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**[School lunch lightens up
Chef is changing the way
Berkeley students eat, one
salad bar at a time](#)**

- [Carol Ness, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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It's 7:30 a.m. in the Berkeley High School kitchen, and Ann Cooper is jumping up and down, shrieking like a kid on a sugar high -- all because of four day-old pizzas.

"When I came seven months ago, we were making 40 pizzas a day. Yesterday, we made 28 -- and four are left over!" Cooper just about yells, happy that kids are steering themselves away from the refined-flour-and-fat slices. "And there's a line at the salad bar!"

Cooper, all 5-foot-1 of her, is the Iron Chef of Berkeley's school lunch program, and the pizzas are a sign of serious progress in her mission: to wean the Berkeley public schools off their diet of frozen, processed, trans fat- and sugar-filled foods, and onto fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains and other nourishing foods.

Other schools in California are making similar changes, hoping to turn back the tide of childhood obesity and diabetes. But none has an Ann Cooper, a professional chef hired by the Chez Panisse Foundation to transform years of talk about healthy food into actual dishes like chicken cacciatore and organic sushi.

Before landing in Berkeley in October, Cooper spent five years running the food program

at the exclusive Ross School in East Hampton, N.Y. She's cheffed in hotels and on cruise ships, catered for 20,000 people at the Telluride Film Festival, cooked backstage for the Grateful Dead and helped kids at Harlem's Promise Academy get off what they call "snack crack" -- junk food -- in favor of healthier choices.

Nothing's proven quite as challenging as lunch in Berkeley.

Many people think Berkeley schoolkids already eat as though they're at Chez Panisse, because of highly publicized programs like the Edible Schoolyard kitchen-garden at Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School, a pet project of organic- and sustainable food guru Alice Waters, as well as Berkeley High's brief experiment with organic lunches a few years ago.

But in reality, when Cooper arrived school lunch on Berkeley's 16 campuses looked a lot like school lunch everywhere. It was chicken nuggets, corn dogs, burgers and Tater Tots, all processed, frozen and packaged in heat-and-serve plastic.

"Cooking" meant counting and defrosting. The central kitchen, which prepares food for 11 elementary schools, had no stove (and still doesn't).

"When I came, they were using Wonder Bread. For real," she says. "I had 50 employees and none of them cooked."

She's still working through the cases of U.S. government commodity food stacked in the school district's storeroom and walk-in freezer in a seismic red-tagged building on Oregon Street in southwest Berkeley.

By law, the commodity food can't be sent back, sold or even given away. The boxes include frozen burritos loaded with salt and saturated fat, and cans of California peaches packed in sugary syrup.

Cooper flips open one box and shows what passed for lunch until recently: a frozen, crustless, white-bread pocket stuffed with peanut butter and jelly -- an "Uncrustables," made by Smucker's from U.S. school lunch commodity ingredients.

Its label lists at least 25 ingredients, including high-fructose corn syrup and three other sugars, trans fats and enough additives and preservatives that, when thawed and perched on a desk, it survived a week with no visible changes except a little jelly seepage, like any PB&J. A similar processed grilled cheese sandwich has been sitting on the desk of one of Cooper's employees since November; it still looks as if it just rolled off the assembly line.

"This is over, in my world," Cooper says.

The Berkeley Unified School District adopted a healthful food policy seven years ago. In collaboration with the Chez Panisse Foundation, the Center for Ecoliteracy and Children's Hospital of Oakland, the district has forged a food-based curriculum now in its pilot stages in classrooms. Kitchen gardens have also been planted at 10 schools. The idea is to inculcate nourishing food at every opportunity.

Lunch itself lagged behind -- until the Chez Panisse Foundation came forward with a three-year grant to hire Cooper and pay her salary.

Big steps

Where her predecessors took baby steps toward change, Cooper is moving like a Hummer in high gear. And she's running into a mix of enthusiasm and resistance up and down the line, from government regulators, parents, teachers, kids and some of her employees.

Under Cooper's watch, 15 of Berkeley's 16 schools now have fresh salad bars where kids line up daily to pile cucumbers, tomatoes or a dozen other fresh ingredients on their lettuce. The 16th salad bar is in the works.

"More kids are eating it," she says. "The more food I sell, the better quality I can have."

Anywhere from 10 to 15 percent of the district's 3,500 high school students participate in the lunch program on any given day -- which means that the district serves approximately 350 to 400 high school lunches daily. Lunches cost \$3.50 at high schools, \$3 for middle schoolers and \$2.80 for elementary school students, and 40 cents through the Free & Reduced lunch program.

Overall, 40 to 50 percent of Berkeley students district-wide qualify for free or reduced lunches.

Marinara sauce for pastas and pizzas is now made from scratch, with good-quality canned tomatoes and sauteed fresh vegetables.

