

unhappy



meals

School lunches are loaded with fat—and the beef and dairy industries are making sure it stays that way.

By Barry Yeoman

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NAOMI HARRIS

Every weekday at lunch, courtesy of the federal government, more than 27 million schoolchildren sit down to the nation's largest mass feeding. If we took a giant snapshot of their trays on a typical day—say, Tuesday, September 24—here's what the continent-wide photo would look like:

In Lynnwood, Washington, we would see kids eating sausage with Belgian waffle sticks and syrup. In Clovis, California, bacon cheeseburgers. In La Quinta, California, Canadian bacon and cheese rolls. In Rexburg, Idaho, cheese nachos and waffles. In Fort Collins, Colorado, "homemade" pigs in a blanket. In Bryan, Texas, cheeseburgers, chicken-fried steak, and pizza. In Hot Springs, Arkansas, country steak with creamed potatoes. In Cedar Falls, Iowa, mini-corn dogs. In Lafayette, Indiana, beef ravioli with cheesy broccoli. In Columbus, Ohio, egg rolls with tater tots. In Kingstree, South Carolina, sloppy joes with onion rings. In Richmond, Virginia, chili cheese nachos. In Gatesville, North Carolina, three-meat subs with Fritos. In Orwigsburg, Pennsylvania, cheese steak on rolls with buttered pasta. And in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, pretzels with cheese sauce.

Here and there, we'd also see baked chicken and salads. But by and large, school cafeterias coast to coast offer an artery-clogging menu of beef, pork, cheese, and grease. "Whenever I see children clinically, I ask them if they buy lunch at school or bring it from home," says Patricia Froberg, a nutritionist at Connecticut Children's Medical Center in Hartford. "If they say, 'I get it at school,' I cringe."

At a time when weight-related illnesses in children are escalating, schools are serving kids the very foods that lead to obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. That's because the National School Lunch Program, which gives schools more than \$6 billion each year to offer low-cost meals to students, has conflicting missions. Enacted in 1946, the program is supposed to provide healthy meals to children, regardless of income. At the same time, however, it's designed to subsidize agribusiness, shoring up demand for beef and milk even as the public's taste for these foods declines.

Under the program, the federal government buys up more than \$800 million worth of farm products each year and turns them over to schools to serve their students. The U.S. Department of Agriculture, which administers the system, calls this a win-win situation: Schools get free ingredients while farmers are guaranteed a steady income. The trouble is, most of the commodities provided to schools are meat and dairy products,

often laden with saturated fat. In 2001, the USDA spent a total of \$350 million on surplus beef and cheese for schools—more than double the \$161 million spent on all fruits and vegetables, most of which were canned or frozen. On top of its regular purchases, the USDA makes special purchases in direct response to industry lobbying. In November 2001, for example, the beef industry wrote to Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman, complaining that a decline in travel after September 11, along with a lowered demand for beef in Japan, was suppressing sales of their product. The department responded two months later with a \$30 million “bonus buy” of frozen beef roasts and ground beef for schools.

“Basically, it’s a welfare program for suppliers of commodities,” says Jennifer Raymond, a retired nutritionist in Northern California who has worked with schools to develop healthier menus. “It’s a price support program for agricultural producers, and the schools are simply a way to get rid of the items that have been purchased.”

All in all, schools obtain almost 20 percent of their food from the commodities program—and they depend on the handouts to meet tight budgets. “School districts are under intense budgetary pressure, and oftentimes nutrition is at the bottom of the priority list,” says David Ludwig, director of the obesity program at Children’s Hospital in Boston. School nutrition directors face increasing mandates from their higher-ups to break even, or even make a profit, and therefore have no choice but to accept surplus commodities. “They help shape our menus significantly, especially if you’re going to run a program successfully financially,” says Christy Koury, director of child nutrition for schools in Freeport, Texas, where menus run heavy on hamburgers, cheese-stuffed pizza sticks, and pepperoni calzones.

