

RETHINKING LUNCH

Eugene lags behind in the movement to provide healthier school lunches.

BY KERA ABRAHAM

On the first day of school, Eugene's elementary school students will stand in the cafeteria's hot lunch line, peer through the sneeze guards at bins of reheated food and decide what to eat for lunch: a corn dog, cheese pizza or cheesy macaroni. The next day, they'll have new choices: chicken nuggets, spaghetti or a hamburger. The next week: beef dunkers, grilled cheese or a soft bagel.

In fact, if you look over the school lunch menus for the entire month — not just for the elementary schools, but for the middle and high schools too — you'll see a lot of orange, beige and brown foods, but not a lot of green.

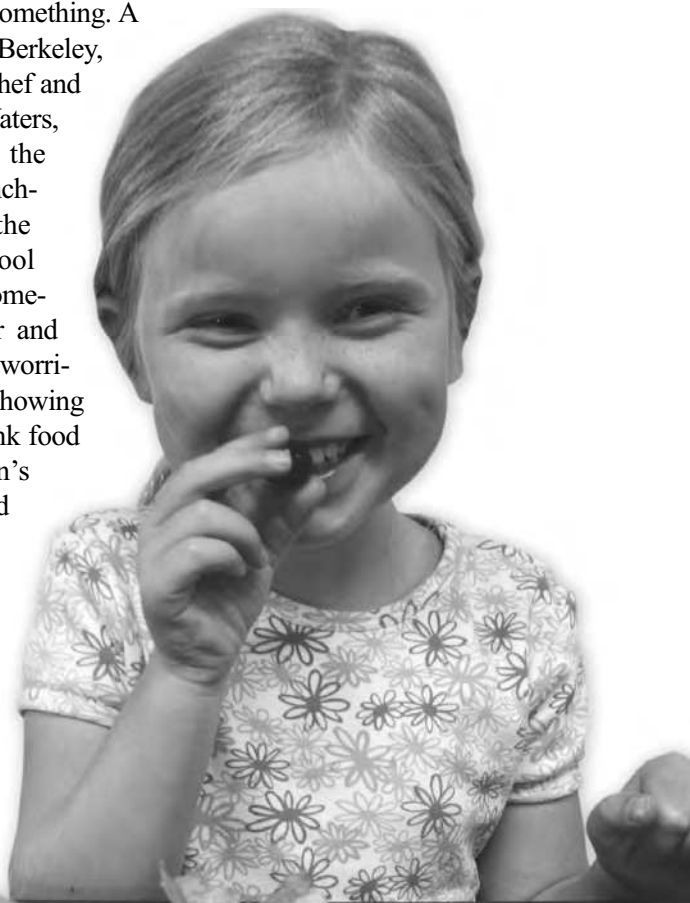
There are economic, social and political reasons for that, but 13-year-old Celene Hoemann isn't concerned with America's educational-industrial-agricultural complex. She just thinks the lunch food looks gross.

"If I ate anything I would probably eat the pizza, but I would stay away from burgers and stuff," says Hoemann, who is starting seventh grade at Spencer Butte Middle School. "They don't taste normal."

So Celene doesn't eat the school lunches anymore. Instead, she brings a bagged lunch — usually a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, a small bag of chips, a piece of fruit and juice. And she's actually noticed a change in how she feels.

"When I ate the school lunches, I noticed that I was more mean toward other people, aggravated and stressed out," she says, "When I started eating regular, healthy foods, I felt better. I wasn't so high strung, and I could pay attention to homework."

She might be onto something. A group of nonprofits in Berkeley, Calif., led by famous chef and food activist Alice Waters, are also rejecting the processed, high-fat lunches served up to the nation's public school children in favor of something fresher, healthier and tastier. They point to worrisome health statistics showing that a steady diet of junk food is making the nation's kids fatter, sicker and dumber. They envision a school lunch revolution that will change the way students eat, and it starts in the soil by a school near you.



THE INITIATIVE

Alice Waters has a theory about kids and food: If they grow it, they'll probably eat it. And if they really understand where food comes from because they visit local farms, study food politics and help prepare fresh, nutritious meals in school, they're more likely to develop healthy eating habits for life.

