



David Joles, Star Tribune

While seated at individual cubicles, taste testers Shelby Hauswedell, left, and Jasi Borman log taste test questions on computers.

Evolving school lunch guidelines have put Schwan's in pursuit. The question: Will kids eat it?

By **MIKE HUGHLETT**, Star Tribune

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MARSHALL, MINN. - It's midday and eighth-grader Shelby Hauswedell is seated at a carrel in front of a computer, concentrating hard on the subject at hand: pizza.

Crust, sauce, cheese -- she's answering a barrage of questions on all three.

One day last week, Hauswedell and about 25 middle school classmates nibbled on pizza and offered up critiques at the Schwan Food Co.'s taste-testing center here.

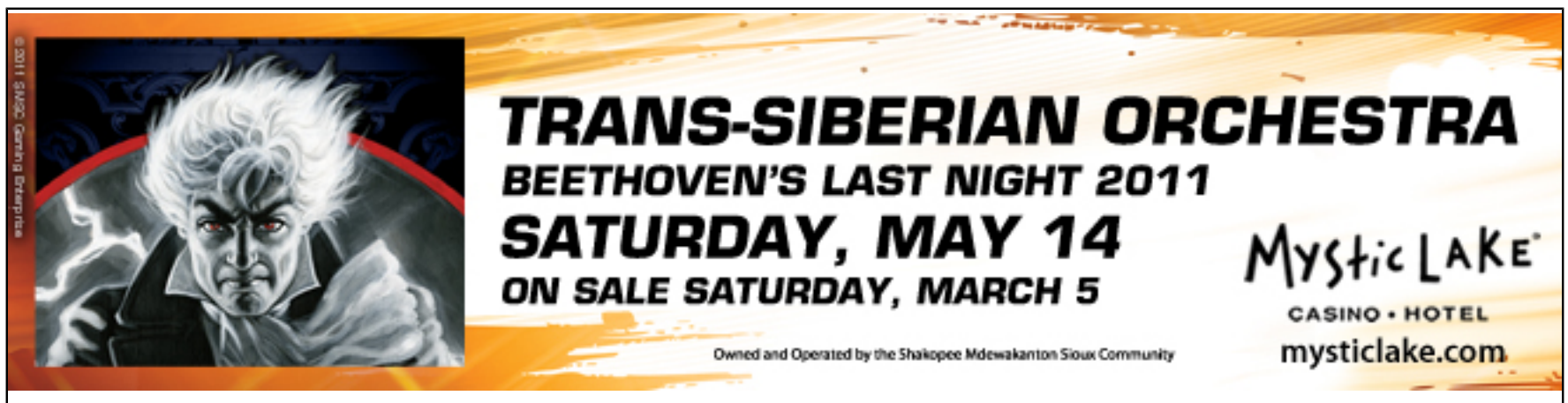
The company is one of the nation's largest school lunch suppliers, and deciphering the tastes of school kids like Hauswedell is more important than ever these days. Federal nutrition standards for school lunches are undergoing a major overhaul -- the first since 1995 -- presenting a big challenge for vendors.

"Schools rely so much on packaged food," said Margo Wootan, nutrition policy director for the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a food industry watchdog group. "Companies will need to reformulate it if they want to keep selling to schools."

Indeed, the pizza Hauswedell and her classmates tested is a new Schwan's product with a whole grain crust and less salt than earlier school pizza offerings. Jim Clough, president of Schwan's Food Services Inc., called it "our first offering in redefining school lunch pizza."

Privately held Schwan's has more than \$3 billion in annual sales divided among three frozen-food segments: home-delivery, food service and retail grocery, where its pizza brands include Tony's, Red Baron and Freschetta. The bedrock of Schwan's Food Services' business is primary and secondary schools, an \$8.5 billion-a-year market nationally as

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Marshall-based Schwan's is gung-ho enough on school lunch that it requires its sales and marketing staffers to get certified by the School Nutrition Association, a professional organization for school meal directors. Certification as a "school nutrition specialist" entails continuing education beyond a college degree.

The lunchroom staple

Schwan's is the nation's largest provider of school lunch pizza, and in school lunch rooms, pizza is often king. "You can never get sick of pizza," said Hauswedell, whose favorite lunch at Russell-Tyler-Ruthton Middle School is the french bread pizza made from scratch.