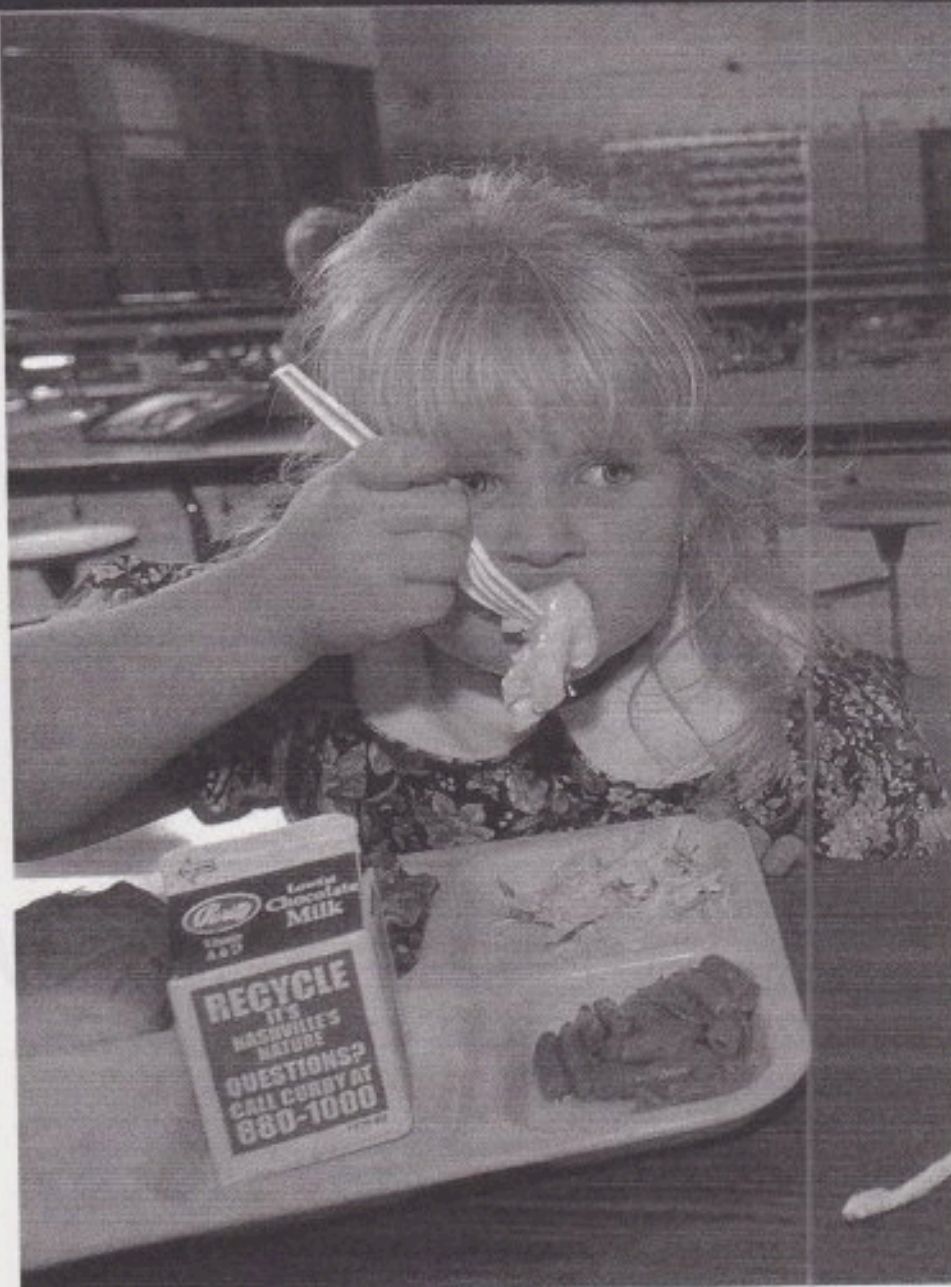
School nutrition officials like Koury consider the free food so vital to their budgets that they have sometimes overlooked good nutrition to side with the beef and dairy industries, forming a powerful alliance that has blocked efforts to serve healthier meals to students. The National School Lunch Program is up for reauthorization this year for the first time since 1998, but given the interests backing the current system, few expect Congress to approve any meaningful reforms. “It’s understood that commodity programs exist,” says Graydon Forrer, former

director of consumer affairs for the USDA, “and that commodity programs will continue to exist.”

