

Jan 22 2008

Community dinners to showcase local food and provide affordable meals

By Colleen Armstrong

What says winter harvest dinner better than white bean and pumpkin chili, lamb sausage, and red velvet chocolate beet cake?

In a collaborative effort between the farm-to-school program and Lopez community members, a series of monthly community **dinners** are being planned, featuring locally grown produce and meat.

Evening Meals at Lopez School is an idea for "using the existing kitchen and multipurpose room at the school. Making use of those facilities, and serving delicious and healthy locally grown food as evening meals, is a practical way to benefit people of all ages. We hope to strengthen the ties between the community and the school, help families and local farmers, learn about the environmental consequences of our consumer choices and deepen our sense of community," explained Michele Heller, a parent and organizer of the event. "I look forward to getting a great meal for my family and coming home early to a clean kitchen!"



Helen Sanders photo

Chefs Kim Bast (l) and Jean Perry (r) are helping with the first Dinner at Lopez School.

The first meal will be on Thursday, Jan. 31 from 5:30-7:00 in the Lopez School multipurpose room. A white bean and pumpkin chili with side dishes of Lopez lamb sausage, a saute and/or slaw of local greens, grain or rice, and dessert of red velvet chocolate beet cake will be served. Chef Kim Bast (formerly of the Bay Caf  ) and chef Jean Perry (owner of Vortex Caf  ) are collaborating on the menu. Produce sources will be noted, along with recipes and other information, in handouts at the dinner. Helen Sanders will play the bagpipes at the start of the meal.

The dinner is \$5 for adults, \$1 for children 12 and under, \$15 for large families; pay at the door. Donations are welcome to help underwrite the cost of the meal, which is being paid for with the help of sponsors. The cost of future meals may vary depending on menu and available funding support.

To reinforce the concept of "seasonal," the monthly meal will reflect a traditional Native American practice of naming each full moon cycle for the characteristics of that month and season. January is the month of the "Hunger Moon" and a reminder of the importance of food to all people throughout the ages.

"The goal is to make available fresh, delicious and wholesome food, at an affordable price, to families and individuals who might otherwise find it challenging and difficult to have access to healthy and affordable meals. The sharing of simple meals in a family style setting is meant to provide fellowship to those who might otherwise be eating alone," said Superintendent Bill Evans. "It is another way for us to share our education efforts toward good health with our families and our community, as well as to show off our school gardens and our farm-to-school program a bit."

The farm-to-school program provides K-12 students with the opportunity to grow their own food, which is integrated into the cafeteria menu. The kids tend gardens at both Lopez School in the Rishi Center and S & S Homestead Farm. There is also a mobile culinary unit that goes from classroom to classroom and farm-to-school classes for elementary, middle, and high school students. The program has been very successful -- the students connect with eating what they've helped grow, and it has served as a model for other schools trying to develop a similar program.

"We hope to use some of our school garden foods, but that all depends on the crop yield and such. It would be a good way to celebrate our gardens and the nutritional pluses that engaging in such a program can give to our students. We'll be looking for ways to use even a little bit of our school garden foods if possible, even if it is simply adding some garden-grown herbs to the soup," said Evans.

Event organizers are concerned about taking paying customers away from island restaurants, so they have been meeting with several local restaurant owners and chefs to gather their input. "Everybody seemed very positive about having community **dinners** at the school as a special event that would allow people to come to the school and have a nice, simple evening meal that was grown locally. The thing that was very exciting was the idea of the restaurants and schools getting together to do bulk buying from local farmers.

We also discussed the idea of more coordination between growers and produce buyers, including potential purchasing co-ops to help local farmers better plan for long-range planting and harvesting," said Perry.

Another vision for the Evening Meals at Lopez School is to make **dinners** available in coordination with existing, and possibly expanded, after-school activity programs. Pickup times for students could be staggered so dinner is served sequentially, with smooth transitions between groups.

This event is meant for the entire community and everyone is encouraged to participate. Any individual, group or organization who would like to become a sponsor with a donation or volunteer time to help, please call Superintendent Bill Evans at 468-2202 x 2350 or Michele Heller at 468-3618.

For additional information, visit www.lopezlocavores.org or email info@lopezlocavores.org or bevans@lopez.k12.wa.us.