

**K**ids today have the benefits of computers, multicultural curriculum, and a reduced risk of meeting a paddle in the principal's office, but they face the same culinary terrors you stomached as a kid: mystery meat, gray vegetables, and blocks of beige spice cake. Despite awareness of the dangers of a high-fat diet and a growing understanding of nutrition and its relation to health and well-being, the average school lunch traditionally has had a whopping 40% fat content.

Antonia Demas is out to put the balance back in these "balanced" meals and bring school lunches into the nineties. From her home in Trumansburg, New York, she runs the nonprofit Food Studies Institute, designed to help school systems around the nation adopt a program she developed at Cornell University—a classroom-to-cafeteria curriculum that provides healthy meals for schoolchildren and teaches them about food, cooking, nutrition, and the world around them.

The 46-year-old Demas has been interested in school lunches for more than 20 years, and with good reason: She is the mother of two children. Throughout her son and daughter's schooling, Demas (who has an undergraduate degree in nutritional education) volunteered to do cooking units in their classes. Her success in cooking up fresh veggies for burger-and-fries kids lead to a second career after her children graduated high school.

"I noticed over the years that when kids have positive hands-on experience with diverse foods, they will consume foods their parents would swear they would never touch," Demas says. But there was a catch: "I knew that, as a woman who cooked with kids, if I said that, most educators would not take me seriously."

Demas went back to school at nearby Cornell, earning multidisciplinary master's and doctoral degrees. Along the way, she set about cooking up an effective way to

get children to eat better, then making sure that they have better food in the cafeteria.

She bit off a healthy mouthful. Some 50 million schoolchildren eat a meal in school every day, and about half

of those eat the traditional school lunch, which Demas says is as bad or worse than any food-court snack: "It's excessive in fat and sodium and limited in certain vitamins and minerals. Basically, it's fast food." The main problem, according to Demas, is the main course. "Sloppy joes, hamburgers, and hot dogs," she sighs. "It's meat, and it's high-fat meat, often with processed cheese on it."

Demas knew that kids tend to make gag faces at healthier, lower-fat versions of dishes they're familiar with. Her solution was to "look at the cultures of the world that haven't had the resources to have huge pieces of meat at every meal."

The longtime vegetarian

turned to cuisines from Asia, Africa, and the Americas for recipe ideas that relied more on fresh vegetables, whole grains, and tangy spices than beef, butter, and oil.

Before long certain classrooms at Trumansburg Elementary were filled with the smell of curry instead of chalk dust. Under adult supervision, the students ground their own spices and chopped and cooked the ingredients. Demas's program exposed students to roots as well as root vegetables. "My theory was to learn to accept a healthier diet and other people at the same time," she says.

"To celebrate black history and the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., the kids made a stew—we called it a soul stew," she recounts, describing a mix of black-eyed peas, corn, and chopped greens, cooked with a touch of molasses. "They heard soul music, and we talked about foods of the South and how the slaves invented a cuisine that was very creative."

Once the children in the experimental classes

## THE LUNCH LADY



Antonia Demas has found a way to make your kids eat their vegetables—and to save them from unhealthy school lunches in the bargain.

## CRUSADERS

whipped up their versions of the low-fat, nutritious, and cost-effective dishes with their own hands, the school cafeteria then served their versions to the whole school. Demas painstakingly measured what was served and what wasn't eaten. She found that the kids who learned about the ingredients and the culture of origin and who cooked the food themselves ate more than the kids who didn't—up to 20 times more. Demas attributes the program's success in getting students to eat their vegetables to having them chop them in the first place.

"If I stood in front of the class and cooked, probably just a few kids would eat it," she says. "But the fact that they cooked and had a good time doing it is the key element."



Demas's program is now in place in schools in New York City; Rochester, New York; Santa Fe, New Mexico; and eastern Massachusetts.

"So many kids today don't know where food comes from," she marvels. "Their families aren't cooking. We're turning into a fast-food culture, microwaving things and ordering out. I really think this is a critical

time to teach children about food."

Turns out that convincing the kids to eat unusual foods is the easy part. Demas and the schools trying to implement her program face a number of tough obstacles, including resistance from personnel. The Food Studies Institute's major difficulty is finding groups and individuals to help the schools fund the program.

Still, Demas doesn't expect lentils to replace mystery meat overnight. "You're talking about major, major change, and there are going to be some problems in getting started," she notes. But she's hopeful she can help affect not just the youngest Americans, but maybe a few overcooked-veggie veterans as well. "I keep hearing from teachers and parents that the kids were dragging

their parents through the grocery store looking for whole-wheat couscous and that kind of thing."

For more information, please write Antonia Demas, Food Studies Institute, 60 Cayuga Street, Trumansburg, NY 14886; or E-mail [ad14@cornell.edu](mailto:ad14@cornell.edu).

Lee Gardner is the music editor for *The City Paper*, Washington, DC's alternative weekly.

### East Meets Southwest

Chef and mother Lynn Walters sold her own restaurant, Natural Cafe, in Santa Fe, New Mexico, to devote herself full-time to the Cooking With Kids program. She has spent the last two years working with Antonia Demas's food-based curriculum in the classrooms and lunchrooms at two local schools. The following recipes may seem like something you'd come

across at an exotic food fair, but they are affordable, nutritious, and low-fat. And once they have hands-on experiences, the kids at E.J. Martinez and Salazar Elementary eat them up.

#### CARROT RICE PILAF WITH BLACK BEANS AND MINT RAITA

1 tablespoon stick margarine  
¾ cup uncooked basmati rice  
½ cup shredded carrot  
1¾ cups water  
¼ teaspoon salt  
1 (2-inch) cinnamon stick  
East Indian Black Beans  
¼ cup shredded sweetened coconut  
Mint Raita

**1.** Melt margarine in a saucepan over medium-high heat. Add rice and carrot; sauté 2 minutes. Add next 3 ingre-

dients; bring to a boil. Cook, uncovered, 2 minutes. Cover, reduce heat, and simmer 20 minutes or until rice is tender. Remove from heat; let stand, covered, 10 minutes. Discard cinnamon stick. Fluff rice with a fork. Spoon rice mixture onto individual plates; top with East Indian Black Beans. Sprinkle with coconut. Serve with Mint Raita. Yield: 4 servings (serving size: ¾ cup rice, ¾ cup beans, 1 tablespoon coconut, and 2 tablespoons Mint Raita).

#### East Indian Black Beans:

1 tablespoon stick margarine  
½ teaspoon cumin seeds  
2 garlic cloves, minced  
¼ teaspoon ground cardamom  
¼ teaspoon ground coriander  
½ teaspoon ground red pepper  
2 (15-ounce) cans no-salt-added black beans, drained