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A Healthy Curriculum

Midwest Food Connection serves full-sized nutrition to its half-pint audience.

By Nancy Crotti

CO+OP DEALS



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RECENT TWEETS

EVENTS CALENDAR

Raw Food Demo

Location: Valley Natural Foods
Demo Kiosk

Date: March 13, 2014

Time: 3:00pm

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Gluten-Free Day

Location: Valley Natural Foods

Date: March 20, 2014

Time: all day

 **Valley Natural Foods** 53m
@ValleyNatural

What a line-up
[@sewardcoop](#). Butternut Squash Enchilada Verde? Sounds like a winner!

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 **Valley Natural Foods** 59m
@ValleyNatural

It's the [@MNFoodShare](#) [#MarchCampaign](#). Help us reach 1500#s of donations for [@360Communities](#) [#foodshelf](#). YellowBins standing by at store exit

 **Seward Co-op** 1h
@sewardcoop

Join us for lunch today:

Butternut Squash Enchilada Verde;
Jerked Chicken;
Veracruz Rice;
Catalan Roasted Vegetables;
Cuban Black Beans

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POLL

What is your favorite winter warmer?:

- Hot cocoa
- A steaming mug of tea
- Homemade soup
- Anything spicy



Midwest Food Connection connects kids to food, farmers and the Earth itself.

The recent focus on improving childhood eating habits is old news to a handful of Twin Cities natural foods cooperatives. Six co-ops support the Midwest Food Connection (MFC), a Minneapolis nonprofit that sends natural-food educators into elementary school classrooms with lessons that leave a healthy impression.

Mississippi Market and The Wedge started the program as a pilot in 1993. The following year, schoolteacher Uli Koester came on board, introducing real food and its origins to young children, some of whom had never seen fresh fruit or vegetables.

For 10 years, the program was a one-person operation. Koester, now executive director, hired another teacher in 2004 and gradually added more as the program grew. In the meantime, Lakewinds, Linden Hills, Seward and Valley

Natural Foods co-ops began to support the program.

MFC now dispatches six teachers into kindergarten through fifth-grade classrooms, tailoring each lesson to the students' comprehension level. The teachers first visit the sponsoring co-op to purchase the food needed for the lesson and use it (along with an electric frying pan) to

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Juicing -- A tasting/cooking demo with Sheryl

Location: Valley Natural Foods

Date: April 5, 2014

Time: 12:00pm

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demonstrate food preparation. Lessons may also include storytelling, singing, acting, art and writing activities.

The nonprofit offers four seasonal sets of lessons about natural foods and sustainable agriculture. From September through November, it's about locally grown food, including wild rice, salad fixings from nearby farms, and herbs and spices used in Minnesota. From November through January, students learn about root vegetables, Minnesota-grown grains, sugar and other sweeteners, and corn. The winter session focuses on foods from many cultures. In the spring, students learn about urban farming.

The co-ops provide 80 percent of MFC's annual \$160,000 budget, most of which pays the teachers and provides their benefits. Last year, they visited 51 schools, according to Koester.

Co-op employees also serve on the program's board.

Supporting MFC helps fulfill the cooperative principles of education and community involvement, according to Liz McMann, consumer affairs manager at Mississippi Market. "Last school year, there were nine different schools in St. Paul that received lessons on behalf of Mississippi Market," McMann says. "We even have people come in and say, 'You were at my kid's school last week.' It's cool that people associate Midwest Food Connection with the co-ops."

In the 2011–2012 academic year, Valley Natural sponsored teacher visits to 850 students in Apple Valley, Burnsville, Eagan, Lakeville, and Rosemount, according to Erin Erickson, the co-op's promotions and education coordinator. The previous year, the co-op began sponsoring lessons that combine classroom time with visits to its gardens.

There, students may help with planting, sample herbs, or dig in a compost pile to find creepy-crawlies such as centipedes, spiders, and worms. "Sometimes we've been fortunate enough to have an insectary island, a grouping of plants that are places where beneficial insects can hang out," says Gary Johnson, community relations developer at Valley Natural. "They might be nectar plants or plants they can get water from, for example, a cupped plant."

The program also works in schoolyard gardens. At Seward Montessori School in Minneapolis, MFC taught lessons in the fall and collaborated with a gardener and the school parent group to raise money for a garden that matches the nonprofit's teaching style and lessons. Spring will bring soil studies and planting of early-harvest plants such as chives, lettuce and strawberries.

Haruko Ruggiero, MFC's curriculum coordinator, says she and her fellow MFC teachers often work with the same teachers year after year. They may present their lessons to multiple classrooms in one school.

That's the case at Clara Barton Open School in Minneapolis, where first- and second-grade teacher Kristin Sonquist first invited Koester, her former colleague, into her classroom soon after he joined the program. "Uli works with me to fit the lesson to my classroom goals," Sonquist says. "Sometimes American kids grow up to school age eating only Goldfish crackers. Uli is a master at getting them to try something new and requires that they are respectful of the food so there's no

‘Oh, yuck,’ or ‘Oh, ish.’”

Koester believes the current national discussion on childhood obesity and healthful eating is good, but that co-ops have more to offer children. “We really focus on the goodness of good food,” he says. “They respond to food that tastes good and to the cultural and agricultural background of food. Giving meaning to food, for their families, for their lives, is what I think makes children into good eaters.”

It also benefits the co-ops and their communities, according to longtime Wedge employee Elizabeth Archerd. “Anything that helps the community understand the issues of our food supply, helps the co-ops,” she says. “And it starts with kids, helping them to understand the deep connections between food, culture, and land—and that food doesn’t come from a factory.”

Nancy Crotti is a freelance writer and editor based in St. Paul.

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