



FAST FACTS

COMPANY NAME:	Red Rabbit
LOCATIONS:	New York City (all five boroughs), New York; Northern New Jersey; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
NUMBER OF STUDENTS SERVED:	32,000 - 44,000 total
GRADES SERVED:	Pre-K-12th grade
PERCENTAGE OF FREE/REDUCED-PRICED ELIGIBLE STUDENTS:	75-100% (varies by district)

Red Rabbit is a food service management company that believes “food justice is social justice.” This Black-owned organization uses multisectoral partnerships to help students establish healthy eating habits by serving nutritious, culturally relevant meals that meet the school meal nutrition standards. By providing access to nutritious, whole foods cooked from scratch, the team aims to make a long-term impact on nutrition-related disease outcomes of the children they serve.



CULTURALLY INFORMED, NUTRITIOUS, SOCIALLY-JUST SCHOOL MEALS

Red Rabbit’s meals consciously balance culture, nutrition, and social justice by respectfully drawing on feelings of nostalgia of students through meals from their cultural backgrounds. Most of their dishes are altered from the conventional recipe to meet nutritional standards, while maintaining flavors and ingredients central to the recipes students recognize from home. For example, Red Rabbit blends their own jerk spice as opposed to buying jerk sauce to limit sodium. Chefs solicit feedback from students, school staff, and families to ensure meals are palatable to the students while remaining culturally relevant.

Suya chicken is a popular menu item that reflects the heritage of West African students served by Red Rabbit. Chefs prepare baked Suya chicken with a West African blend of spices. The kale and salad boast a simple dressing, and the Jollof rice is flavored with a tomato and pepper puree made in-house. Cooking the items from scratch and blending the seasonings in-house keep the sodium content within meal pattern requirements and ensure the meal is free of preservatives.



Nigerian Suya chicken with Jollof rice, accompanied by lemon massaged kale, cherry tomato and bell pepper salad, blackberries, and orange wedges.

SCRATCH-COOKED WHOLE FOODS, MADE WITH LIMITED SODIUM AND ADDED SUGARS

Preparing school meals from scratch is Red Rabbit's cornerstone and limiting sodium and added sugars is a natural part of their philosophy. Red Rabbit chefs are trained to flavor dishes with fresh herbs and spices as opposed to relying on salt. By limiting processed foods in their cooking, their menus naturally contain less sodium. Comfort foods still make an appearance - with a healthier twist. For example, macaroni and cheese is prepared using low-sodium cheese and served with coleslaw brined with vinegar and allspice instead of a salt brine.



Baked macaroni and cheese with pickled coleslaw.



Jerk chicken with brown rice, kale and accompanied by Hami melon and red seedless grapes.

The Red Rabbit team estimates that breakfasts contain 400-500 mg of sodium and lunches contain 900-1100 mg of sodium (both meals including milk), which means they contain less sodium than current limits set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (540-640 mg for lunch and 1,230-1,420 mg for breakfast for School Year 2022-2023).

To limit added sugars, Red Rabbit incorporates naturally sweet, whole foods like fruit and cooking methods that bring out sweet flavors. For example, the Jerk chicken, another student favorite, is caramelized.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

The organization is transitioning from a centralized kitchen to on-site kitchens, allowing the team to get to know the students at each site, and further customize their menus to provide meals tailored to the cultures and preferences of the student body at each location.

This transition is vital to achieving the organization's mission and supporting student health. The team notes that access to good kitchen equipment on-site is necessary to make meals from scratch efficiently. They need sizeable walk-in refrigeration to store bulky ingredients like fresh produce and gas stoves to cook staples like rice from scratch. Some schools mostly have reheating equipment because they are designed to receive prepared foods from a central kitchen.

“**MOST PEOPLE DO NOT REALIZE THE IMPORTANCE THAT THE ADULTS IN THE ROOM HAVE IN BEING ABLE TO ESTABLISH THE CULTURE THAT THE CHILDREN THEN END UP FOLLOWING. IF WE DO NOT HAVE BUY-IN FROM THE ADULTS, IT BECOMES QUITE HARD TO CONVINCE A CHILD TO SEE AND ENJOY A MEAL THAT THEY ARE NOT FULLY FAMILIAR WITH.**”

**–NAUSHER KHAN
DIRECTOR OF
STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS**

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

The delicate balance of providing meals that reflect culture, good nutrition, and positive acceptability from kids and the adults in their lives is both a strength of the Red Rabbit team and an ongoing challenge. The team notes that the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and MyPlate are based on a Eurocentric perspective and do not always reflect the foods that students from different cultures eat. However, the Red Rabbit team delivers meals to children that reflect different cultures and remain nutritious by meeting nutrition standards.

As anyone who is tasked with feeding students knows, foods like sugary breakfast cereals and yogurt are hard to compete with, but the team seeks to normalize healthier options like plain yogurt with fresh fruit. Equally as important, buy-in from adults sets the standard for children to form their eating habits. The Red Rabbit team trains their student-facing staff and works with administrators, teachers, parents, and serving staff to promote understanding and awareness of the diversity of their menus.



This story was developed and based on an interview and email correspondence with the company from June-August 2022. Compliance with nutrition standards is self-reported and has not been verified by CSPI.

Company website: <https://www.myredrabbit.com/>

For more information, please contact policy@cspinet.org

August 2022