

Monroe students learn healthy food is fun

By Polly Stanoch Rix - Staff Writer

Ah, there's nothing like an ice cold Tofutti sandwich on a warm day.

Tofutti? What's that you might ask?

The second-graders in Tom Potter's class at Monroe School can tell you. Tofutti tastes like ice cream, looks like ice cream but is made of soy.

Their newfound knowledge has come from parent Jill Ovnik, who has taught them this year about healthy eating.

With obesity on the rise and poor behavior linked to high-sugar diets, Ovnik is interested in changing students' attitudes about food. After reading about the Food is Elementary program a couple of years ago, Ovnik presented Potter with the idea of bringing the program into his classroom.

Over the course of this year, Ovnik has set up shop in the second-grade classroom; introducing them to other countries and the foods those cultures eat. The kids have tried kale, mustard greens, barley, squash and many other foods.

"The kids have control and do the work," Ovnik said. "They are doing everything – chopping, dicing, cutting."

Their willingness to try new foods has something to do with them making the food. The best part is they actually eat it, too, said Ovnik, who has three children.

Peer pressure motivates them to try foods they might never taste at home, she added.

"Peer pressure works in our favor here," Ovnik said.

The final session, held May 12, featured soy-based foods from America. Students feasted on soy burgers, soy chicken-flavored nuggets, soy nuts, soy cheese, soy chocolate pudding and soy milk.

As he popped boiled soy beans in his mouth, Tanvis Kuncas reported he ate every bit of his (soy) chicken nuggets.

Ben Huebner didn't think he would like the soy burger served for lunch, but found out after one bite that it tasted good, he said.



Monroe School second-graders in Tom Potter's class love eating raw veggies such as the kale, spinach and jicama that parent Jill Ovnik has offered them this year. Their willingness to eat new foods comes from helping to prepare the snacks. (Doings photo by Steve Johnston)

"We've learned about how to eat healthy and to live healthy," said Kyrstin Gee, who particularly liked the food lesson on Japan and eating sushi.

While seven students said they liked the soy milk, most of the class took a pass on second servings.

"I thought it was the strangest thing I tried," Alle Dirico said. "I thought I was going to like it and I didn't."

Potter has noticed a difference in what his students are bringing to school for a morning snack. He has an interest in teaching healthy living skills, he added.

The students kept journals, writing down their thoughts about what they tasted. The exercise involved using new vocabulary and practicing their writing skills, Potter said. They also kept nutritional information about the foods, reinforcing some principles of

health science.

Food lessons have coincided with academics in another way, also. The week that Ovnik brought in samplings of 20 varieties of apples, the class just finished reading the book, "Johnny Appleseed." The class lesson on Egypt concurred with eating Egyptian food.

The Food is Elementary program is being taught in 200 schools across the country, she said. Several area parents have written her letter thanking her for her efforts. Parents wrote that their children make healthier choices and are eating many more vegetables and fruits.

"I would love to see this (program) in all of the schools," Ovnik said.

"We could use a portion of the school yard for a garden where students can grow their own vegetables," Ovnik continued.

Some thought about food

Monroe School second-graders took to heart what they have learned about eating healthy, a survey showed last week.

The following are some of the student comments.

"I will make different choices from now (on) to stay healthy."

-- Charlie Banks

"I told my mom to buy more vegetables (and) not to eat too much sugar and fat."

-- Rachel Parks

"I love this program because I get to try new thing! I think some are tasty and some are not but I love to try!"

-- Meredith Anderson

"China is the healthiest country in the world."

-- Doug Wilson

"Reading labels show what things can make you healthier. I learned that I should eat better and make better choices."

-- Maggie Roglich