

Local Corn Tortillas in K-12 Schools Case Study

A **Grains to Trays in Action** Pilot Project Linking Fresh, Local Tortillas to Two Wisconsin School Districts

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AGC is a network of farmers, millers, maltsters, bakers, chefs, food manufacturers, brewers, distillers, researchers, and advocates working together to strengthen a regenerative grainshed in the Midwest.

For more information about AGC and our Grains to Trays work, visit www.graincollaborative.com.

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Overview

In 2024, Artisan Grain Collaborative (AGC) received a [Lake Michigan School Food Innovation Hub Grant Award](#) to support grains-to-trays value chain development in the Great Lakes region of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin. As a first step, AGC convened a Grains to Trays in Action Advisory Committee¹ to identify promising on-the-ground project ideas to test in the region. Building off the learnings from AGC’s [Grains to Trays assessment work](#) in 2022, the Advisory Committee narrowed down several pilot projects to explore with these grant funds, including linking fresh, local nixtamalized corn tortillas to two Wisconsin school districts.

The corn tortilla pilot project aimed to support **development of direct-to-school logistics** for regionally-grown and manufactured corn tortillas. The primary goal was to investigate if and how freshly made nixtamalized tortillas could enter the K-12 school food environment; a secondary goal was investigating K-12 school food opportunities for other grain-based food producers within the Great Lakes region.

To learn more about the Grains to Trays in Action project, [click here](#).

Key Pilot Project Participants

Tortilleria	Tortilleria Zepeda makes fresh tortillas in Lone Rock, Wisconsin with locally-sourced certified organic corn, using traditional nixtamalization techniques. This artisanal product is unusual on several levels. Most tortillas are made industrially, using accelerated processing methods starting with a dehydrated nixtamalized flour, known as masa harina. Conversely, Tortilleria Zepeda’s labor intensive nixtamalization process starts with whole organic corn grown by Wisconsin farmers, producing fresh masa with increased flavor and available nutrition. Co-founder Heidi Zepeda and Co-owner Sabrina Pitts were eager to try to get their tortillas into a variety of institutional settings, including K-12 schools.
School Districts	– The Mount Horeb Area School District is located in Dane and Iowa Counties, and serves 2,500 students from PK-12 in five schools. Food Service Director Michelle Denk has been with Mount Horeb for 16 years, and purchases locally-grown and -processed food when financially possible. – The School District of Holmen is located in La Crosse County and serves 3,800 students in grades K-12, in six different schools. Michael Gasper is the Director of Nutrition Services, and for 18 years has been working toward all-scratch cooking across the district.
Support	AGC is a network-based organization that fosters connections along the grain value chain to strengthen a regenerative grainshed in the Midwest. AGC provided value chain coordination between Tortilleria Zepeda and the Wisconsin school districts by facilitating initial conversations, coordinating logistics, and supporting overall relationship development.

1 The Advisory Committee included representatives from school districts, regional distributors, and grain-based food producers located in the Great Lakes region of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin.

Pilot Project Development Process

GETTING STARTED

Beginning in March 2025, key pilot project participants started meeting to share ideas and develop a plan for tortilla use in schools in the fall semester. Preliminary tasks included:

- **adapting menus** to see how tortillas already in use at schools could be swapped with this new, local product
- modifying and certifying the tortillas to ensure the product met federal **grain crediting and nutrition** requirements
- developing **direct-to-school delivery** options
- **providing educational materials** about how to best use and serve local nixtamalized corn tortillas
- identifying opportunities to introduce a new product to schools and drive student and family demand through **sampling, taste testing, generating promotional materials, and events**

Between March-July 2025, the pilot project participants met remotely once a month. Michael Gasper and Michelle Denk lent their expertise on how to integrate a new product within the restrictions of the school food environment and Heidi Zepeda and Sabrina Pitts jumped right into tackling product modification.

MEETING SCHOOL FOOD GUIDELINES

Each food a school serves is measured by its nutritional components, and must fit within the meal patterns set by [USDA Nutrition Standards](#). For grains, the standard serving changes with student age. One grain credit is one ounce, and K-5 and 6-8 students need one credit per day; high

school students need twice as much.

To fit these parameters, Tortilleria Zepeda created new 6-inch 28-gram tortillas, which are thicker than their standard tortillas. Additionally, Tortilleria Zepeda had to create a [Child Nutrition label](#).



GRAIN CREDITING AND PRICING

- One grain credit is 1 oz = 28 grams
- K-5 age students need 1 oz eq daily and at least 8 oz grain eq weekly
- 6-8 grades need 1 oz eq daily and at least 9 oz grain eq weekly
- 9-12 grades need 2 oz eq daily and at least 10 oz grain eq weekly

Grant funds were used to purchase tortilla samples for school districts to develop recipes with their staff and taste test them with students about once per month during the fall semester. Both food service directors expressed general concern from the outset about their ability to procure the tortillas long-term given budget cuts and persistent financial constraints in the Wisconsin K-12 school system. However, the directors proposed that serving the tortillas about once per month was likely doable even despite these challenges, as opposed to replacing all industrial tortillas on their menus. This approach provides the opportunity to balance the cost of these locally-sourced and -produced tortillas against other monthly purchasing necessities.



