a vegetarian item with a delicious bean spread and California-grown roasted veggies and is available to all [Hillcrest] students for free! Feel free to grab one during lunch and enjoy in the cafeteria, outside, or after school. Bon appetit!**

**Good morning [Hillcrest] students, this is [Mrs. Johnson] with a lunch announcement. Today in the cafeteria [Denise and Katie] are serving Angie’s Burrito. This is a vegetarian item with beans and roasted peppers and is available to all [Hillcrest] students for free! Happy Taco Tuesday, I will see you in the cafeteria! Bon appetit!**

# PLANT-FORWARD FLAVORS

Recipe name: \_\_\_\_\_

Loved it!     Liked it!     Tried it!

Tell us how you feel about this recipe:

# PLANT-FORWARD FLAVORS

Recipe name: \_\_\_\_\_

Loved it!     Liked it!     Tried it!

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# PLANT-FORWARD FLAVORS

Recipe name: \_\_\_\_\_

Loved it!     Liked it!     Tried it!

Tell us how you feel about this recipe:

# PLANT-FORWARD FLAVORS

Recipe name: \_\_\_\_\_

Loved it!     Liked it!     Tried it!

Tell us how you feel about this recipe:



## ABOUT THE CENTER FOR ECOLITERACY

The Center for Ecoliteracy has a 25-year history of advancing ecological education and school food systems change in K-12 schools. We recognize that students need to experience and understand how nature sustains life and how to live accordingly. Our California Food for California Kids initiative builds the capacity and commitment of public school districts to provide all students with fresh, locally-grown school meals and reinforce connections between the classroom, the cafeteria, and the garden. When schools serve more fresh, locally-grown food, they support student health and academic achievement while benefiting local economies, communities, and the natural world. The Center for Ecoliteracy leads systems change initiatives, publishes original books and resources, facilitates conferences and professional development, and provides strategic consulting and technical assistance. We work at multiple levels of scale with local, regional, state, and national programs.

## CREDITS

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## PHOTOS

Craig Lee, [craiglephoto.com](http://craiglephoto.com); Karen Brown; Stock photography from [istockphoto](https://www.istockphoto.com)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to Vince Caguin (Natomas Unified School District), Tara McNamara (San Diego Unified School District), and Erin Primer (San Luis Coastal Unified School District) for their ideas and suggestions about student engagement.