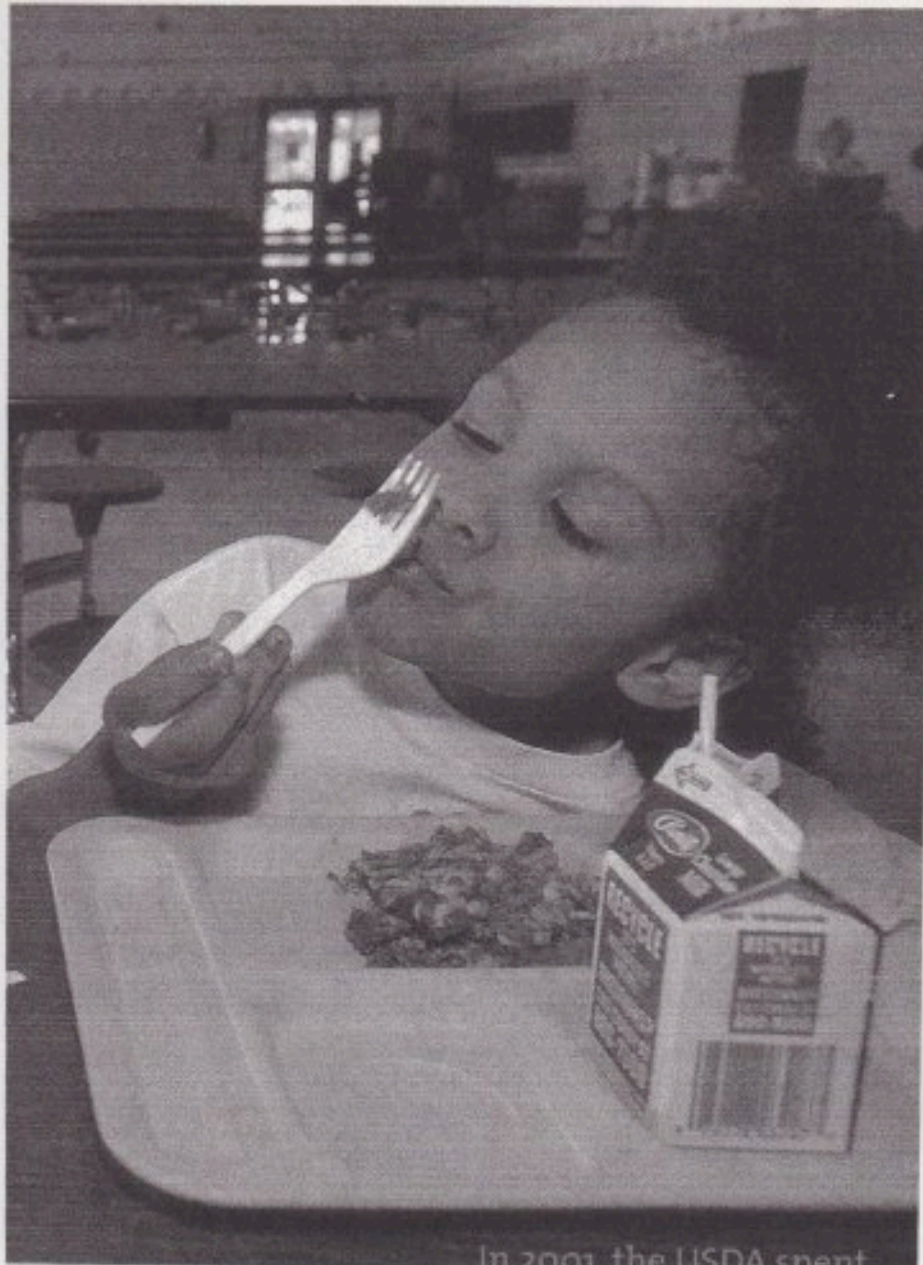
THE KINDERGARTNERS arrive first at the Chapman Elementary School cafeteria in Huntsville, Alabama, holding Popsicle sticks painted with their names and payment codes. They grab green plastic trays and pick out half-pint cartons of chocolate and plain milk. Then cafeteria workers pile the lunch entrée directly onto the trays: tortilla chips heaped with ground beef and smothered with melted yellow cheese. The kids grab apple halves and cornbread, and a few take the side order of watery