MENU PLANNING

Both school districts use flour and corn tortillas on a regular basis, and the food service directors were excited to have access to freshly made nixtamalized tortillas for the first time. Tortilleria Zepeda was eager for their nutritious tortillas to be featured as tacos in schools.

Holmen School District conducted recipe testing throughout summer 2025 when staff could work together without the pressure of serving students. Together, they brainstormed ideas that would work for their team's capacity and eventually produced an enchilada casserole recipe using the specially-sized tortillas. This hot dish was sometimes called "Mexican Lasagna." After taste testing, Holmen shared the recipe with Mount Horeb, who decided to use the enchilada casserole, too. Using the tortillas in the casserole allowed the schools to prepare meals efficiently; making tacos is very challenging to do at scale.



RESOURCE HIGHLIGHT

Check out Holmen School District's [enchilada casserole recipe](#).

*"I was part of the SNA National Board and selected to talk to the head of the USDA about scratch cooking. **He asked me, 'how long did it take you to get there?' I said, 'well, we're not there yet, but 18 years so far.'** Our district has decided that's what we want to do. But you'll never actually get there. You consistently are on that journey. It takes a lot of work. It's a lot of training, a lot of building confidence that [we] can do these things. It's a work in progress."*
– Michael Gasper, School District of Holmen

DIRECT-DELIVERY

Tortilleria Zepeda delivered custom-made tortilla samples to the two school districts. Self-distribution was a good option to get the pilot off the ground because the company already had a delivery near Holmen, and Mount Horeb is not far away from their facility. In the meantime, Tortilleria Zepeda was also working to get onboarded with regional distributors that the pilot schools and other area school districts buy from in the region like the Wisconsin Food Hub Cooperative, based in Waupaca, WI and The Common Market, Great Lakes located in Chicago, IL. Tortilleria Zepeda saw working with a regional distributor as a necessity for service to K-12 schools in the long run.

EDUCATION AND OUTREACH

Between planning and implementation, Tortilleria Zepeda attended several K-12 school-focused conferences in summer 2025 to make connections and learn more about K-12 school food needs. The company also investigated funding opportunities and machinery for a significant equipment expansion to scale production of the 6-inch 28-gram tortillas they developed to meet USDA Nutrition Standards.

In July 2025, Tortilleria Zepeda worked with a professional videographer to create a 10-minute video about their tortillas, with instructions for food professionals on product handling and preparation.



RESOURCE HIGHLIGHT

Check out Tortilleria Zepeda's Nixtamalized Corn Tortillas and How to Reheat for Institutional Kitchens instructional video here: <https://youtu.be/MIII5NII00M>. This video is intended for food service directors and school nutrition staff.



Heidi from Tortilleria Zepeda handing out taste tests of tortillas at Mount Horeb Back-to-School Food Show

In August 2025, Mount Horeb welcomed students back with a Drop-In Evening and Back-to-School Food Show. Students met their teachers, found their classrooms, and sampled new foods in the cafeteria, including the enchilada casserole recipe. Mount Horeb asked students to vote for which new foods they liked; 68% of students in attendance gave a thumbs-up for the enchilada casserole. Tortilleria Zepeda attended and brought tortilla samples for students to try as well.

68%

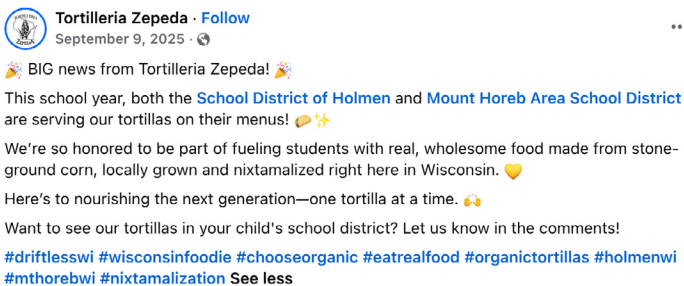
of students in attendance gave a thumbs-up for the enchilada casserole at a Back-to-School Food Show

Mount Horeb and Holmen prepared to incorporate signage and information about the tortillas into their existing promotional plans, which include emails to teachers and families, signs on the cafeteria line, and communication via social media.

MENU LAUNCH

The day before the dish was served, Mount Horeb sent the video and other information to teachers. Holmen promoted the dish through their usual channels, including emails and announcements.

At Holmen, the enchilada casserole was served at least once every 4 weeks. At Mount Horeb, the enchilada casserole was offered four or five times each in the different age groups in the district – K-5, middle, and high schools. At each school, the enchilada casserole was always offered alongside another familiar menu option to give students choice, which is the usual procedure for introducing new foods.



Collaborative Facebook post showcasing introduction of local corn tortillas in school meals.

IMPLEMENTATION AND STUDENT SATISFACTION

Despite the 68% of students who attended the Back-to-School Food Show giving the enchilada casserole a thumbs-up, both school districts observed a drop in the number of students eating the casserole after a few offerings. This eventually resulted in pulling the dish from the K-5 menu at Mount Horeb.

