



South Carolina Farm to School Junior Chef Competition Tips and Frequently Asked Questions

Tips

- Consult the experts.
 - Connect with your school district's Food Service Director and/or Menu Planner. They are familiar with the school meal pattern, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) nutrition standards, recipe development, and ingredients commonly available and used in school nutrition programs. Review the requirements of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) with the representatives and discuss which USDA Foods (commodities) are typically available for use by the school nutrition department.
 - Discuss pricing for items needed with your Food Service Director, Menu Planner or other pertinent representative in your district.
 - Ask local chefs for recipe ideas to highlight seasonal produce and connect with local farmers to find out what products they produce.
- Create and document the recipe thoughtfully.
 - Keep ingredients and preparation steps to a minimum to create a labor-efficient recipe.
 - Ensure the recipe contains sufficient information and meets the minimum competition requirements.
 - List all ingredients, quantities and directions in the order in which they are used in preparation.
 - Include timing and temperatures in the recipe directions.
 - Write the directions in a clear, sequential, step-by-step format (e.g., Step 1, Step 2, Step 3, etc.).
 - Document the directions as clear, concise and complete as possible.
- Research popular menu items at restaurants and new flavor trends.
- Consider different but complimentary flavors, textures, etc.
- Complete a student taste test (optional but recommended).

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

1. Who can participate?

All enrolled South Carolina high school students in grades 9-12, who attend a school participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) are eligible to participate in the competition. Each team must have 2 two to four students. Only one team per school may enter the competition.

2. What are the goals and benefits of the Junior Chef Competition?

The goals and benefits of the Competition are:

- To encourage student engagement with school nutrition and learn about the programs.
- To develop healthy, student-friendly recipes to include local products that can be incorporated into the school nutrition program.
- Students will gain valuable knowledge and skills in recipe development, food preparation, teamwork and local food systems.
- Students will have the opportunity to demonstrate their culinary skills in a competitive environment.

3. What is the National School Lunch Program (NSLP)?

The National School Lunch Program is a federally assisted meal program operating in public and nonprofit private schools and residential childcare institutions. It provides nutritionally balanced, low cost or free lunches to children each school day.

4. How do I enter?

The application packet is available online at the South Carolina Department of Education's Office of Health and Nutrition (OHN) webpage: <https://www.ed.sc.gov/districts-schools/health-and-nutrition/special-programs/sc-junior-chef-competition/> or an application packet may be requested by emailing farm2school@ed.sc.gov.

A complete application (including the recipe, nutritional analysis and photograph of the dish) must be submitted to the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) at farm2school@ed.sc.gov or by mailing the application to SC Farm to School Junior Chef Competition, ATTN: Ben Sease, 849 Learning Lane, West Columbia SC 29172 by October 7, 2026.

5. Does my team need to obtain approval of our recipe from a designated representative of our school district's School Nutrition Program?

No. However, teams are strongly encouraged to work with a representative from their school district's School Nutrition Program staff to develop the recipe and obtain accurate pricing information. Collaboration among students, adult supervisors, and School Nutrition Program staff can help strengthen the recipe submission and support the team's success.

6. Is there a registration fee?

No. There is no registration fee for this competition.

7. What are the judging criteria for the Junior Chef Contest?

Recipes will be judged on overall appeal (student friendly), adherence to NSLP standards,

appearance and execution, creativity, taste, presentation, pre costing of recipe, sanitation and food safety. The best use of local SC Grown ingredients and USDA Foods will also be considered. See the Junior Chef Competition Overview and Rules and Judge's Scoring Sheet for more information.

8. What are the required components for the school lunch meal?

Meals offered in the NSLP must meet a meal pattern and nutrition standards set by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The meal pattern consists of five components, fruit, vegetable, grain, meat/meat alternate, and milk. Each must be offered in required amounts. Contact your local food service manager for more information.

9. What is the USDA Foods Program?

The USDA Foods Program provides healthy foods to schools for use in preparing school meals. USDA Foods include a wide variety of vegetables, fruits, dairy products, whole grains, lean meats and other protein options. To learn more, check out the USDA Foods Fact Sheet. The USDA Foods list for School Year 2026-27 is available at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/usda-fis>

10. What is the Farm to School Program?

The term farm to school encompasses efforts that bring locally or regionally produced foods into school cafeterias; hands-on learning activities such as school gardening, farm visits, and culinary classes; and the integration of food based education into the regular standards-based classroom curriculum. To learn more, visit the National Farm to School Network at: <http://www.farmentoschool.org/>

11. What is a whole grain?

Whole grains consist of the entire cereal grain seed or kernel. The kernel has three parts – the bran, the germ, and the endosperm. Usually the kernel is cracked, crushed, or flaked during the milling process. If the finished product retains the same relative proportions of bran, germ and endosperm as the original grain, it is considered a whole grain.

Examples of whole grains include whole-wheat flour, cracked wheat, wheat berries, rolled oats, brown rice, wild rice, quinoa etc.

12. How is whole grain-rich defined?

Whole grain-rich is a term referring to the USDA Food and Nutrition Administration (FNA) criteria for school meal requirements for grain. Foods that meet the whole grain-rich criteria for the NSLP contain at least 50 percent of the grains in the product are from a whole grain. The remaining 50 percent or less of grains, if any, must be enriched.

13. How do I know if a grain ingredient in my recipe meets the whole grain-rich criteria?

If the ingredient statement lists a whole grain ingredient as the first ingredient (or the second ingredient behind water) the product is considered a whole grain rich product. Consult your local Food Service Director for more information.

14. How can I find out what products are locally grown in South Carolina?

You can search for products grown in South Carolina on the South Carolina Department of Agriculture's Certified South Carolina Grown website at <https://agriculture.sc.gov/>.

15. Should teams bring their own equipment to the cooking competition?

The SCDE will provide teams with identical equipment, utensils and supplies. Please review the Junior Chef Competition Overview and Rules for a list of items that will be provided to teams for the cooking competition and a list of items that teams will be responsible for bringing.

16. How much time do teams have to prepare, cook, and plate their recipe?

Teams competing must prepare, cook, and plate their recipe (yield of six servings) in 1.5 hours. There will be an additional 30 minutes given for cleaning.

17. Can the adult/team supervisor help cook during the competition?

No. Only students may be involved with any aspect of the preparation process before or during the competition.

18. What is the appropriate attire for students on the day of the cooking competition?

Students should dress appropriately for food preparation. Appropriate attire includes chef's coat (if available), long pants, and closed-toed, comfortable shoes (i.e., good cushioning and arch support) with non-slip soles. Jewelry and nail polish are not allowed. Hair must be properly restrained.

If you have additional questions, please contact the Junior Chef Team at farm2school@ed.sc.gov