DINING & WINE

A School Fight Over Chocolate Milk

By KIM SEVERSON    AUG. 24, 2010

MILK, that icon of purity, has been taking some hits lately.

By the time they are 11, children drink more soda than milk. The amount of milk consumed in America over all has fallen to about 20 gallons a year per capita, from 25 gallons in the early 1990s.

It’s even on shaky ground in the one place it has long seemed at home, the school lunchroom. To appease parents whose children can’t or won’t drink milk, a quarter of the nation’s largest school districts now offer rice or soy milk and almost 17 percent of all school districts offer lactose-free milk.

Most recently, chocolate milk has emerged as both villain and victim in a cafeteria drama that pits the milk industry, administrators and parents against one another.

For those who haven’t been in a school cafeteria lately, 71 percent of the milk served nationwide is flavored. In New York City, school food officials say fat-free chocolate milk fills nearly 60 percent of the 100 million cartons served each year. The rest is one-percent plain.

But chocolate milk can contain about twice as much sugar as plain low-fat milk. Milk is naturally sweet from lactose; flavored milk also contains cane sugar or high-fructose corn syrup, making it unwelcome in some cafeterias.
When students went back to school Monday in the District of Columbia, they were served only low-fat white milk. Berkeley, Calif., schools banned chocolate milk, and Florida school officials are considering it.

“There’s been a lot of pressure on flavored milk recently,” said Diane Pratt-Heavner of the School Nutrition Association.

Flavoring milk, some school officials and milk processors say, is the only way to get students to drink it. Milk provides a host of nutrients, including calcium, protein and vitamin D, which recent studies show is deficient in about three-quarters of teenagers and adults.

“It’s better for them to have some milk with some flavoring and a little added sugar than to go without milk,” said Ms. Pratt-Heavner, whose organization last month helped release a study that showed that elementary school children drank 35 percent less milk at school on average when flavored milk was removed.

The study, based on seven school districts, was paid for by the Milk Processor Education Program, a dairy industry group that supports the “Got Milk?” campaign, and conducted by Prime Consulting Group, whose clients include several large food companies.

Milk processors began a $500,000 campaign a year ago to defend chocolate milk from what they called “food activists” who believe it delivers too much added sugar. There is a lot at stake. The milk sold in schools accounts for 7 percent of all milk sales in the country.

The campaign has picked up in time for this school year. Posters featuring professional athletes promoting milk and chocolate milk for student athletes are ready for shipping to schools, and on Wednesday, the School Nutrition Association is offering its members a “Webinar” entitled “Keep flavored milk from dropping out of school.”
Dairy processors and some nutritionists are concerned that important nutrients are going down the drain instead of into children, said Ann Marie Krautheim, senior vice president for nutrition affairs at the National Dairy Council. “There is a vocal minority that is looking at flavored milk from one sole angle, which is the sugar content,” she said. “Parents need to consider the total nutrient package.”

People trying to make school lunch more nutritious say it’s outrageous to serve an eight-ounce drink that can contain more than five teaspoons of sugar — almost as much as a cup of soda or apple juice — and call it healthy.

“Saying we need to add sugar and flavoring to milk to get kids to drink it is like saying we need to feed kids apple pie if they don’t like apples,” said Ann Cooper, who runs the Boulder, Colo., school food program and a national Web site, chefann.com, aimed at reforming school lunch.

She’s not opposed to chocolate milk, but she is opposed to teaching children it is part of a healthy daily diet.

The Boulder school district banned flavored milk last year. To help keep consumption up, Ms. Cooper installed a dispenser that keeps the milk colder and is more fun, she claims, than grabbing a carton. And it saves money.

Like other nutritionists and pediatricians, she argues that too much milk can make a child too full to eat foods like greens, hummus and beans that offer nutrients found in dairy products.

Some parents simply want the schools to be working with them, not against them.

Jenny Evans’s children, who are 9 and 7, drink plenty of plain milk and eat a moderate amount of cookies, ice cream and the occasional piece of candy. But she objects to chocolate milk with added sugar as a staple at their school, the Garrison Union Free School in upstate New York.
“I don’t think sugar is good for my kids, but I want to be the one giving it to them,” she said.

For school food workers trying to make meals nutritious, milk of any kind helps solve problems.

Along with a grain, a vegetable, a fruit and a protein, milk must be offered at every meal if a school district wants to get crucial reimbursement from the federal government. Students need only take three of the five items offered, but chocolate milk is a popular choice.

To qualify for the federal money, the meals also have to deliver a set amount of calories and nutrients, with no more than 30 percent of those calories coming from fat. Low-fat milk helps meet those needs, said Janet Poppendieck, a sociology professor at Hunter College and author of the book, “Free for All: Fixing School Food in America.”

The government started providing subsidized milk to schools in the 1940s to help nourish needy children. The dairy industry helped finance this and other school nutrition efforts. Recently, it helped pay to promote school breakfast and summer food programs.

For many years, Ms. Poppendieck said, the close relationship between the dairy industry and public schools was welcome. But the recent campaign seems more commercial than social marketing, she said.

“As we have had our consciousness raised about milk both flavored and unflavored, the dairy council’s efforts begin to look less angelic,” she said.

But even parents who try to limit sugar in their children’s diets think chocolate milk on the lunch tray is worth the nutritional trade-off.

Amy Alexander’s children attend Montgomery County schools in Maryland. Her 11-year-old daughter has been boycotting milk altogether and her 7-year-old son won’t entertain much plain milk unless it is on his cereal.
And he hates vegetables, but he loves chocolate milk. At least that gives him some nutrition, his mother figures. But she asks him to limit himself to a carton every other day at school.

“I suspect he takes it every day, but I’m not there,” she said. Mostly, she doesn’t want her children to have issues around food.

“I don’t get the militancy around this,” she said. “Milk is milk.”

A version of this article appears in print on August 25, 2010, on Page D3 of the New York edition with the headline: A School Fight Over Chocolate Milk.

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