



# SETTING THE STANDARD: FARM TO SCHOOL IN WHITEFISH, MONTANA

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## A FARM-TO-SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT

WHITEFISH, Mont. – Whitefish Public Schools’ cafeterias may soon feature a new splash of flavor at the salad bar: the “Wonder Dressing,” a lemon-forward vinaigrette created by 6th graders at Whitefish Middle School as part of the “Tournament of Dressings.” The competition, staged like the popular TV show Shark Tank, was held in February 2023 where 42 teams had the opportunity to hone their food

science and entrepreneurship knowledge for the coveted prize of having their dressing served in a local venue.

The salad dressing contest is one of many ways the Whitefish School District prioritizes “farm-to-school” programs, which include teaching agriculture and nutrition lessons; hands-on experiential learning in school gardens and farms; and getting local and regional foods served in classrooms and cafeterias. Jay Stagg, Whitefish Public Schools Food Service Director, has led and advocated for these programs since onboarding with the district in 2008. Before his time with Whitefish schools, Stagg built his culinary expertise over decades in fast-food and fine dining, working from dishwasher to head chef. Without much commercial kitchen experience before joining the Whitefish team, Stagg is passionate about building lifelong curiosity and appreciation for a local and regional food system tray by tray.

### The evolution of food-centered lessons

In the early 2010’s, Stagg started interactive activities at Muldown Elementary to get kids excited about food, recognizing the positive impact it can have. “Having kids of my own, they really liked being in the kitchen and cooking. There are always so many reports of kids cooking lessons,” says Stagg. “If kids can grow the food and harvest it and see it, touch it, [and] cook with it, they’re way more likely to eat it.”

Around 2015, Stagg became an early adopter of Montana’s



Image: Hydroponic tower in Muldown Elementary

Harvest of the Month (HOM) pilot program. HOM is a statewide program to increase consumption of Montana-grown and raised foods in Montana communities. Using HOM's lessons and materials, Stagg prepared activities, such as taste tests, with Montana foods from sweet and crispy apples to leafy kale.

"I would never think that kids would eat kale...but [the lesson is] this fun kale salad thing where you get a ziploc bag, and you get to massage it, punch it, break it, [and] you add your lemon juice and salt," Stagg says about one of his favorite lessons. "Twelve years later, [students] are still like, 'I remember making kale salad in second grade!'" Stagg serves the nostalgic kale salad regularly in the school's salad bar.

The food lessons proved a huge success. Teaching dozens of classes, however, soon took up too much of Stagg's time. Fortunately, using funds from the school's profitable food

service budget, Stagg was able to hire Emily Bonenfant part-time in 2020 to continue the interactive lessons. Modeling HOM and tools from the National Farm to School Network, Bonenfant teaches Muldown Elementary's 700 students a wide range of engaging local and regional food-related topics. With her added capacity, Bonenfant also cares for 14 hydroponic towers placed in hallways and common areas throughout Whitefish's schools. These bright green units provide students a daily window into the plant life cycle from seed to harvest.

### Learning by doing

In recent years, Whitefish staff and community members have collaborated to expand their farm to school education beyond the elementary school. In 2018, generous private contributions and grants brought together \$2.7 million to build the Center for Sustainability and Entrepreneurship (CSE), a designated space "providing applied learning experiences for K-12 students in energy, agriculture, forestry, natural resources, and entrepreneurship," according to the CSE website. The CSE features two state-of-the-art science classrooms, over two dozen raised beds, a composting station, a student-operated farm stand, and a year-round greenhouse. At the CSE, students are given plots in the greenhouse to build their plant and soil knowledge. Students learn about and grow an abundance of fruits, vegetables, and herbs such as rosemary, parsley, lemons, bananas and coffee.

The CSE staff have designed a curriculum for every grade level to engage with the Center. The idea, echoed in Bonenfant's lessons, is to expose students early and often to sustainability and food system topics that prepare them for programs later in middle and high school. Their goal? To inspire a lifetime of curiosity at the intersection of food, entrepreneurship, and the environment.

Elementary students are first introduced to the CSE over multi-day garden field trips. In 5th and 6th grade, students learn about sustainable, values-based business models, such as the dressing competition for 6th graders. The 5th grade operates a farmer's market where students sell herb packets, tea blends, and microgreens. In the fall 2022, proceeds from the market not only covered the costs of the sale, but also left remaining funds for the North Valley Food Bank, a local nonprofit decided on by the students.



Image: Culinary Arts students prepare steak from Eureka, Montana



## “I love buying local product... I love putting that money back into the local economy... It’s not going to someone I don’t know.”