*"We're basically in survival mode right now, just trying to cover our costs. Because of that, we have to stick to the classics our customers already love. If we're going to try something new, it has to be a side note, not the star of the show. If people see an unfamiliar dish right at the top of the menu, they immediately back off—even if it tastes amazing. **Right now, familiarity is what sells.**"*
– Michelle Denk, Mount Horeb School District

Directors pointed out that kids need multiple chances to see and try a new food, and in the very tight budgets of a school cafeteria, it is not always possible to make foods available frequently enough to be accepted.

Studies show that it can take **8-10 times** before a food seems safe, familiar, and worthy of trying.



*"I had an opportunity to teach during Hispanic Heritage Month at Madison East High School, and taught three different culinary classes about nixtamalization and the cultural significance of making tortillas. The school was able to purchase some tortillas just for that event. **I think we underestimated how much education was needed for cafeteria use.**"*
– Heidi Zepeda, Tortilleria Zepeda

Lessons Learned

The pilot project was a success in that it met the primary goal of better understanding what is needed to support freshly made tortillas, and other grain-based products, entering the K-12 school food environment. Going into the project, the largest anticipated hurdle was trying to meet federal nutritional requirements, but that problem was easily solved as Tortilleria Zepeda was able to quickly adjust their production to make custom tortillas. Ultimately, other challenges surfaced that were less easily overcome during the short window of this pilot project. These issues point to solutions or opportunities to try in the future.

HURDLE OR CHALLENGE	SOLUTION OR OPPORTUNITY
The need for K-12 students to experience repeated exposures to food before the items or meals are familiar enough to be selected regularly and accepted. Passive engagement with promotional materials, like signage about the tortillas in the cafeteria and verbal reminders during menu announcements, is not sufficient in developing sustained student interest or acceptance. Additionally, one semester is not enough time to educate students, get their feedback, and establish regular menuing of the new item.	– Plan for a year-long roll-out plan, at minimum. Consider doing a series of smaller scale taste tests with students throughout the fall with the goal to serve it as a regular full meal option in the spring. – Pair taste tests and teaching opportunities in smaller classroom or group settings to create a bridge between students and a new food. If students learn about the food in a classroom or at a special event, there is more opportunity for connection and acceptance. – Invite food producers to multiple educational events to share with students and families about their product and the value chain it is a part of, from farm to school lunch trays. If possible, a student field trip to the producer's facility could also build student enthusiasm and engagement.
Ability for K-12 school districts to commit to long-term, consistent purchases of local tortillas without the support of grant funding.	– Prioritize the best value over lowest cost by considering price alongside other factors, like product quality with enhanced nutrition and flavor; reliability and responsiveness of working with a nimble, small business; and supporting local food and agriculture economies. – Avoid an “all or nothing” approach by strategically menuing the higher-value products or ingredients periodically or as a percentage of total product usage. Once a baseline has been established, new goals can be set for the frequency of menuing or percentage of ingredient incorporation.

HURDLE OR CHALLENGE	SOLUTION OR OPPORTUNITY
Lack of capacity among regional values-aligned distributors to simultaneously onboard local food businesses and their products and actively educate about and promote them to K-12 school clients.	– While small businesses may be nimble and flexible enough to do direct delivery for a few nearby K-12 school district buyers over a short period of time, this is not a sustainable solution. Small businesses need regional distributors with increased capacity and efficiencies to connect their products with K-12 schools. – To better serve their K-12 school clients and the grains-to-trays supply chain, regional food hubs and distributors may need to partner with K-12 school technical assistance providers to offer workshops and training that equip schools to not only order and receive local and regional grain-based products, but also with the knowledge and skills to work with them effectively.
Establishing new working relationships between a local food business and K-12 school districts, with wide-ranging goals, needs, and constraints. Being able to adapt and work together as a new food item is introduced to students requires a deep understanding of respective operations and preferred outcomes.	– Identify shared goals and what success looks like from the perspective of each engaged party. Compare what each entities’ “must-have’s” are in the relationship, and where there is flexibility and opportunity to compromise. – Bring a beginner’s mind to learning about each party’s respective operations. – Host in-person or remote introductory sessions, where food service directors can show their kitchens in motion, and producers can show their product in use.

Conclusion

As in all regional grain change work, shifting away from products of the standard food system is an enormous endeavor. Sometimes, this effort has been described as steering an ocean-going vessel; turns must be incrementally taken, and movement is slow. Investigating K-12 school food opportunities for freshly made tortillas gave the project team further insight into how grain-based food producers within the Great Lakes region can continue to pursue K-12 school food markets, and potential challenges they should consider and prepare themselves for.

Given the constraints, the pilot demonstrates that novelty food items may be initially better placed in K-12 schools through a more intentional, phased approach with a significant up-front investment in education and building student awareness and enthusiasm before the product or ingredient ever reaches the school lunch room. A built-in teaching component introducing the new food, how it’s made, and its connection to place, can help the food stand out. With an individual championing the food, students can absorb information, and have the chance to experience a unique food without distractions. Once a food moves from new to familiar and acceptable, regular menuing is likely to be more successful.

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