



Tennessee Junior Chef Competition

2026-27 Competition Guidelines

The Tennessee Department of Education (department) School Nutrition Program will host the ninth annual **Junior Chef Competition**. Teams will compete to develop a nutritious, student-friendly recipe that includes local foods and is easily incorporated into the school nutrition program. This culinary competition is designed to encourage students to engage with and learn about school nutrition programs and Farm to School. The application serves as a recipe contest to determine the top teams that move on to compete in the in-person culinary competition.

Teams

- Teams must consist of two to four students in grades 9-12. Students must attend a school that participates in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).
- Each team must have at least one adult team supervisor who is a school employee. The adult team supervisor will be the primary contact between the department's School Nutrition Program and their team. In addition, the adult team supervisor should provide the team with culinary guidance, teach food safety techniques, assist with nutrient assessment, and help meet contest guidelines and deadlines.

Note: School districts may submit multiple teams. However, only one team per school district is eligible to advance to the in-person cooking competition. If multiple teams from the same school district rank among the top qualifying teams, only the **highest-scoring team** from that district will advance. The next highest-scoring eligible team from a different school district will be selected to fill the remaining competition spots.

Recipe Application

Teams will submit an application, entailing an original recipe with nutrient assessment, and a photograph of their dish. Applications must be submitted to the department via email to Lynsey.Paul@tn.gov and copy School.Nutrition@tn.gov by Friday, **December 18, 2026**.

Recipe Requirements

Recipes must meet the following National School Lunch Program meal pattern and nutrient standards:

Meal Component and Nutrient Guidelines by Dish

	Entrée
Components	2 oz. eq. Meat/Meat Alternate 2 oz. eq. Whole Grains ½ cup vegetable or fruit
Calories	≤ 750
Saturated Fat	< 10% of calories
Sodium	≤1000 mg

- The recipe must include:
 - 2 oz. meat/meat alternate and 2 oz. whole grain-rich food,
 - **Plus**, ½ cup vegetable or fruit.
- Recipes must include **two (2)** or more Tennessee-grown products that are integral to the dish; not a garnish.
- Recipes must include **one (1)** USDA commodity item. Your school nutrition director can help you find this item.
- The recipe must serve **six (6)** people.
- Seasonings should focus on herbs and spices, while keeping sodium (salt) to a minimum.
- The team must use an original recipe. If the team starts with an existing recipe, the source of the existing recipe must be cited, and teams must alter the recipe to make it their own.
- Teams must obtain approval of their recipe by the school district's School Nutrition Program Director prior to entering the contest. Recipes must be submitted to the school district's School Nutrition Program as soon as possible to allow adequate time for review and approval before the application deadline. This will ensure that recipes meet the USDA meal pattern requirements. If you are unable to reach your



district's school nutrition director or need additional support, feel free to contact Lynsey Paul at Lynsey.Paul@tn.gov for assistance.

- Nuts are allowable in the Tennessee Junior Chef Competition; however, nuts are not allowed in the Southeast Region Junior Chef Competition. Recipes from the Tennessee competition that contain nuts will need to be revised to be eligible to advance to the Southeast Region Junior Chef Competition.
- The recipe must include all preparation steps and equipment necessary to recreate the dish.
- Recipes must be replicable by school nutrition programs. During recipe development, student acceptability and the ease of school meal program implementation should be considered (e.g., labor efficiency, number and types of ingredients, number of preparation steps, availability of ingredients to school nutrition, and equipment used in preparation).
- Teams are expected to follow appropriate food safety procedures. If using raw meat, see information related to safe minimum cooking temperatures and preventing cross-contamination, please visit www.foodsafety.gov. Raw meat may not be served for consumption.
- No dessert items are allowed, including, but not limited to, cakes, cookies, pies, candies, ice cream, or brownies.
- Smoothies are not eligible.

