

## Revolution in High School Lunches: Nancy Stewart and Sandella's Flatbread Have a Winning Combination

By Marc Hughston

Nancy Stewart is the Foodservice Director at Sweetwater Union High School District and with 24 schools and 44,000 students, her department is serving lunch to the largest secondary school district in the nation. Stewart is revolutionizing the lunch program though because of a basic problem she saw when the lunch bell rang: the kids who had cash would line up at the snack windows for ala carte chips and soda, while the kids on the subsidized National School Lunch Program (NSLP) would line up for bland offerings in an unattractive industrial cafeteria built for speed. There was an image problem with the cafeteria, and there was a nutrition problem with the chips and soda.

Stewart says she has seen this same problem before and while she has known what to do about it, the timing was right at Sweetwater. Says Stewart, "During my job interview process at Sweetwater, I saw that there was forward thinking, receptivity, and less fear of change. I told the Superintendent about what I wanted to accomplish and while I would have to prove myself, he was going to give me a shot at it. From the first day on the job I felt I could get this done at Sweetwater."

To paraphrase Stewart, the solution is multifaceted but fairly simple. First, students identify very strongly with branded concepts, and she needed a strong anchor with menu items that were much more flavorful and wholesome. Enter Sandella's Flatbread Café, a national chain (see sidebar). Stewart will also launch in-house branded concepts that she created: *The Dean of Greens*, *Professor Java & Co.*, *Dr. Smoothie PhD*, and *The Pizza Master*. Second, the industrial cafeteria needed to be outfitted with Sandella's trade-dress (see rendering below), and a similar cosmetic overhaul will give life to each of Stewart's in-house concepts. "The facelift makes the food court an attractive alternative to the snack window, and kids on the NSLP get a superior lunch offering," said Stewart. Third, Stewart is implementing kiosks and café carts, with the same trade dress, to solidify brand identity and create more points of distribution for easier access and shorter lines during the 30 minute service window.

"I expect Sandella's and the other branded concepts to make the difference with nutrition because with better tasting and healthier foods available, kids will opt for the food court more often than the chips and soda they can get at the snack windows."

Stewart expects these changes to have financial benefits too, resulting in Foodservice not just supporting itself, but generating excess income that can be reinvested in nutrition education, and activities to promote the fitness message. As reported by Chris Moran in an article in the San Diego Union Tribune, "Sweetwater's school board is counting on an increase of about \$250,000 in profits district wide as part of the \$11.8 million in budget cuts and savings it approved Monday night. Sweetwater cafeterias were \$82,000 in the red last school year and \$100,000 behind in 2005-06." Stewart expects to be in the black for the 2008-09 school year.



Founded in 1994, Sandella's Flatbread serves premium quality, health-conscious and delicious wraps, paninis, quesadillas, grilled flatbreads, salads and rice bowls, featuring bold flavors and their signature brick oven flatbread. Sandella's flatbread has no fat, is lower in calories, and is Kosher; menu items have no trans fats, and are listed in Weight Watchers Points Guide.

Sandella's is the largest and fastest growing flatbread concept in the world with over 125 restaurant locations and over 400 more in development nationwide. Visit their website at [www.sandellas.com](http://www.sandellas.com)

Stewart also expects a positive educational impact in the short run as access to Sandella's and the other branded concepts leads kids to make better meal choices, supplying them with the nutrition that supports their learning. Over the longer term, Stewart will provide the opportunity for an entry level education in entrepreneurship and leadership wherein high school students actually run the branded concepts, under the supervision of adult cafeteria staff, and have the experience of learning to keep those operations in the black. *Careers-To-Go*® is the name for this venture.

And what about the choice with Sandella's Flatbread Café? Nancy Stewart says, "I have researched and talked with officials from many branded concepts about my plans, and what impressed me about Sandella's was the combination of their appealing nutritional and flavor profiles, and long experience with their brand in foodservice operations at colleges and universities." Sandella's did not require Sweetwater to become a franchisee nor to pay the usual franchise fee for each location. Instead, Sandella's has licensed the brand to Sweetwater requiring only that they use Sandella's proprietary Flatbread, follow the recipes, adhere to the training, and employ the standard Sandella's trade-dress. "With about four emails back and forth and a conversation with Mike Stimola, Founder and President of Sandella's, we had the green light from legal and the school board approved it," says Stewart.

"What's unique about our concept," says Mike Stimola, Founder and President of Sandella's, "Is that Nancy [Stewart] can offer a variety of menu items with a common base of ingredients. For her initial menu for example, she just needs her commodity chicken and mozzarella, green leaf lettuce and tomatoes, and we get the different sauces and the flatbread to her distributor. And then she can offer the Chicken Fajita Quesadilla, the Sweet and Spicy Chicken Wrap, the Chipotle Chicken Wrap, the Buffalo Chicken Wrap, and the Honey Mustard Chicken Wrap with just a variation in the sauce while she uses the same basic ingredients. There are 80 menu items she can choose from but in a nutshell, it's flatbread and bold flavors with a common base of ingredients. And with four steps or less for every menu item, it is very simple to execute in a high volume environment."

Opening day is July 14 at the Otay Ranch High School's remodeled food court where Sandella's Flatbread Café will be serving hot Chicken Fajita Quesadilla's and cool Sweet and Spicy Chicken Wraps. Co-branded, *Professor Java & Co.* and *Dr. Smoothie, PhD* will offer smoothies, lattes and more; *The Dean of Greens* will offer salads, subs, and soups and *The Pizza Master* will feature oven fresh pizza-by-the slice plus The Master's Pasta Bowl.

For more information or if you are interested in licensing Sandella's within your school district or facility, please visit [www.sandellas.com](http://www.sandellas.com) and contact Marc Hughston at 949-719-3800 x315 or [marc@fransmart.com](mailto:marc@fransmart.com).



Otay Ranch High School cafeteria, above.  
Rendering with Sandella's trade-dress, below.

