



## RURAL CHEF AND SCHOOL FOOD EXTRAORDINAIRE IN RONAN, MONTANA

By Blake Lineweaver, Mission West Community Development Partners



**A FARM-TO-SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT**

*Image: Scratch salsa from school garden*

RONAN, Mont. – Meet Marsha Wartick, the food service supervisor behind the delicious and nutritious meals at Ronan Public School District No. 30 located on the Flathead Reservation in western Montana’s Flathead Valley. With over four decades of experience in the kitchen, Wartick knows exactly what it takes to create a menu that kids will love: sourcing ingredients as local as possible and cooking what you can from scratch. Scratch cooking for thousands of hungry mouths can be easier said than done, however.

During her first twenty years in food service, Wartick worked in restaurants along the Mission Mountains. When the position at Ronan Public Schools opened up in 2000, Wartick took her restaurant skills to the school cafeteria, where she now manages a staff of 19 and serves breakfasts, lunches, and snacks for the district’s 1,500 students. That shakes out to be about 10,000 meals each week.



Image: Students in Pollywog Park

Wartick remembers the transition from restaurant to cafeteria wasn’t seamless. “You have your requirements. You are feeding probably 50 times what you would feed in a restaurant most nights,” she says. Fortunately, Wartick found support from Katie Bark and Molly Stenberg with Montana State University’s Montana Team Nutrition and Montana’s Office of Public Instruction (OPI) to help her navigate the challenges of a new food service director, from placing food orders to menu planning.

With the logistics (mostly) taken care of, Wartick knew that the key to improving her program meant reducing “heat and serve” foods and moving towards as much scratch cooking as possible. For that, she’d need to find the right ingredients, and Wartick didn’t look far.

### Local food for local kids

Wartick finds value in supporting her community and educating students about where their food comes from. “Helping the community, helping the farmers, the ranchers, the orchards in the area is special,” says Wartick. “We’re so rural. It’s important to keep these kids realizing that it’s special to be this way...so many schools, they’re getting bigger and bigger, and you can lose that connection.” Over the years, Wartick has organized special menus, such as “Montana Day” which spotlights an entirely Montana-made beef taco and other local and regional items.

Wartick honed in on local foods in 2007 when she first learned about “farm to school,” an approach that aims to transition school food purchasing away from big supply chains to the local and regional scale while educating students about how their food was grown; who grew it; and why that connection matters. Wartick heard about farm to school from Jan Tusick, director of the Mission Mountain Food Enterprise Center (MMFEC), located two blocks from the school district’s central kitchen in Ronan.

MMFEC is the only shared-use food processing facility in the region that is certified by the United States Department of Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration. They provide minimally processed local fruits and vegetables sourced from the 40 producer-owners of the Western Montana Growers Co-op (WMGC).



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With MMFEC’s processing capacity, Tusick began connecting food service directors with local farmers in the early 2000s with the guiding question: how do we get more local food into our schools?

“When Mission Mountain started doing the processing, that was a lifesaver for us, because I have a lot of employees, but we don’t have the time to process our own fruits and vegetables,” says Wartick. “Trying to process 50 pounds of carrots for us is really, really hard. We just don’t have the equipment; we don’t have the time; we don’t have the room either.”

Like many schools, a significant amount of Wartick’s minimally processed fruits and vegetables are used in the federally-administered Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable (DoD Fresh) program. Since enrolling in DoD Fresh in 2013, Wartick has worked directly with local producers to supplement a portion of the fruits and vegetables snacks served daily for the 750 kids at Pablo and K. William Harvey Elementary schools. Through DoD Fresh, students learn fun facts about the snack, from where it was grown to its power-packed nutrients.

When she supports local agriculture, Wartick finds her food quality significantly improves. “It’s nice getting local stuff that we know is going to be fresh. It hasn’t been sitting for five months somewhere and then shipped across the country,” she says. A frequent barrier for schools is connecting with producers, and Wartick recognizes the benefit of the school’s proximity to the farms and orchards in Western Montana. “[The producers] contact me, and I will get apples, pears, peaches and other fruits and vegetables from them,” says Wartick. Additionally, she’s connected with local producers through OPI and WMGC. For example, in the winter months, Wartick orders living butterhead lettuce from Local Bounty, a hydroponics start-up out of Hamilton, MT, through WMGC.

Wartick also appreciates the meaningful relationships she has with her local producers. “The farmers too, a lot of times, these are their kids,” says Wartick. And that connection makes a difference. “[They’ll say,] ‘I’m not going to bring any pears right now because they are not good enough quality for you.’ Now, you’re not going to hear that from these big companies.”



The students, too, appreciate knowing where their food comes from. “It’s connected back to the community, to their family even,” says Wartick. “We’ll have something we made for the food court, maybe it was zucchini bread. We’ll say, ‘This was grown in Arlee,’ and then the kids’ eyes light up and they go, ‘Well, my cousin grows that down there.’ So to see that they were like, ‘Oh, that’s so neat.’ I think that was really great.”

### School food is food access

Wartick is a strong advocate for the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), a federal program that allows high-need schools to provide meals at no charge to every student in communities where the free and reduced lunch rate is at or above 40%. For Ronan Public Schools, the rate is 96%. By participating in CEP, universally free meals advances equity in schools by reducing the stigma associated with school lunches. Wartick also spends less time filing out free and reduced forms and can focus on what matters most: serving healthy and delicious meals.

“A lot of our children here, their parents weren’t raised to cook. Their grandparents weren’t raised to cook. Children back in the 1900s, when the reservation was first done, they were taken out of their homes. So that [skill] was kind of lost to a lot of these generations.”

With her own history rooted in the community, Wartick knows the key to healthy diets is building positive relationships with freshly cooked food at a young age. “[Here] we make our own breads, rolls, and pizza,” says Wartick. She sources the flour for her bakes from Wheat Montana out of Three Forks. “We also do spaghetti, and yesterday, it was beef stroganoff,” Wartick says of her scratch cooking efforts.

“We’re not able to [cook from scratch] 100% [of the time], but the more real food we feel like we can cook, the better.” By showing kids what meals from scratch can taste like, she hopes students will take the message home.

Wartick has also served traditional foods of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. She’s made special menus featuring foods from the 1800s and 1900s, like bison roast and gravy, when she can. “It takes time when you do a special menu, and I need the right cooks to learn how to cook buffalo. You have to go low and slow, you know.”

### Learn from the experts

For other schools looking to get their start in farm to school, explore CEP, or bring traditional foods into the cafeteria, Wartick recommends getting in touch with the great support network available. Everyone has to start somewhere, and it helps to start small.

“Call the other schools. Get a hold of OPI. Get a hold of Montana Team Nutrition and No Kid Hungry,” says Wartick. She also serves as a Peer Mentor with Montana Team Nutrition, another great resource for Montana’s food service directors. “They can call us, and we’re all experienced. We can help with anything from farm to school to how to figure out a recipe; how to develop a recipe; what foods you can use; what foods you shouldn’t use; [and] your salt content.”

Whether you’re a food service director, administrator, or community member interested in starting farm to school in your district, reach out to our team of local food innovators ready to help find local food solutions for your school meal program:

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