Recipe Scoring

The Recipe Application will be scored on meeting the NSLP meal pattern and nutrient standards, recipe presentation, based on submitted photograph, creativity, school nutrition reproducibility, and use of Tennessee-grown ingredients. After the initial recipe review, teams may be asked to adjust their recipes to meet the meal pattern and nutrient standards.

- **NSLP Meal Pattern and Nutrient Standards:** A nutrient assessment must be completed and submitted with the application. Teams must use a USDA approved nutrient assessment software that may be available from their district's School Nutrition Program, or the recipe analyzer tool included with the application. Teams should use nutrition facts labels when completing the assessment. If labels are not available, teams may use other sources that provide nutritional information, such



as the USDA Nutrient Database. A list of commonly used ingredients is included in the application.

- **Local Foods:** Local foods must be identified in the recipe. Recipes will be judged on the best and most effective use of Tennessee-grown ingredients and highlight local and seasonal foods. A list of Tennessee-grown products can be found in [Appendix B](#).
- **USDA commodity food items must be identified in the recipe.** The District's School Nutrition Director will have a list of these items.
- **Recipe Presentation:** The recipe will be judged on its description (included in the Recipe Entry Form), completeness, and the photograph of the dish.
- **Description:** Recipe descriptions should cover the taste, texture, and appearance of the dish. It is recommended that you use descriptive words such as colorful, crisp, hearty, spicy, etc.
- **Completeness:** The recipe should describe the preparation steps and equipment necessary to prepare the dish. The directions should be clear, concise, and complete.
- **Creativity:** Recipes will be judged on innovative use of ingredients, including creative flavor combinations.
- **School Nutrition Reproducibility:** Scoring will take into consideration student acceptability, ease of preparation, number and types of ingredients, availability of ingredients to school nutrition, use of culinary techniques appropriate for use in school nutrition, cooking time, and use of cost-effective ingredients.

On-Site Competition

The submitted recipes will be judged by members of the department's School Nutrition Program based on the Recipe Contest Judging Rubric. Based on this round of judging, up to eight teams from the application-based Recipe Contest will be invited to compete in the on-site portion of the Junior Chef competition with a panel of chef judges on **March 12, 2027, at Nashville State Community College**.

The dishes and teams will be evaluated by a panel of judges based on the following criteria:

- **Presentation:** Presentations should last between 2-3 minutes and will be scored on thoroughness of dish introduction and ability to answer questions from the judges. During the presentation, teams should:



- Introduce all members of the team;
 - Describe how the recipe was developed;
 - Describe the nutritional content of the recipe;
 - Identify the local ingredients used in the dish and discuss the importance of buying and using local products; and
 - Describe interaction with the school nutrition program.
- **Overall Appeal:** The dish will be judged on creativity, use of local foods, and school nutrition reproducibility.

**Note: All components must be prepared on-site during the competition. Premade or pre-prepared food items are not permitted unless they are commercially prepared and have a manufacturer's label. This includes, but is not limited to, sauces, broths, dressings, marinades, and similar prepared ingredients.*

Based on the cooking demonstrations, recipe presentations, and overall recipe, awards will be given to the top three teams.

There are three award levels: First, second, and third place. Sullivan University in Louisville, KY, has graciously sponsored the following scholarships:

- First Place: \$6,000
- Second Place: \$4,000
- Third Place: \$2,000

First-place teams will have the choice to select the Sullivan University scholarship amount, or they can choose a sponsored scholarship from Nashville State Community College, encouraging students to stay in Tennessee.

In addition to the scholarship award, the first-place team will be eligible to compete in the Southeast Regional Junior Chef Competition, to be held in Orlando, Florida.

First-place teams must make their best effort to participate in the Southeast Regional competition.



Appendix A: National School Lunch Program Guidelines

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is a federally assisted meal program operating in schools throughout the nation. The program provides reimbursement to schools that meet the federal requirements. The NSLP meal pattern and nutritional standards are based on the latest Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Schools must meet requirements to receive reimbursement. Use these guidelines to assist in developing a recipe that meets requirements for school meals.

