

Lunchtime Learning

CAN YOU IMAGINE ELEMENTARY school cafeterias serving up brown rice and lentils to eight-year-olds—who then ask for seconds? Antonia Demas has helped make it happen. As the founder of the fledgling Food Studies Institute, Demas is leading an effort to wean America's schoolchildren away from fat-laden burgers, pizza, and French fries. Under her program, kids garden, cook, and learn about the cultural origins of wholesome, nutritious foods from around the world.

"When children have a hands-on, sensory experience with a new food," Demas says, "they'll eat things parents would swear they'd never touch." In one project, for example, a group of students ground 14 different spices to create an Indian curry, marveling at the color and smell of each spice. When curry was later served in the school cafeteria, most of the children who had cooked it before ate it happily, while most of those who hadn't refused.

Demas says her program's benefits are not just nutritional. She believes that when children have a positive experience with food from a certain culture, they become more open to people from that culture. "Ultimately, this program can help fight prejudice," she maintains. Her curriculum also uses food to support lessons in a range of other subjects, including



history, geography, math, science, and the arts. At P.S. 61 in New York City, for example, children have helped paint several colorful murals depicting foods from around the world. To celebrate Martin Luther King Day, students in Somerville, Massachusetts learned about African-American history and cooked a "soul stew" containing black-eyed peas, collard greens, and corn. Demas feels that elementary school-age children are the most receptive to this kind of broad-based learning. "They're not afraid to put their hands in a big bowl of gooey dough," she says.

Six schools from across the country have already adopted Demas's curriculum, and if the funding comes through, eight more could sign on by the end of this year. To make the program more accessible for school cafeterias, Demas is creating a cookbook

of easy-to-prepare recipes, accompanied by a cost and nutritional analysis of each menu.

So far, all the reviews of the program have been positive. Lynn Fredericks, the director of culinary nutrition education at P.S. 61, says that children there are

Santa Fe schoolchildren make tortillas.

"totally mesmerized" by the new lessons because all their senses are engaged. She points out that the program also encourages peer learning. "The children are boosting each other's confidence; they feel a camaraderie," she says. "It's better than sitting in a classroom, feeling pressure to

compete with each other. The only pressure they feel is to hurry up and finish so they can eat!"

—Rebecca Ostriker

Antonia Demas, Food Studies Institute, 60 Cayuga Street, Trumansburg NY 14886; (607) 387-6884.

BOOKS

Write Father, Write Son

When Gautama Chopra was a boy, his father used to tuck him into bed with the outlines of a bedtime story. "He would say to me, 'You give it an ending,'" he recalls. Gautama's father, Deepak Chopra, is a best-selling author. Now, the son has published his own book, a parable called *Child of the Dawn* (Amber-Allen).

Gautama, a senior at Columbia University, cites his father's writings, especially *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success*, as one of his influences. For example, Hakim, the street-orphan protagonist of Gautama's tale, undertakes a quest for wealth and power that leads him to several villages and teachers. Along the way, he learns many of the same "laws" laid down in the elder Chopra's work.

Although he was named after the Buddha and has meditated since age four, Gautama worries that bookstores are displaying *Child of the Dawn* in the wrong place, usually as a "New Age" or self-help book. "I'm only 21 years old. Who am I to write a self-help book?" he asks. "I long to see it in the fiction category."

However it's categorized, *Child of the Dawn* has received the kind of attention most authors only dream of, including an initial printing of 100,000 and nibbles from Hollywood. Gautama is clearly enjoying the ride.

—Gregory Dennis

