The Tale of the Turnips of 2016

“You could mistake it for a mini-supermarket,” said Julie LaFontaine, executive director of The Open Door. “It doesn’t have the feel of a traditional food pantry.”

She was talking about the organization’s recently renovated food pantry. Clients who use the new pantry do their shopping with a grocery cart. They choose from shelves stocked with a variety of items. They pick from an oversized cooler and freezer which hold selections of meat, milk, and eggs. They fill their bags from a colorful array of fruits and vegetables stacked in a produce cooler. This client-directed model affords pantry clients food, dignity, and respect.

“While all food is important, our goal is to make sure that 30% of each food distribution is fresh produce,” said LaFontaine. “This is a goal that we are meeting and exceeding this year.”

At the heart of The Open Door’s new service model lies the concept of Making the Healthy Choice the Easy Choice. This approach aims at increasing client consumption of healthy food by transforming donated produce and product into easy-to-use meal components which are distributed in bulk through the pantry cooler.

It can pose a challenge when the donated product is not the most popular item. Such was the case with the Turnips of 2016.

LaFontaine said they arrived in fifty pound bags. Turnips. Lots of them. All shapes and sizes. Their dusky pale skins, still covered with dirt from the farmer’s field, were piled on pallets into the warehouse cooler.

When food pantry manager, Kevin Brisson, first saw this prolific donation from the Greater Boston Food Bank, he knew these practical cousins to the sweeter rutabaga would be “slow movers” among the clients.

“Root vegetables are not standard fare for many people,” said Brisson. “We knew we would have to figure out a way to promote them.”

One of the ways The Open Door promotes less popular products is to send them to the Nutrition Team for a makeover. Turnips, Brussels sprouts, avocados, squash, kale and the like never come out of the kitchen the same way they went in. With some culinary magic and a dash of care, the team transforms these items into tasty treats that are offered along with a recipe at the Hospitality Station in the client waiting area and in the pantry.

“It’s all about getting creative,” said Brisson. “It is about repeated exposure.”

Lauralee Taylor, the kitchen production manager, said she approached the mountain of donated turnips with a small amount of “horror” due to the sheer quantity. However, she and her team made short work of the pile along with a group of volunteers who helped peel and clean the bulbous roots and get them ready to serve.

“First we have to tell them what it is and then we can show them what to do with it,” said Taylor.

In this case, the turnips were cubed or sliced and then roasted with olive oil, salt, and pepper for a delicious alternative to a french fry. They were added to a potato salad for a surprising twist on an old favorite. They were folded into soups and tucked into a pot pie.

The end result? People tried them and liked them. Mission accomplished!
Serving Up Summer

The Open Door Summer Meals program is in full-swing once again, serving up nutritious lunches during the hot summer months, when kids are not in school. Summer Meals manager Dani DuBois, along with assistant Julia Toby and their team of awesome interns, cover 16 sites on Cape Ann, in Ipswich, and at the Extended Stay Hotel in Danvers.

DuBois has been with Summer Meals for eight years, and manager for the past two. She says, “I absolutely love Summer Meals! It is so much fun to watch the kids grow year after year.”

“I really appreciate the hard work that the interns have put in this year and the fact that they have been able to make time to visit our sites to do nutrition activities with the kids,” she added.

Children have been making Berry Yummy Smoothies, watermelon pizza, and refrigerator pickles this summer.

The meals are prepared and packed fresh each morning at The Open Door kitchen, and offer a variety of healthy choices, including fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat milk. The menu has included such specialties as homemade granola, BLT pasta salad, and zucchini oatmeal raisin cookies.

In 2015, the Summer Meals program, as a long-time sponsor of the federal Summer Food Service Program, served more than 16,000 tasty meals during the 10 weeks of summer vacation, to children ages 18 and younger—all at no cost to their families.