A year after Ontario government’s PPM 150 policy launched in 2011, banning fatty, sodium-heavy and sugar-loaded foods and drinks from school cafeterias, the Toronto District School Board shuttered 32 high school cafeterias due to poor revenue. “Students started going elsewhere to eat,” says Amy Symington, a professor of nutrition at GBC and principal investigator on the My Food, My Way project.

Couple the high school student’s unfortunate recourse with rising obesity rates – according to Statistics Canada, last year 31 per cent of Canadian children were overweight or obese – and it seems the cafeteria is in need of a reinvention. Enter the forward-thinking plan is My Food, My Way (MFMW), a partnership between George Brown College’s Food Innovation and Research School, the TDSB and CUPE 4400.

 “[The challenge was] coming up with recipes that meet the PPM 150 bill requirements, but also taste good and are appealing to high school-aged students,” adds Symington. “We gathered together a team of students from George Brown and have come up with 12 recipes and 12 sub-recipes.”

The program is less about policing student behavior and more about teaching them how to make better food choices. The best way to do that: concoct healthy spins on the staples.

“We wanted to make dishes that could be reproduced easily by anyone staff or student and that can be implemented in the cafeterias across the GTA,” says Candace Rambert, a culinary technician at GBC’s Food Innovation and Research Studio. “The students tried to find recipes very familiar to a Canadian population as well as the demographics you would find across the GTA.”

Recipes—ranging from veggie lasagna, pork souvlaki skewers, butter chicken, beef sliders to fish tacos—were tweaked along the way eschewing sodium in favour of using a squeeze of lemon or a handful of herbs to make the flavours pop. Symington kept a close eye on nutrition levels to ensure they stuck within the guidelines of PPM 150.

“[One of the recipes we were struggling with the sodium levels, but lime juice brightened up the entire flavor profile of the dish],” says Katherine Sowden, a GBC student and researcher on the project. “[It was an eye opener for me. It helped me to be extra conscious of sodium and fat levels and look at the [market] trends].”

The recipes went through a rigorous testing process and several panels of judges including student ambassadors from the TDSB and GBC. With the recipes perfected, the plan now is to introduce the new menu in January at Lakeshore Collegiate Institute via a pilot program, then roll it out to other schools both with and without culinary programs.

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AMY SYMINGTON, PI

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There are so many studies that have been done connecting school success with proper nutrition,” adds Symington. “We just really need to step up our game here in term of what we’re serving our future leaders of the country.”