

What's for lunch? St. Paul schools serve up bison nachos

The special meal was dished up districtwide Monday, but carried extra significance in American Indian Magnet School's renovated cafeteria.

By Anthony Lonetree (<https://www.startribune.com/anthony-lonetree/6370607/>) Star Tribune | MAY 1, 2023 — 3:32PM

Bison nachos were on the menu Monday across St. Paul Public Schools, and it was a meal that had been months in the making, with special care taken to keep the recipe as pure and simple as possible.

No oregano, no cayenne or chili peppers, nothing overwhelming when it came to seasoning. Just onions, black pepper, salt and water.

"It is how our families wanted it," said Cole Welhaven, a district nutrition services coordinator. "The bison flavor really comes through."

Sofia Arellano and Nayeli Lightfeather, seventh-graders at American Indian Magnet School (AIMS) on the East Side, crushed up their tortilla chips before digging in for their first bites. And the verdict? Good, but could use a little spice, they said.

Last summer, St. Paul's nutrition services department made it a goal to work with the parent advisory councils to create special menus celebrating the district's diversity. Black parents weighed in first with a meal highlighted by red beans and rice in commemoration of National African American Parent Involvement Day in February.

Monday's meal also was served districtwide — 3,200 pounds of bison in all — but it had special meaning at AIMS. There, students were forced for the past two years to eat lunch in class amid a multiyear \$55.3 million school renovation and expansion project.

The wraps came off a newly remodeled cafeteria earlier this year, and just as Monday's meal was no ordinary meal, the AIMS cafeteria is no ordinary cafeteria — shaped as a circle, making it a fitting showcase for the district's latest cultural culinary endeavor.

ADVERTISEMENT



RICHARD TSONG-TAATARI, STAR TRIBUNE

Lunch monitor Marqueta Henderson checked in on the kids eating their bison nachos at the American Indian Magnet School in St. Paul on

In its early days in the 1990s, American Indian Magnet would begin its week by gathering students in the cafeteria for the burning of sage and cedar — the practice known as smudging — and close it out with drum and dance ceremonies on Fridays.

"That space was a place of comfort — of coming in and joining together as a community and as a school," Michele Fairbanks, an Ojibwe language and culture specialist in her 30th year at AIMS, recalled last week.

But as the school expanded from grades K-5 to preK-8, the gatherings had to be staggered — Group A one Friday, Group B the next, and so on — and lunch periods became a whirlwind of students coming in and out over a four-hour stretch.

Now the circle is wider, making it possible to not only serve lunches over a more manageable two hours but also to rekindle thoughts of those larger drum and dance ceremonies, "and of what makes AIMS 'AIMS,' " Principal Tim Brown said.

Then there is the beauty of the glass and the beams of Douglas fir. Work remains, but after winter break, when students and staff returned to school and finally saw what had been sealed off for so long, "there were tears," Fairbanks said.

ADVERTISEMENT

Lightfeather, a student at AIMS since the first grade, said approvingly: "It is more spacious. Kind of more modern."

Brown said a tribe with a Twin Cities office hopes to use the space for monthly meetings.

Long in the making

St. Paul Public Schools held its first workshop on the AIMS renovation in 2015. Community members crammed into long tables in the cafeteria. Papers were scattered about and post-it notes listing priorities collected. People had license to dream.

Fairbanks and Thomas "Mr. D" Draskovic, a Lakota language specialist, often speak of the power of the circle (<https://www.startribune.com/st-paul-american-indian-magnet-school-hmong-draskovic/600214455/>) in Native culture — about how it is the strongest shape in the universe. The school's design team wanted the circle space to be larger, and to have more light, and drafts and drawings were produced, and tweaks made.

ADVERTISEMENT



(https://chorus.stimg.co/24625531/merlin_70673185
auto=format,compress&cs=tinysrgb&)

PROVIDED BY ST. PAUL PUBLIC SCHOOLS, NULL

The newly remodeled cafeteria at American Indian Magnet School in St. Paul reflects the power of a circle in Native culture, and gives the school space to not just serve lunch but also hold ceremonies.

But there's more.

Outside the school is a linear progression of circles, said project manager Michelle Bergman Aho. An outdoor classroom with benches arranged just so. Then a playground with new equipment also taking the shape of a circle.

Eventually, construction trailers now in view of the cafeteria will be removed, freeing up space reserved for outdoor powwows.

Back in the brainstorming days, community members suggested that perhaps the school could have a field with buffalo.

"It was funny, you know, it was just fun," Fairbanks said of the idea.

ADVERTISEMENT

But for now, bison will remain simply as a menu item.

Anthony Lonetree has been covering St. Paul Public Schools and general K-12 issues for the Star Tribune since 2012-13. He began work in the paper's St. Paul bureau in 1987 and was the City Hall reporter for five years before moving to various education, public safety and suburban beats.

alonetree@startribune.com 612-673-4109