

# The Living Section

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## School Lunches: When They Love Even the Greens

By KAREN BAAR

**M**ENTION school nutrition, and most people think of ladies in hairnets dishing out dry meatloaf and overcooked spinach or dull lessons on the four food groups.

But schools throughout the country are showing that by getting children involved and interested in food and cooking, they eat more, and more wisely, than their parents would think possible.

"If children have cooked it themselves, they'll eat food adults would never believe they'd touch," said Dr. Antonia Demas, the director of a consulting company, the Food Studies Institute, in Trumansburg, N.Y.

In the process, the students in programs that encourage them to cook and eat new foods are broadening their understanding of the world.

For example, a class in cooking soul food followed a lesson on civil rights at the all-white elementary school in Trumansburg, about 10 miles northwest of Ithaca. After the students sampled eight types of greens, local stores had to begin stocking a couple of them to keep up with the resulting demand. In a California school, students grow their own food, cook it with local chefs and

serve it in the cafeteria. When Oregon schoolchildren as young as 5 were allowed to decide what was for lunch, they ate a bigger variety of fruits and vegetables.

Many of the programs were inspired by a 1993 report from the United States Agriculture Department showing that while virtually all public school cafeterias received some Federal aid, along with surplus food, only half of the students ate the schools' lunches. (The other half brought their lunches from home or bought lunch off-campus.)

The study also found that those students who ate the schools' lunches were getting too much fat, too much salt and too little appeal.

One result of the study was that the Agriculture Department created Team Nutrition to improve eating habits. Team

Nutrition now provides curriculum guides and classroom kits to 20,000 public and private schools, about a fifth of those in the Federal lunch program. Participation in Team Nutrition is voluntary.

Not every well-meaning school lunch program is a success story. In too many districts lunch is a hurried, crowded affair, accompanied by ear-splitting noise. In some Oregon high schools students have to stand to eat. Under pressure from stu-



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dents and faced with financial cutbacks, some cafeteria directors are contracting with fast-food restaurants.

"Every one likes to beat up on the school lunch program, but we need to view it as the resource that it is," said Michele Tingling-Clemmons, the senior field organizer for the Food Research and Action Center, a national advocacy group.

Given the often-voiced concerns about changing Americans' eating habits, the Federal school lunch program, which feeds 25 million children a day, is an obvious place to start.

Some improvements are just a matter of adding choices to the foods served by school cafeterias. Under the Food Pyramid Choice Menus program in more than 100 elementary schools in Oregon, all students, including the youngest, can choose among three to five entrees and select from an all-you-can-eat "variety bar" with 8 to 10 items, including bread, crackers, rolls, fruits and vegetables.

"Many people said, 'You can't do this with young children because they'll be overwhelmed,'" said Connie Evers, a consultant to the Oregon Education Department. But a study by the Oregon State University found that the children are choosing lunches that meet or exceed the Agriculture Department's dietary guidelines.

And an added benefit is that now more children are eating the schools' lunches and are happier with their choices. "My 7-year-old son is happy that he finally gets enough to eat," Ms. Evers said.

Sometimes, more imagination is involved. In 1994, Dr. Demas, the consultant in Trumansburg, N.Y., gave lessons at the local elementary school on the foods eaten in other parts of the world. With a \$400 budget and surplus foods from the Agriculture Department that are rarely used in school lunches — lentils, bulgur, brown rice and beans — she created recipes and lessons that focused on healthy foods from other cultures. She had children listening to Indian music and making vegetable curry with a spice mixture they ground themselves. The children did all of the cooking.

For Martin Luther King Day, the children made a "soul stew" with black-eyed peas, corn and kale, first sampling eight different greens to determine which they liked best.

"The rest of the year, I kept hearing from parents that their kids were begging them to buy dandelion greens," Dr. Demas said. "And although I had to special-order the greens at first — they were fairly exotic for upstate New York — rape and escarole are now in stock at our local store because the demand has



Suzette van Bylesov for The New York Times

## By getting involved in food and cooking, some students are learning to eat more wisely.

been so steady."

