

Fit, full and healthy

By Teddye Snell, Press Staff Writer

Most parents know it's hard to get children to eat their vegetables. Imagine how some Tahlequah parents felt Monday evening when their children asked for second helpings of vegetable lasagna.

Cherokee County Health Coalition hosted its second annual Healthy Foods Cookoff at Beta Field Monday evening, and approximately 100 area residents showed up to judge the fare.

"I think we have a few more people here than last year," said Carol McKiel, event coordinator. "What's surprising is there are a lot more children, which is great!"

Prior to judging foods presented by a number of area businesses and agencies, participants signed in, received a free pedometer and T-shirt, then walked with Mayor Ken Purdy from Beta Field to Norris Park and back.

"We're so fortunate to have such a wonderful evening and beautiful surroundings to complement this event," said Mayor Purdy. "It's nice to see so many participants take advantage of our new park."

While the temperature was pleasant for a walk, many lined up to sample the foods and to get recipes to take home. "This is a fairly serious competition," said McKiel. "The winner gets bragging rights and a healthy foods cookbook. Last year, Kid Connections won with their fruit kabobs."

Darlene Denny of Kid Connections felt like they had the competition sewn up.

"The key to winning is to serve something cool and refreshing," she said. "That and presentation. It's all about presentation!" This year, Kid Connections was serving pineapple-banana smoothies.

Another booth drawing a good deal of attention was that of Cox Pharmacy. Jana Evensen, and Sara and Brandon Brown, handed out servings of baked tilapia with four-cheese mashed potatoes.

"Brandon here is also giving people their body mass indexes," said Evensen.

Megan White, director of the Sequoyah Institute at Northeastern State University, had a portable stereo playing hits from the 1950s.

"I'm handing out popcorn with a twist," said White, doing her best Chubby Checker impression. "We're also registering people for tickets to be given away for River City Players and Downtown Country."

White's "twist" to the popcorn was pizza flavored. The recipe called for the addition of a little butter, oregano, basil, garlic powder and Parmesan cheese blended together and poured over the popcorn.

White wasn't the only contestant serving twisted popcorn.

"It's funny," said Tracy Norsworthy, from Oklahoma Turning Point Initiative. "I brought popcorn with a cinnamon twist." According to McKiel, more than 15 area agencies and businesses offered samples and give-away recipes.

"All the food was low-calorie and low-fat, and demonstrated how healthy food can taste good and be easy to cook."

Many Stephens, assistant office manager for Tahlequah Pediatrics, was overwhelmed by the number of children who asked for her vegetable lasagna.

"I couldn't believe it," she said, scraping the remains of the first pan. "I've only had one child who didn't ask for some. It's great!"

Next to Stephens, Christine Cogburn, dietitian for W.W. Hastings Indian Medical Center, was dishing up fruit and yogurt parfaits.

Crystal Griffith, cook for Tahlequah City Hospital, provided another popular dish: mini pizzas. Children also flocked to this booth for samples. Little did they know the crust was whole wheat, topped with feta cheese, artichokes, tomatoes and mushrooms. According to the recipe sheet provided, each serving contained 5.3 grams of fat, 2.5 milligrams of cholesterol and 33.4 grams of carbohydrates.

Cherokee Nation Home Health Services also offered fruit cups and sugar-free snickerdoodle cookies. But the dessert drawing the most attention was the "Splendid" chocolate cake with whipped cream. (OK, so it was light whipped cream.)

"This cake is made with any devil's food cake mix," said Penny Gifford, with Oklahoma Rehab Pulmonary Specialists. "You mix the cake with one can of diet Coke, that's all. Each serving is only 160 calories."

The cake was very moist and flavorful, not at all like what you'd expect "healthy" chocolate to taste.

Gifford said part of their plan with patients is to get them on a healthy daily regimen.

"We work with children and adults," said Gifford. "The first thing we do is get them on an exercise plan. Once they adjust, their breathing improves."

According to McKiel, quality and quantity matters when it comes to a healthy diet.

"What and how much people eat is one of the most important factors for being healthy," she said. "Eating high-fat and high-calorie foods can cause a variety of illnesses, including heart disease and diabetes. The USDA suggests that people eat about 2,000 calories per day. Eating fried foods and fatty meats make it difficult to keep to the calorie limit."

Vegetable lasagna

This recipe was provided by Tahlequah Pediatrics, and serves 12-14.

12 lasagna noodles
1-1/2 zucchini
1-1/2 yellow squash
1 onion
1 green bell pepper
1-1/2 cups cottage cheese
2 cups spaghetti sauce (your choice, no meat)
1 cup mozzarella cheese
2 fresh tomatoes

In a baking pan, layer the bottom with lasagna, then top with sliced vegetables, sauce, cottage cheese and mozzarella; then repeat the process twice more. Top with sauce and mozzarella. Bake at 400 degrees for 1 hour.