

Mushroom Meatballs? School Meal Solutions Dished Up at Senate Hearing

American Mushroom Institute

WASHINGTON (PRNewswire) — Innovative school meal solutions – like mushroom meatballs – were "served up" recently, as the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry examined the challenge of feeding America's school children.

The hearing featured testimony from school foodservice directors from Mississippi, Michigan, and Kentucky as Congress debates the current nutrition guidelines and begins preparation for the reauthorization of school nutrition programs in 2015.

Senator Robert P. Casey, Jr. (D-PA) arranged for his colleagues to sample the mushroom meatballs – an example of new products being introduced into school meals to meet U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) nutritional guidelines. Mushroom "blendability" – the simple process of adding fresh, chopped mushrooms to meat, so that students' favorite meals can be made healthier without losing taste or texture while extending volume – is a chef-inspired cooking technique in use by school districts across the country.

Pennsylvania is the top producing mushroom state in the country, and Senator Casey commended "the mushroom industry, foodservice directors and meat processors for working together to find solutions to producing healthier meals that meet the USDA guidelines and, most importantly, appeal to kids."

Samples of new menu items were a welcome addition to the hearing, noted Committee Chairwoman Senator Debbie Stabenow (D-MI).

"We want to do this hearing every week because we've been given a lot of great food this morning, so we are going to make this a weekly effort. Senator Leahy brought us some pumpkin squares that we have from the school menu in Vermont and I've tasted one and it's absolutely delicious. And from Bob Casey we have mushroom meatballs. These are also great – 50 percent mushrooms and 50 percent meat! I feel like I'm on the Food Channel right now. We didn't eat like this when I was in school," she said.

Senator Sherrod Brown (D-OH) cited the Cincinnati, Ohio school district as an early adaptor of the new nutrition guidelines. The district was one of the first to use mushroom blendability as a "student-approved" way to increase the healthfulness of the meat entree in school lunches. School foodservice directors can use the USDA commodity program to purchase beef and mushrooms which are sent directly to meat processors to create great tasting entrees with less fat, calories, and sodium that are also cost effective. Reformulated recipes were developed by the mushroom industry to assist schools that prepare meals in their own kitchens.

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"Mushroom blendability is a delicious example of the effective product innovations that are improving school meals for America's children," says Dayle Hayes, MS, RD, president of [School Meals That Rock](#) [1]. "Blending chopped mushrooms, now available through [USDA Foods](#) [2], with ground meat allows schools to serve burgers, meatballs and tacos that are lower in calories, fat and sodium. Students eat more vegetables while enjoying healthful versions of their favorite foods. This is win-win-win for kids, school nutrition professionals and agriculture."

When school lunch meal pattern requirements changed in 2012 to improve student health, the mushroom industry, foodservice directors and industry processors worked together to find solutions to produce meals that met USDA guidelines – and most importantly, appealed to children. The resulting menu items are affordable for schools, increase lunchroom sales and add an extra serving of vegetables in foods that students want to eat. Concepts like the mushroom blendability technique demonstrate that schools can serve healthier versions of foods kids love and increase vegetable consumption without sacrificing taste or acceptance at affordable prices.

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[1] <https://www.facebook.com/SchoolMealsThatRock>

[2] <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fdd/schoolscn-usda-foods-programs>