Considerations:

- Schools must meet daily and weekly component requirements.
- A component is one of five food groups. The components of a school meal are **grains**, **fruit**, **vegetable**, **meat/meat alternate** (protein and dairy products), and **milk**.
- Recipes must document the amount of each component in the dish.
- For an ingredient to be creditable, it must be visible in the final product or be a recipe that is widely known to contain that component.
- Meat/meat alternate and grains are credited in ounce equivalents (oz. eq.), and fruits and vegetables are credited in cups.
- Half of the weekly grains offered must be whole grain-rich (i.e., $\geq 50\%$ of the grains in the product are whole grains; the remaining 50% or less of grains, if any, must be enriched).
- All food offered counts toward the nutrient requirements; this includes condiments.
- Recipes must contain zero grams of *trans* fat per serving, unless the *trans* fat is naturally occurring.
- Per plate cost includes labor and food cost.
- Schools are tied to specific procurement requirements; not all ingredients may be available to purchase.
- Schools must meet nutrient requirements for calories, sodium, and saturated fat over the course of the week.

Food Component Requirements

Meat/Meat Alternate (M/MA)	• Credited in oz. eq. • Beef, poultry, pork, beans, nut butters, cheese, yogurt, and tofu are all creditable. • Use the Food Buying Guide (FBG) to determine how products credit and convert as purchased into edible portion and oz. eq. • Access the FBG at https://foodbuyingguide.fns.usda.gov/Home/
Grain	• Credited in oz. eq. • Half of the weekly grains offered must be whole grain-rich (i.e., ≥ 50% of the grains in the product are whole grains, the remaining 50% or less of grains, if any, must be enriched). • Purchased breads, buns, bagels, and biscuits credit 1 oz. by weight = 1 oz. eq. • Purchased pasta, rice, and oats credit as 1 oz dry or ½ cup cooked = 1 oz. eq. • Flour in from scratch recipes credits 16 g per serving = 1 oz. eq. • Cereal grains in from scratch recipes credit 28 g = 1 oz. eq. • Use Exhibit A for crediting of other purchased grain products
Fruit	• Credited in cups. • Dried fruit credits as double the volume. • Minimum creditable amount is 1/8 cup. • Use the FBG to convert as purchased into edible portion.
Vegetable	• Credited in cups. • Weekly vegetable subgroup requirements. • Minimum creditable amount is 1/8 cup. • Raw leafy greens credit as half the volume. • Use the FBG to convert as purchased into edible portion.



Additional Resources

The following resources and links are for informational purposes only and do not represent official policies, procedures, or guidance of the Tennessee Department of Education. The Tennessee Department of Education bears no responsibility for the accuracy, legality, or content of the external sites.

- USDA National School Lunch Program: [National School Lunch Program | Food and Nutrition Service](#)
- [USDA Food Buying Guide](#)
- [Whole Grain Resource for the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs](#)

Appendix B: Tennessee-Grown Products

Fruits and Vegetables

- | | | |
|-------------------|---------------|------------------|
| • Apples | • Garlic | • Snap Beans |
| • Asparagus | • Grapes | • Spinach |
| • Bok Choy | • Greens | • Sweet Potatoes |
| • Beets | • Herbs | • Squash |
| • Bell Peppers | • Hot Peppers | • Strawberries |
| • Blackberries | • Kale | • Sweet Corn |
| • Blueberries | • Lettuce | • Tomatoes |
| • Broccoli | • Mushrooms | • Turnips |
| • Cabbage | • Okra | • Watermelons |
| • Cantaloupes | • Onions | |
| • Cauliflower | • Peaches | |
| • Carrots | • Pears | |
| • Cherry Tomatoes | • Potatoes | |
| • Collard Greens | • Pumpkins | |
| • Cucumbers | • Raspberries | |
| • Eggplant | • Rhubarb | |

Meats

- Beef
- Poultry
- Pork
- Fish
- Eggs

For more information on Tennessee-grown products, please visit the [PickTN website](#).

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