In the high school, students have the hands-on opportunity to run a cooperative microgreens business out of the CSE with support from CSE instructor Chris Bickford. Through the microgreens business—aptly named 4th ‘N Pine after the school’s address—Bickford advises students on all aspects of a values-aligned food business, from cultivation and packaging to marketing and distribution. In 2023, the 4th ‘N Pine students sold to two local grocery stores and several restaurants. One of the student-interns connected the microgreen business to her part-time job at The Farmers’ Stand, a 100% farmer-owned market based in Whitefish. When Bickford isn’t at the CSE, he operates Whitestar Organics, an organic vegetable farm that grows and stores several thousand pounds of carrots for the Whitefish School District.

Herbs and greens grown by students in the CSE also contribute to the school’s food service program at “the microlevel,” as Stagg calls it. This collaboration is yet another testament to how Whitefish schools have built the CSE and its hands-on, project-based curriculum around the holistic student experience and for the betterment of the greater Whitefish community.

**Moving towards scratch, one crunch at a time**  
In addition to the classroom, one of Stagg’s primary goals

since 2008 has been to procure more local foods for the school’s 5,000 weekly meals. Stagg credits his restaurant experience for inspiring more scratch and quick-scratch cooking in the central kitchen.

“At a restaurant, I think you pay a little bit more attention to how stuff tastes versus just trying to get it out the door and [to] fill up someone’s stomach,” says Stagg. “[I’ve] pretty much changed all the recipes...instead of buying canned gravy, [we] actually make the gravy. I knew how to make that stuff from scratch and slowly taught it to the staff.”

The scratch-solution required the right ingredients, and Stagg didn’t have to look far. “Pretty much right off the bat, I was trying to figure out how to get local beef in here.” Item by item, Stagg has found the right local food opportunities that fit his budget, meal patterns, and processing capacity. “Over the years, I’ve tried to add a thing or two or whenever anything came up, and slowly [as] to not overwhelm the staff.” Stagg buys directly from regional producers but also indirectly through the Western Montana Growers Cooperative (WMGC), a producer-owned cooperative of 40+ farms and ranches based in Missoula, MT.

Not every opportunity has worked out seamlessly for Stagg, however. He’s learned that clear communication with local



producers, who might have little prior experience working with schools, is critical. “I [once] bought a bunch of local beef from Lower Valley, and I went and picked it up because this was before they had delivered, before they knew me...they had packaged it all in, like, one pound, frozen logs. I was getting 800 pounds but like [in] 800 little things of beef. We had to open up each one.”

Hiccups aside, Stagg is proud to support local farms and ranches while providing nutritious and delicious meals for Whitefish students. From Moss Farm apples in Rollins to grape tomatoes and cucumbers from Whitefish’s own Mountain View Gardens, Stagg has added local foods steadily to his menu and supported his community in doing so. “I love buying local product,” says Stagg. “I love putting that money back into the local economy...It’s not going to someone I don’t know. [And] I like to pay my friends to keep things going. I feel best about that.”

The slow part, Stagg believes, is important for the long-term sustainability of local food purchasing in schools. “Don’t overwhelm yourself, because then you might not end up getting anything done,” Stagg warns. “Pick apples. Figure out how to get apples on your menu. Next year, pick carrots. Just pick one thing and solve it.”

### Scaling local food for statewide impact

Over the last 15 years, Whitefish has made leaps and bounds in its educational and local food procurement goals. What’s to come, Stagg says, is to innovate the local and regional food system from outside the school district.

“For personal goals, I would like to help to meet or to get in with the right people to do the statewide scale stuff,” says Stagg. “Now that I know what food service directors will do

and won’t do, I need to take that knowledge [elsewhere]...if we’re going to really expand beef or pasta or something, [we need to] make it work statewide. More projects like Montana Marinara, I think is huge. And that [means] working with the processors and farmers.”

Stagg continues to work with the Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI), the Northwest Food Hub Network, and the Mission Mountain Food Enterprise Center to make local food procurement as easy as possible for Montana schools, regardless of population or geographic location. A recent success for Stagg’s advocacy with OPI was assisting Local Bounti in Hamilton, MT in securing the salad greens bid for the Department of Defense Fresh Fruits and Vegetable Program (DoD Fresh). As a result, all Montana schools will soon be able to source hydroponic leafy greens year-round from within the state through DoD Fresh.

In addition, Stagg serves as a resource for other schools looking to expand their local food purchasing as a coach with the Montana Farm to School Institute. He also helps Montana food service directors one-on-one as a Peer Mentor with Montana Team Nutrition.

While Stagg has big dreams for Montana, he finds the most meaningful contributions happen at the local level. “It’s the small town, the people on the front lines who make the biggest difference,” says Stagg. The caveat? “They’ve got to want to, though.”

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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