

# School Chef: Healthy Food can be Fun, Delicious and Appealing to Kids

by Julia Bollman

Spend some time with Chef Fred Farhat - "Chef Fred" as the students at his school call him - and you soon realize that he's obsessed with food. In a good way.

At home in the kitchen at Raintree Learning Community, a new preschool and kindergarten in Ballwin, he describes his creations as one would an art project and with as much enthusiasm as a child proudly unveiling a newly-created fingerprinting.

"There is a lot of fun going on on this plate," he says of one of his signature dishes - "frushi" - a dish that resembles sushi but made with steamed rice and fresh fruit. "You can eat it with your fingers - which kids love to do - and it's as visually appealing as it is healthy."

In fact, all of Chef Fred's creations are made with fresh ingredients, are low in sugar and unhealthy fats, and are purposefully colorful and designed to be fun to eat. He is, after all, trying to keep his patrons happy, and four-year-olds can be a tough bunch when it comes to food.

"I always design a meal so that it appeals to the senses, and that's what kids love," he says. "They don't even realize that it's all good for them. They notice the flavors and think it's fun to eat. But they are learning to love foods that are good for them."

Farhat grew up in St. Louis in a large family. His father is a chef and the family spent much of their time cooking together. He spent as much time as his six sisters in the kitchen. His decision to attend culinary school was a natural one, he says.

"In my family, we never viewed cooking as primarily male or female task," he explains. "We all spent time learning about food, spent time cooking and having meals together and discovered the artistry that can come with creating meals. I learned to look at food as edible art, and became interested in foods of all different cultures."

Following culinary school, Farhat worked in restaurants in Chicago, perfecting his skills. When he heard about the opportunity to become the chef at Raintree, he jumped at the chance. He now spends his days cooking healthy breakfasts, lunches

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**"Chef Fred," as the kids call him, creates yummy and healthy breakfasts, lunches and snacks for kids at Raintree Learning Community in Ballwin. He also teaches a weekly cooking class where kids learn to create healthy, fun and easy-to-make snacks using lots of fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins and healthy starches.**



## Fruit Sushi (Frushi)

2 cups water  
1 1/2 cups rice  
1 cup coconut flakes

About 1 pint of assorted fresh fruit and berries  
1/4 cup lemon juice  
1/4 cup orange juice

Begin by steaming rice for 20 minutes, until tender. Spread steamed rice on a baking sheet and mix in coconut flakes and orange juice. Then spread out on pan and let cool for 20 minutes. Slice your choice of fruit. Sprinkle with lemon juice to preserve the color of the fruit.

Form one tablespoon of rice into an oblong ball, or wrap a sushi roller in plastic and poke holes so it can breathe. Spread cold rice down on roller in an even spread. Fill the roll with fresh fruit and roll up tight, then wrap in plastic wrap and store chilled. Keep cold till served. Cut rolls into 1 1/2 -inch pieces and plate.

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and snacks for the students there, and also teaches a once-a-week cooking class.

A typical day's menu may include a breakfast of scrambled eggs with whole wheat toast and fruit, chicken satay, rice, broccoli and orange slices for lunch, and watermelon pops for a snack, all made from scratch.

Other breakfast favorites are fruit-stuffed pancakes or granola & banana on a stick. Lunches can consist of panko-crust tuna cakes, bean quesadillas, or focaccia pizza faces and salad.

Ingredient are all fresh and frequently come from the school's own garden, providing an opportunity to teach kids about the origins of food.

"Our kitchen definitely is a teaching kitchen," Chef Fred says. "We have the opportunity to teach kids how food is grown - that it doesn't originate in the supermarket. And our garden lets kids take part in growing the food we eat. It lets them understand the growing process from seed to sprout to the table, and when they help prepare foods in the cooking class, they discover that cooking

healthy meals can be a creative, fun activity to do with those they love."

Chef Fred also designs his menus to compliment lessons the students at Raintree are learning in the classrooms. "With food, we can have a global focus," he explains. "If the students are learning about Japan, I can design a menu of Japanese foods in keeping with the theme of the day."

