

# Students visit bison farm, get to sample the goods as part of nutrition program

[Linda Vanderwerf](#) West Central Tribune  
Published Tuesday, May 22, 2007

WILLMAR — The boy saw Annette Derouin standing, tongs in hand, next to a food service cart last week, and he knew right away what it meant.

“Are we sampling something today?” he asked.

Derouin nodded, and the boy smiled as he headed for a table in the Roosevelt Elementary School cafeteria.



Roosevelt Elementary School student Chris Baker of Willmar looks out a bus window Wednesday at bison during a tour of J&L Bison Ranch in Willmar. A group of fifth-graders from the school toured the ranch northwest of Willmar to view the animals up close and learn more about their history. The students were later offered the chance to sample bison as part of the district's nutrition program. (Tribune photos by Bill Zimmer)

Soon head cook Connie Thompson was clapping her hands in rhythm to get the students' attention. Students would have a chance to taste bison hot dogs, she said, and they would be on the menu the following day.

Students in the Willmar School District have become accustomed to seeing Derouin, the head of the district's nutrition program, hand out samples of food they may have never tasted before.

Students periodically eat locally grown foods as part of the Farm to School program of the West Central Regional Sustainable Development Partnership.

Derouin and Lynn Mader, a nutritionist with the development partnership, have handed out samples of Minnesota apples, squash, oatmeal and wild rice. If students like the foods, Derouin looks for a cost-effective way to include them in the regular menu.

Sometimes the students sample other foods, including a variety of less common fruits.

They have tried red grapefruit, star fruit, mango and papaya.

Judging by the comments of Roosevelt students that day, the samples are usually quite popular.

Everyone seemed to like the hot dogs. The texture was more solid than the average grocery store hot dog, and they were a little spicier.

Several students said they would tell their parents about the tasty treats and even suggest their families try the bison. Many agreed it would be a tough choice the next day, when they would be able to choose a burrito or a bison hot dog for lunch.

Fifth-graders toured the J&L Bison Ranch northwest of Willmar last week to see the animals on the ranch and learn more about their history. Rancher John Arndt, a former teacher, said he enjoys talking to the groups. Students go on a bus tour to get a close-up view of the huge animals and then sit on a grassy hillside for a talk, he said.

Some of the students ate lunch shortly after returning from the ranch.

“This will be interesting,” Mader said before the sampling started. “It’s really making that connection from farm to fork.”

John and Leila Arndt set up a display about bison in the cafeteria and helped hand out hot dog samples while a different shift of youngsters came in every 15 minutes.

Last year, the students tasted bison chuck roast that had been shredded. “It’s been a really fun thing,” Leila said.

Bison is a very lean, low-cholesterol protein source, Mader said. Its popularity has increased as consumers have become concerned about fat and cholesterol in other meats.

Planning is already under way for the 2007-08 school year. Mader helps Derouin make plans for local produce. She writes to farmers to find out what might be available and when.

It’s easy in the fall, when farmers can provide fresh produce from their fields, Derouin said. The winter can be a little more challenging, but she has found more items that are available through the winter, including wheat, oatmeal, some root vegetables and dairy items.

Some possibilities for the program next year include fresh tomatoes in the fall, cheese from First District Association, wheat berries in a vegetarian chili, and dried bean dishes.

Derouin said she has received some Somali recipes from the St. Paul School District and plans to try them next year, too.