Rosemary Dederichs, director of nutrition services for the Minneapolis school district, said pizza is "wildly popular in high schools." The district cut back on pizza in high schools from daily to three times weekly this school year, part of a larger effort to make lunches healthier and improve menu variety. But it dares not go further than that. "We didn't want to shoot ourselves in the foot," Dederichs said.

From a health perspective, pizza didn't come off well in the recently released Dietary Guidelines for Americans, recommendations that the U.S. Department of Agriculture makes every five years (they are separate from the new school nutrition requirements).



In its dietary guidelines report, the USDA pegged pizza as a major source of sodium, saturated fat and solid fat in American diets. And pizza was listed as the second-biggest source of calories for children and adolescents, trailing only grain-based desserts -- i.e., cookies and the like.

Still, pizza can be healthy, and Schwan's and other pizza makers have been working to make it so for the school market for several years, said Katie Wilson, head of the National Food Service Management Institute at the University of Mississippi, a USDA-funded child nutrition research center. Pizza in schools is already "a different product in most cases" than pizza in grocery stores or pizzerias, she said.

The new school nutrition requirements raise the bar farther for pizza and a host of other foods. Released in January by the USDA, they're rooted in the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act, which became law in December after being championed as part of Michelle Obama's campaign to fight childhood hunger and obesity.

The regulations, which are likely to be finalized in mid-2012, for the first time establish calorie maximums for school meals. They also require that whole grains constitute half of the grains served in a meal. And they increase the requirements for fruit and green or orange vegetables, while significantly decreasing the amount of starchy vegetables allowed -- much to the chagrin of the potato industry.

But the biggest change -- for food manufacturers

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and school nutrition directors -- is probably the mandate for a dramatic reduction in sodium.

The current average sodium level in school lunches is 1,520 milligrams for middle schoolers and 1,588 for high schoolers. Within 10 years, those amounts must be gradually reduced to 710 to 740 milligrams, respectively.

"Pizza is going to be a tough one because there is sodium in every ingredient," said Patty Duenow, the Anoka-Hennepin school district's assistant director for child nutrition. "It's in the crust, it's in the sauce, it's in the cheese."

A better recipe

Schwan's salt-reduction efforts have centered on sauce and crust -- the two pizza elements the company makes directly. Cheese is purchased from outside vendors.

The company has been working for about 18 months on a pizza that would meet the new school nutrition guidelines. Food manufacturers got a good preview of what those guidelines would entail from an October 2009 study by the Institute of Medicine, which was done at the behest of the USDA.

Schwan's has been including whole grains in some pizza crusts for years. But the company had to double the amount of whole grains to 16 grams per serving in order to meet the new guidelines -- not an easy task without radically altering taste or texture. Schwan's, working with its ingredient suppliers,

found a way to do it.

On the sodium front, Schwan's re-engineered a slice of its Big Daddy's brand pizza -- which serves the middle and high school market -- so that it contains 580 milligrams of sodium. That's down from 800 milligrams when Big Daddy's was launched in 2005, and 640 milligrams after a salt reduction made in 2010.

Plus, the retooled sauce for Big Daddy's now contains 1/4 cup of vegetables, up from 1/8 cup in the previous version.

The new Big Daddy's pizza, along with Schwan's Tony's-brand offering for elementary schools, will officially hit the market this spring. By fall, Schwan's anticipates that the reformulated pizza will make up 40 percent of its pizza offerings to schools.

Still, "with any product we launch," said Schwan's Clough, "it gets back to, "Will the children eat it?"

That's where Hauswedell and her classmates at Russell-Tyler-Ruthton Middle School come in. They participated in one of about 20 kid taste tests Schwan's does each year at its research and development center. The drill: Try three different slices of Big Daddy's cheese pizza and critique various attributes on a scale of "super bad" to "super good."

What was the verdict from Hauswedell and classmates Jasi Borman and Hunter Burns? Schwan's school pizza -- even with whole-wheat crust, not

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always a winner with kids -- stacked up well against their favorite brand of supermarket pizza.

And none of them noticed that the school pizza had up to 32 percent less salt -- just what Schwan's would want.

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