chili beans. “I like the meat,” declares second-grader Matthew Miller. “I like the cheese and I like the apples,” adds classmate Tanner Teets. Another boy tears open a packet of salty taco sauce and sucks it straight from the foil.

The lunches at Huntsville’s public schools tend to run heavy on beef and cheese—items the federal government regularly delivers to their doorstep. Like all 99,000 schools and childcare centers that participate in the National School Lunch Program, Huntsville’s schools depend on the agricultural commodities they receive throughout the year. Today’s nachos are made from surplus ground beef. So were the spaghetti sauce and



Katlyn Woodley (left) and Salina Birolahe lunch on beef lasagna at Chapman Elementary School in Huntsville, Alabama.



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**\$350 million on surplus beef
 and cheese for schools—and
 officials say such high-fat meals are
 contributing to the growing health
 crisis among kids.**

the taco salad on this month's menu. Surplus ham contributed to a barbecue lunch, and surplus cheese was used on sandwiches. A roast-beef lunch was fashioned from surplus meat, even though child-nutrition director Carol Wheelock says the kids don't particularly like roast beef.

Wheelock knows that a beef-filled menu isn't the healthiest thing children can eat. If she could afford to refuse the commodities, she says, she would buy leaner meats like turkey and chicken. But like others who oversee school lunches, she tries not to complain about the commodities program. "I treat it as a challenge," she says. "We have to put our thinking cap on and come up with ways to use the commodities that we're given."

Wheelock's dilemma is repeated in dis-

tricts across the country. School boards, coping with tight budgets, aren't willing to spend more for better nutrition. Huntsville, for example, left 50 teaching slots empty this year to trim its \$187 million budget. "The school food service is held hostage, because they can't go into the open market and buy healthy foods and stay profitable," says Raymond, the retired nutritionist.

Schools rely on the commodities program for another reason: It fits neatly into the

decades-old method they have traditionally used to prepare school meals. Known as "food-based menu planning," the system mandates specific servings of meat, dairy, vegetable, and grain on each child's plate—without bothering to determine the meal's total nutritional value. "It's been done that way for so long," says Suzanne Havala Hobbs, a former spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association who teaches nutrition at the University of North Carolina. "There's just resistance to change."

The USDA insists that school lunches are getting healthier. "There have been tremendous moves to reduce the fat content in school meals," says department spokeswoman Jean Daniel. In recent years, the government has lowered the acceptable fat levels for ground beef and pork, introduced light cheeses and ground turkey, and eliminated tropical oils from its peanut butter.

For the most part, though, fat levels remain dangerously high. Based on USDA recommendations, an adolescent girl who eats a 730-calorie lunch should receive no more than 24 grams of fat, and no more than 8 grams of saturated fat. Yet one portion of USDA surplus chuck roast, plus a glass of whole milk, delivers 31 grams of fat, including 14 grams of saturated fat. Buttered rolls and a side dish of cheesy broccoli bump those figures even higher. And if a school wants to cut animal fat by eliminating whole milk, it can't: Federal law requires that schools continue offering it as long as 1 percent of the students purchase it.

As a result, school lunches routinely fail the government's own nutritional standards. By law, schools are supposed to restrict fat content in lunches to 30 percent of the calories served each week. But according to the USDA, 81 percent of schools exceed that limit. Worse, 85

percent fail the standard for saturated fat, a leading contributor to coronary disease. Half of all schools serve whole milk, which further drives up the saturated-fat content. On any given day, less than 45 percent of schools serve cooked vegetables other than potatoes—which are often prepared in the form of french fries—and less than 10 percent serve legumes, a healthy, low-fat form of protein.

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