Waters, a founder of the celebrated Chez Panisse restaurant, helped to sprout the rise of farmers' markets across the nation through her tireless advocacy of locally grown, organic food. Now, with the help of several Bay Area nonprofits, she's pioneering a movement to bring healthier foods into school cafeterias and more hands-on food education into classes.

That effort is well under way at Martin Luther King, Jr., Middle School in Berkeley. Approach the school from the south and you'll see a shabby exterior typical of California's under-funded public schools. Turn a corner and you'll come upon a little slice of Eden: a one-acre garden with neat plots of vegetables, fruit trees and compost bins. There's a wood-fired pizza oven, a chicken coop, a circle of straw-bale benches and a kitchen where the kids prepare the foods they've grown.

This is the Edible Schoolyard, the Chez Panisse Foundation's 10-year-old signature project with Berkeley Unified. Every King student spends nine weeks in the garden and nine weeks in the kitchen, learning how to grow, cook and eat food together.

"What we're trying to do with the garden and kitchen is have a hands-on learning experience," says Edible Schoolyard Administrative Coordinator Jessie Benthien, picking bites of ripe fruit as she walks through the garden. "The kids aren't writing. They're turning the compost pile, picking

and eating and throwing feed to the chickens."

Some of the fruits in the garden are surprisingly exotic, reflecting the cultural diversity of Berkeley's students. The Persian mulberry, straight off a slender tree, looks like an oversized raspberry and tastes tart and full-bodied. The cape gooseberry, which ripens inside a straw-colored husk on a knee-high vine, is round and orange and pops in the mouth like a cherry tomato.

The Edible Schoolyard is just one part of a larger effort to change Berkeley's — and ultimately, America's — school lunches. The Chez Panisse Foundation has teamed up with the Center for Ecoliteracy, the Children's Hospital of Oakland and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to launch an initiative called Rethinking School Lunch, which focuses on getting kids engaged in the food cycle from seed to mouth. The online Rethinking School Lunch guide helps school districts work out the details of a farm-to-school program — finances, food procurement, curricula and sample menus — emphasizing a sense of experimentation and a dedication to slow, steady change.

Berkeley Unified was one of the first school districts on board. In 1999, it adopted a food policy that aims to improve on the USDA's dietary guidelines by providing kids with fresh, locally grown food, as much of it organic as the budget will allow. The district also plans to eliminate foods that have been treated with bovine growth hormone, irradiated or genetically modified. And students can say goodbye to vending machines selling junky snacks and soda.

Berkeley's shift is the most dazzling example of a sweeping national movement toward healthier school meals. Healdsburg

UNHEALTHY LUNCHES MAKE KIDS SICK.

The nation's kids are facing a health crisis. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), one in six kids ages 6-19 are overweight, a threefold increase since the 1970s. In Oregon, it's even worse. The CDC estimates that 31 percent of the state's low-income kids ages 2-5 are overweight or at risk of becoming overweight, increasing their likelihood of developing diabetes. The disease kills three times more Oregonians today than it did in 1990.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture reports that more than half of school-age kids eat less than one serving of fruit a day, and almost 30 percent eat less than one serving of a non-fried vegetable. A third eat fast food, and three-quarters drink soda, on a typical day. A 2004 federal study found that about 80 percent of schools participating in the National School Lunch Program serve lunches that are higher than 30 percent fat.

The CDC reports that kids with unhealthy eating habits "tend to maintain these as they age," yet fewer than a third of the nation's public schools offer nutrition education geared toward changing kids' eating habits. Numerous studies link unhealthy eating with poor academic performance and bad behavior.

Oregon is the second-hungriest state in the nation. But paradoxically, the state's high hunger rate may be linked to its rising childhood obesity rate. The cheap foods that low-income families often buy tend to be high in fat and sugar and low in nutrition.

Unfortunately, Oregon's adults don't make good models for healthy eating. According to the state Department of Human Services, 60 percent of Oregon's adults are overweight, an 86 percent increase from 1990-2002. Nationwide, obesity is the biggest killer after tobacco, contributing to the deaths of 300,000 Americans every year.

— Kera Abraham