The week after each lesson, the dishes were served in the school's cafeteria. At first, the students from classes where the lessons had been given ate about three times as much of the new foods as other students. But by the end of the yearlong project they were eating 20 times as much, while students in other classes wouldn't touch the new dishes.

The West Virginia Education Department published a handbook last year showing teachers how to expose students to foods from around the world in social-studies classes. The handbook also provides recipes that can be used in the classroom and adapted for the school cafeteria.

Dr. Sharon Hibbs, who helped develop the handbook, made African baked bananas, Siberian meat pies and Mexican hot chocolate with her sixth-grade students in Barrackville.

"One father had warned me that his son was a picky eater," Dr. Hibbs said, "and the child had asked me, 'You expect us to eat these things?'" But after a tasting, the student came back and told her: "I tried nine different foods, and I loved them. I just couldn't eat that black-bean dip."

In other projects children are learning not just how food is cooked, but also how it is grown. For the past three years at the St. Helena, Calif., elementary school, students have been growing a range of produce in 29 raised beds. In class, they cook and eat the fruits and vegetables they have grown, and if there are any leftovers, they serve them in the cafeteria.

Teachers use the garden to teach social science, math and history. "In the third grade, we study our local region," said Linda Maloney, a teacher who coordinates the school's curriculum. "We grow grapes here in the Napa Valley, so the children

grow grapes in the garden and learn to make grape juice, grape jelly and raisins. They take field trips to learn about pruning and harvesting. And at the same time, they learn the history of the valley, since grapes didn't come until relatively recently."

A highlight for the children is cooking with chefs — and wearing toques — at the nearby Greystone branch of the Culinary Institute of America. "This year, we'll have 400 or 500 kids," said Greg Drescher, the institute's director of education. When they learn about Mexico — about 40 percent of the children in the school are Hispanic — the children make tortillas, beans, salsa and rice. "When I was growing up, we wanted the fireman to come in to school," Mr. Drescher said. "These kids want chefs."

This approach isn't limited to small schools in rural areas. In six New York City schools, in a joint program last year with Cornell Cooperative Extension, cafeteria employees cooked recipes provided by the Agriculture Department for tastings by parents and third, fourth and fifth graders. "The idea is to put the ones they like on the menu," said Denise Toulon, an administrative manager in the Office of School Food and Nutrition Services.

The children also see what goes on behind the scenes in the cafeteria, and food becomes part of their lessons.

"When we teach the geography of New York State, we don't just talk about landmarks," said Nilda Tirado, the nutrition and health leader at the cooperative extension. "We talk about agricultural production."

As part of the second New York Harvest for New York Kids Week, scheduled for Sept. 20 to 28 this year, the children will learn more about fruits and vegetables grown in New York State by visiting local farmers'

markets and having farmers visit their classrooms. And whenever possible, school lunch menus will feature New York-grown foods.

Besides these changes in menus and curriculums, food service directors are enticing students with artfully decorated cafeterias or dining areas meant to resemble the food courts at local shopping malls.

"Our cafeterias are the nicest restaurants in town," said Melinda Turner, the director of food service in the Booneville, Ky., schools. "The kids want to come because the atmosphere is like a theme restaurant."

The high school cafeteria, called the Cafe on the Hill, has been made to look like a Hard Rock Cafe. And at the elementary school's Jungle Cafe, Ms. Turner used masking tape and green foliage to transform pipes hanging overhead into palm trees. Murals of jungle animals decorate the walls, and rattan awnings and bamboo shades cover the windows.

Paulie Homer, the food service director at a school in Lolo, Mont., said: "Lunch should be fun. Here, when the kids come in, they never know what we'll be doing."

Her cafeteria has a theme that changes every year. "One year, we did a world cruise," she said. "We put up a map of the world and featured foods from each country as we reached it. We had foods from Africa, Scandinavia and China."

This year's theme will be channel surfing, and menus will be connected to television shows, past and present.

"We're doing 'Happy Days' first," Ms. Homer said. "We'll offer a 'Fonzieburger,' play 1950's music and dress in poodle skirts."

She must be doing something right: at her school, with kindergarten through the eighth grade, 85 percent of the students eat the cafeteria's lunch.