

LOCAL PROFILE!



Seward Co-op
 Minneapolis-based Midwest Food Connection endeavors to improve children's eating habits by making them more knowledgeable about their food choices.



Uli Koester (left), of Midwest Food Connection, displays some of the healthful foods he uses in his presentations. Second-grader Tsunami Douglas-Webb (right), of Northrop Elementary School, is one of the thousands of Twin Cities school children Uli has taught about food and food culture.

Photos by Kari Goodnaugh

Expanding Children's Food World

By Uli Koester, Midwest Food Connection

There has to be motivation.

In my teaching, I have kids taste food — often previously unfamiliar to them — on a daily basis. I would say I am 95-percent successful in getting positive responses, but the range of attitudes is amazing. Much, I suppose, depends on the individual taste buds children have. Then there is the general interest and spirit for adventure that differs from one student to the next.

Above all, though, a child's motivation to eat well has everything to do with what, in German, (my mother tongue) is called *Umfeld*. It means, literally, "the field around someone" — a nice agricultural metaphor. Of course, most children aren't influenced by an actual field of crops (although that would be nice), but instead by their families, their daycare providers, the atmosphere in the lunchroom, their peers, and their shopping and gardening experiences. We perhaps could call this idea a child's "food world."

I experienced a nice example of this several weeks ago. I was teaching first-graders at Anne Sullivan Communication Center, a Minneapolis school about a mile south of Seward Co-op, and that particular Thursday I was cooking wild rice and sharing the Minnesota traditions around the grain. The same day, the school was celebrating Native American Involvement Day. The kids had a full day of Anishinabe culture — dancing performance in the morning, my cooking and storytelling about wild rice, and an evening feast cooked by parents.

This was especially meaningful because most of the kids at the school are not Native American, or even native Minnesotan, but recent arrivals from eastern Africa. On that day, they were immersed in a positive food environment, one that not only gave them critical cultural knowledge, but also opened their minds and taste buds to new healthful options.

A Child's Food World

If parents and educators play a key role in shaping a child's food world, where does your food co-op come in? It, of course, has a direct influence on young shoppers. You see it whenever you shop — children randomly opening bulk bins, toddlers in shopping carts reaching for seconds of the orange slice samples, older ones charting their way with a shopping list.

Beyond that, though, the co-op stands as a central element in the community. It empowers parents and families, as well as farmers and suppliers, to consider what's best for children. Seward Co-op has also chosen, for several years now, to sponsor my organization's work in elementary schools. Last year, the Midwest Food Connection (MFC) reached 6,600 kids at 59 schools!

Who better to influence a child's food world than us! Let us as parents, shoppers, co-op employees, member-owners, volunteers and leaders seize upon our unique position. Our new store — with its classroom, as well as its expanded size, buying power, classroom, and reach into the neighborhood — can and will work wonders in the lives of our children.

Uli Koester joined Seward Co-op in 1989 and the Midwest Food Connection in 1994. This December, MFC organized and sponsored a dinner at Macalester College, at which more than 60 Twin Cities professionals with an interest in food and children gathered.

In a keynote speech, Uli challenged them to form a new Twin Cities coalition on behalf of children and healthful eating. Stay tuned for further developments. For more information about MFC and how to arrange a visit from one of their teachers, visit www.midwestfoodconnection.org.



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