Chef Fred generously agreed to share some of his original healthy recipes with *St. Louis Kids*, (see next page) recipes that will someday be published in his own cookbook of healthy and appealing foods for kids.

And for busy parents, Chef Fred has made sure his recipes are easy and quick to create, are designed for kids to take part in, and are, of course, delicious.

"Kids naturally love fresh flavors, and are drawn to finger foods and foods that look delicious. I want to open up a world to them that doesn't include fried finger foods and french fries, and when they are young, we have the best chance of creating a life-long love of healthy food." ■

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due to a variety of reasons, but primarily, they are not eating healthy foods, their portion sizes are out of control, and they are not as active as they need to be."

Another culprit - drinking too many sugary drinks, and that includes fruit juice. Todd says she recommends milk over almost any kind of juice, except the occasional glass of orange juice - and then, choose the calcium-fortified kind.

"I've just never seen the point in filling kids full of juice. Kids are drinking way too many calories this way. It's much better to eat fruits and drink milk at mealtimes."

Poor food choices can impact kids' performance in school in that if they consume empty calories for breakfast or lunch, they are more likely to feel hungry throughout the day and focus on that, hindering their ability to focus on the tasks at hand.

Empty calories from high-sugar foods can produce a burst of energy - or "sugar rush" as it's sometimes referred to - but that quickly leads to a drop in blood sugar that leaves kids feeling tired, fatigued and hungry again.

Kids of all ages benefit from eating a breakfast of fruit, protein and whole grains, which can be as simple as granola, yogurt and a banana or apple. Lunch should also contain a lean protein, milk, a vegetable and a healthy fat that will help kids get through the afternoon without hunger pangs.

And for dinner, another lean protein, a healthy starch, vegetable and milk. And parents should always be in charge of choosing what's for dinner until kids are making healthy choices on their own.

"You'd be surprised how many kids are in charge of dinner - of deciding what the family will fix or where they will eat out," Todd says.

"It's tempting for parents to give in and let the kids eat fast food when life is so busy. But ultimately, it's up to parents to make sure their kids learn to make good food choices." ■

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### Tuna Cakes

For a new twist on an old favorite, turn tuna into a great main dish.

- 1 can white tuna drained
- 1/2 cup of soy sauce
- Salt and pepper and fresh herbs
- 1/2 white onion minced
- 1 cup panko crumbs
- 2 tbsp. butter melted
- 2 tbsp. oil

Beating eggs and combine with all other ingredients, except oil, in a medium bowl. Form patties with the mixture and let them chill for 20 min. Heat the oil in a large pan. Cook tuna cakes for approximately 4 minutes per side, or until golden brown. Turn cakes only once and remove from the oil and drain on a paper towel. Serve tuna cakes warm with a lemony sauce.



### Tortilla Soup

This soup is a treat for the eyes with long, crispy tortilla chips and a shock of red and green garnish. Fun for kids to dip, rich flavor for adults, this soup is great for the entire family.

- 16 oz chicken stock
- 2 tbsp. cooking oil
- 20 (7-inch) corn tortillas
- 8 oz chicken breast seasoned
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 1 cup red peppers
- 4 cloves garlic
- 1 teaspoon chili powder
- 1 teaspoon cumin
- 1 chopped fresh tomato
- 1/4 cup chopped fresh cilantro leaves
- 2 fresh limes, cut into quarters
- salt and pepper

Preheat the oven to 400. Then cut 10 corn tortillas into chips and strips, season with salt, and bake 10 minutes or until golden. Season the chicken with salt and pepper and place in a large stock pot with hot oil. Add the garlic, onions, and peppers. Remove the cooked chicken breast from the pan.

Dice the chicken into 1/2-inch pieces and set aside. Place the pan over medium heat, add the stock and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to medium low and simmer. Add the pre-baked tortillas to the pot. Cook 10 minutes until the tortillas are tender. Add the rest of the spices, then remove from the heat and pour into a blender. Puree the soup until smooth.

Thinly slice the other half of the tortillas. Fry tortillas in batches until golden brown. Remove and drain on paper towels. Season soup to taste before serving. Add chicken to the soup, garnish with tomatoes, fresh cilantro, tortilla strips, and cheddar cheese. ■



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