It’s lunch hour on a luminous spring day at Berkeley High School’s open campus—the perfect time to stroll to Extreme Pizza on nearby Shattuck Avenue, grab a Coke, order some pizza heaped with sausage and sit in the California sun. But in Berkeley High’s lunchroom, lines of students are waiting patiently for—get this—cafeteria food. The longest line—now get this—is for salad. “This is only my second time eating school lunch,” says junior Fennis Brown, 17. “I’ve always been put off by cafeteria food. But when I saw a friend eating it, I thought, That looks like it could come from any good restaurant. And it’s cheaper and easier than eating off campus.” Such words herald a small battle won in the big food fight erupting over U.S. lunchrooms. With childhood-obesity rates zooming—more than a three-fold increase in 30 years—schools are under pressure from parents, health officials and legislators to serve something more wholesome than greasy burgers and Tater Tots. Across the U.S., administrators are banning deep-fat fryers from cafeteria kitchens. Sodamakers agreed last month to stop selling their sugary, fizzy products in schools.

But bans are easy compared with changing how kids eat. How do you eliminate junk yet create meals that stay within tight budgets and satisfy fickle tastes? To find out, TIME went behind the lunchroom counter in two communities: Berkeley, Calif., where a well-funded program is converting students like Brown; and Shawnee, Okla., where financial and cultural pressures mean that change will come more slowly.

The Cafeteria Crusader When Ann Cooper, Berkeley schools’ director of nutrition services, sees the long lines in Berkeley High’s cafeteria, she races behind a counter, grabs a pair of tongs and starts mixing made-to-order, all-organic salads. Only after the rush does she let herself gloat. “Yes!” she shouts, pounding
Cooper has inked deals with local suppliers for whole-wheat rolls, fresh produce, even grass-fed beef. Her staff of 83, accustomed to reheating food from outside vendors for the 4,000 lunches, 1,500 breakfasts and 1,500 snacks served each day, is learning to make meals from scratch.

Cooper concedes that the support she has is extraordinary. She is probably the best-paid food-services director in the country: her $95,000 salary plus generous benefits is covered by Waters’ Chez Panisse Foundation, which sees Berkeley as the launchpad for a nationwide revolution. Cooper’s district is also unusual in allowing her to rack up a $250,000-a-year loss. Still, she believes Berkeley’s model is exportable, primarily because raw ingredients can be cheaper than processed food; the trick is to teach cafeteria cooks around the nation how to buy, store and prepare them. Meanwhile, she says, she’s got more local problems to solve—like what to do with all meals often backfires,” she says. “Fewer children choose to eat with us.”

Her challenge isn’t just to get the kids to eat healthy, but also to make money. When Taylor took the job 14 years ago, she was told she had to turn a profit in her first year or find a new employer. The dietitian turned marketer has stayed in the black ever since. But balancing her budget while trying to boost nutrition in the 2,600 lunches served daily is tough. Mixed salad greens cost 13¢ more per serving than iceberg lettuce; a whole-wheat bun costs 5¢ more than a white one. Like every other U.S. school district, Shawnee gets no more than $2.34 per day per child from the Federal Government to provide lunch to the poorest kids. The state of Oklahoma kicks in an additional half a cent per head. The rest of the budget must come from wealthier kids who choose to buy school lunch and snacks.

Ironically, Taylor relies on junk-food sales to make her menu healthier. “This is where I make money,” she says, her hand on a packet of Cool Ranch Doritos. “That money allows me to buy more fresh fruit and vegetables.” Taylor makes other food healthier by stealth. Chicken nuggets are baked, not fried—a switch she made on spring break so kids would be less likely to notice. Pizza is topped with low-fat cheese, and the crust is whole wheat. She calls vegetarian beans “pork and beans” since, she says, “in Oklahoma no one knows what ‘vegetarian beans’ means.”

Fast-food-style marketing tricks, such as silver burger wrappers and plastic salad shakers, cost a little extra, but they boost sales. (When the shakers ran out at the middle school, salad sales dropped from 30 a day to 0.) The cafeterias resemble local eateries too. The Cub’s Den at Shawnee Middle School looks just like a food court at a mall. Taylor has similarly revamped the serving areas at the high school—South of the Border serves Tex-Mex; Grandma’s Corner has home-style cooking. Marketing is a necessity. “We’re a business,” Taylor says. “If your customers don’t eat with you, you don’t stay in business.”

—With reporting by Jeff Chu/New York