6 March 14, 1996 Cornell Chronicle

Program has children eating healthier foods

By Susan Lang

Imagine a school lunch program with entrées containing only 6 percent of calories from fat; almost completely based on nutrient-dense U.S. Department of Agriculture's commodity plant foods, such as dried beans, lentils, bulgur wheat and brown rice; and – here is the hard-to-imagine part – is readily eaten by children.

Demas

Yet such food is being served – and consumed – in six schools across the nation, thanks to a pilot program developed at Cornell.

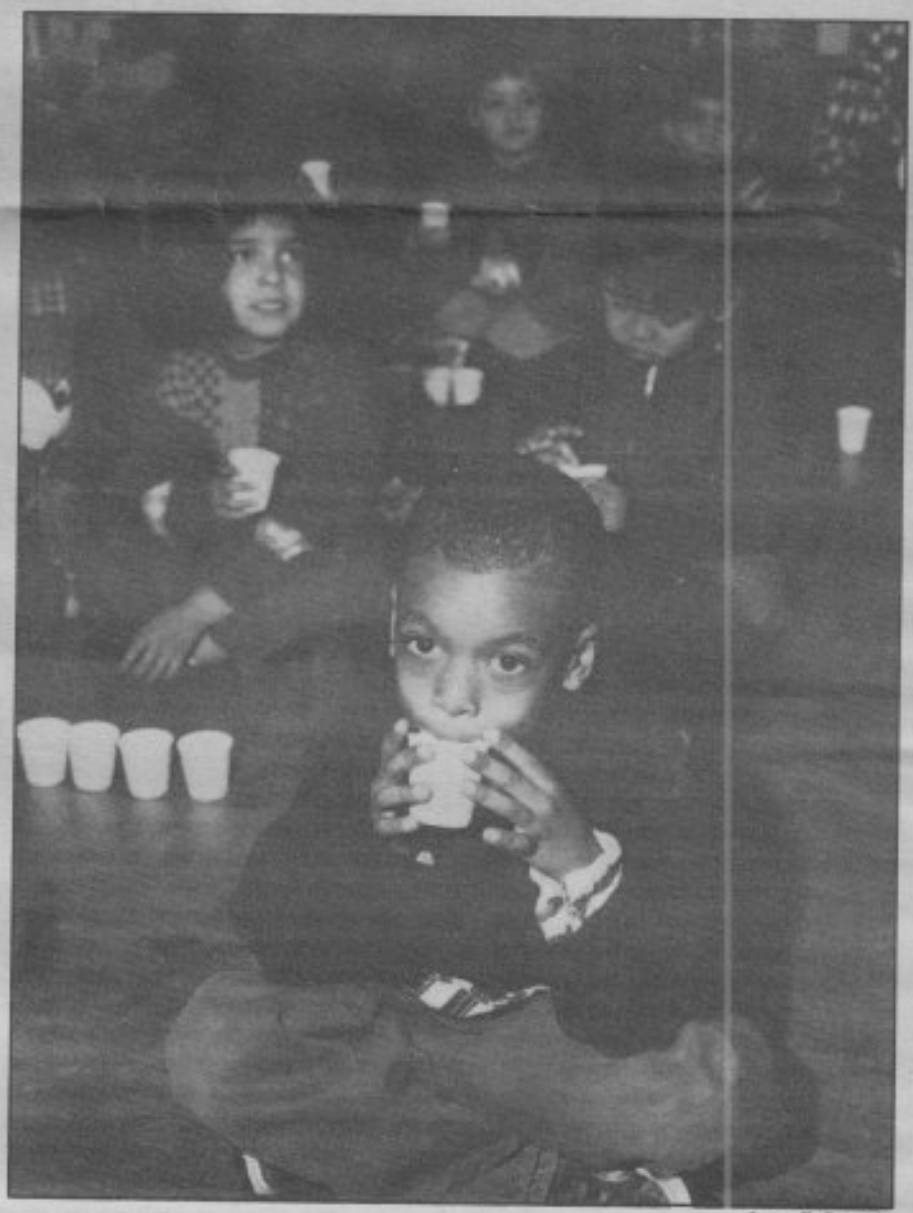
"My research shows that children will eat up to 20 times more low-fat, high-fiber foods if they first learn about them through hands-on experience in the classroom," said Antonia Demas, Ph.D. '95, who developed the award-winning multicultural food education curriculum for her doctoral thesis.

From New Mexico and the Lower East Side of Manhattan to Upstate New York and Boston, children are learning about, preparing, sampling and then eating in their cafeterias such healthful foods as "dill-lightful" bulgur and veggies, calconnon (Peruvian potatoes with an Irish twist), three sisters casserole (beans, corn, squash and maple syrup), soul stew (black-eyed peas, corn, collards, molasses), Chinese bean dumplings, pasta primavera, couscous chili, chutney and curry.

"Children usually reject low-fat versions of foods they're used to, but by involving the students in preparing healthful, international foods in the classroom, and teaching them about nutrition through the study of other cultures, food and cooking, the children accept these foods and even ask their families to prepare them," said Demas, whose curriculum received the Society for Nutrition Education Excellence in Nutrition Education Award and the USDA's Most Creative Implementation of the Dietary Guidelines Award last year.

After the highly successful pilot project of the curriculum in Trumansburg, which showed how powerful experiential learning about food in the classroom is in getting children to taste diverse, low-fat foods, Demas received more than 100 inquiries about the program from schools and community groups across the nation.

The curriculum involves engaging the senses in preparing the foods, such as making pasta, curry and chutney; smelling and using fresh herbs; feeling the stickiness of butter and relating that to



Jerry F. Ruotolo

A student in New York City tries to identify the feel and taste of fat in five different milks, from skim to cream, as part of Antonia Demas' food education project.

China, Italy and India and their unique foods; and showing how foods connect to other subjects in school.

To help the children better understand the food cycle, the curriculum this year will include school gardens with fresh herbs, greens and dried beans.

In Manhattan, Trumansburg artist Daniel Burgevin is working with children to paint a large mural based on the food education curriculum, to dress up the cafeteria and reinforce the classroom learning.

"Typical school lunches contain up to 40 percent of calories from fat and rely far too much on animal-based foods," said T. Colin Campbell, Cornell professor of nutritional biochemistry, one of Demas' faculty advisers for her thesis and a board member of Demas' forthcoming nonprofit organization that will institute the program on a much wider basis.

"Americans will not reduce their rates of chronic, degenerative diseases until they shift away from their animal-based diet to a plant-based diet," Campbell said. "The best way to do this is in childhood."

Also endorsing Demas' curriculum and sitting on her board of directors are family pediatricians Dr. Benjamin Spock and Dr.

showed that children will eat unfamiliar foods if they cook them in school and study their sources and properties. We desperately need a varied program to steer children away from the death-dealing American diet high in meats, dairy fats and other unsaturated fats, toward whole grains, vegetables, beans and fruits."

Said Attwood, author of *Dr. Attwood's Low-Fat Prescription for Kids*: "This unique program, created by Dr. Demas, has the potential of changing the health destiny of an entire generation of children. I've seen nothing like this in my 32 years as a pediatrician."

"Antonia's work helps children appreciate and respect people from other cultures all over the world and does so in a very appropriate, direct and immediate manner. I think they will remember what they learn," said Robert Ascher, professor of anthropology and member of her graduate committee. "By preparing and tasting the foods from other cultures, they, in a way, directly experience an aspect of those cultures."

"Antonia is a superb teacher who masterfully trains teachers in implementing the program and integrating a wide variety of disciplines," said Joan Egner, professor