Frozen and other canned vegetables are out. Boxes of fresh produce are delivered daily by GreenLeaf, the San Francisco specialty produce company that also supplies some of the Bay Area's best restaurants. Fresh fruit and vegetables are served every day.

Fresh breads, rolls and vegetable-stuffed calzones, along with muffins for the breakfast program, roll up in a truck from FullBloom Baking Co. of San Mateo. Tamales come fresh from All Star Tamales, which sells at San Francisco's Alemany and Civic Center farmers' markets; egg rolls bounce in from La Cocina, the incubator kitchen in San

Francisco's Mission District.

Commodity products

For budgetary reasons, Cooper still has to order most of her food through the heavily subsidized U.S. commodity program, as do most school districts. But she chooses plain frozen chicken parts instead of breaded breasts and processed nuggets, real cheddar cheese instead of processed "cheese food" or packaged sandwiches, and other foods such as hot dogs made from grass-fed beef.

"It's not that the menus look so different," she says. "It's that the food is really different."

Cost is always an issue. The salad bars aren't raising costs, Cooper says, but fresh fruits and vegetables are more expensive than canned or commodity produce. And she wants to buy organic and local foods, which will require more money.

Employees have to work harder -- washing and cutting lettuce, slicing and bagging apples and oranges, cooking ginger beef or baking egg rolls and stir-frying vegetables. And that transition hasn't always been easy.

At the central kitchen, located at Jefferson Elementary School near the North Berkeley BART station, longtime manager Cecilia Adams says, "It's challenging, but it's my job."

Adams, who does most of the ordering, says she has the same amount of work but more places to order from, so "it takes a little longer."

But her staff of six, who used to just count and send, now is cooking away as the sun rises, with "extra help when needed."

At 6 a.m. on a recent Wednesday, cook Alan Lyman was already sauteing big batches of broccoli, cabbage and carrots to go alongside breaded commodity chicken breasts in foil pans that are then sealed with plastic.

"Yes, we do more work, but it's more fun," says Lyman, stirring the vegetables in the large, rectangular "tilt skillet" that serves in the place of a stove. The skillet, a large rectangular metal box with a heat element underneath, can be slanted in various directions, like a gigantic electric frying pan.

"There is not much fun in just opening a box or can and emptying it into a pan," Lyman says. "We've changed our system of cooking 100 percent."

Cooper says asking people to do more work is bound to stir up problems. She's had issues

with the unions, and says "there is a sense of disgruntlement" among some employees.

The morning of this reporter's visit, two workers in the same school kitchen called in sick, and Cooper says she believes it's because their boss is trying to make the changes she wants. She and her assistant discuss sending the employees to work at different schools next year.

"I'm asking them to change a food system that probably is much like the one they have at home," Cooper says. "That's huge. That's very challenging."

Sticking with it

The payoff is in the kids. Students -- and their parents -- had to get used to the changes, says Adams, who's worked in the central kitchen for 17 years and sees the kids coming through Jefferson Elementary's lunch line.

"At first, they were just, 'Ugh.' And we had to explain that it's more healthy," Adams says.

Now, they peer in eagerly and ask for fruit, or for their favorite dishes.

The hardest part, Lyman says, is getting kids to taste new foods. When the salad bar went in, Lyman says, one little boy didn't know what a cherry tomato was until they cut one open to show him. The lightbulb went on, and the boy said, "Oh, the thing that comes in burgers!" Turns out he liked them.

More kids are leaving their soda, chips and fatty, salty Lunchables at home and going for the cafeteria food, Lyman says.

"People don't mind working harder if they see the end result. And it's job security for us if kids are coming and buying it," he says.

At Thousand Oaks Elementary School, just off Solano Avenue in North Berkeley, the kid-size red plastic salad bar has been open for business for just a few weeks. Students line up to serve themselves from a dozen choices. One boy piles olives, cheese and carrots on his lettuce, then adds a flurry of strawberries.

"They're just hyped about the salad bar," says lunchroom monitor Cherry Van Meurs, who has a second-grader in the school and is PTA president. "They get to do their own thing."

The number of lunches served has gone from 142 a day to about 200 since the salad bar opened.

At middle school, the healthful food juggernaut has hit a few obstacles. Take nachos, for instance. Cooper learned the hard way about meddling with a beloved lunch staple, no matter how unhealthy.

The minute nachos disappeared from the menu, kids stopped eating school lunches and revenues dropped. So nachos made a quick comeback, but with trans-fat-free chips and quality cheddar cheese. And kids came back to lunch.

High school is where school lunch gets the most competition. Most kids can head off campus to downtown Berkeley for their favorite fast food. School lunch can carry a stigma -- one that Cooper hopes appealing, freshly prepared offerings will overcome.

The organic salad bar is drawing kids away from the pizza line. Asian, Italian, Mexican and American comfort foods rotate through a week, with pizza and salad every day. The menus are a work in progress, Cooper says, as she learns what teenagers like -- and what they don't.

Senior Frank Davis, who loaded olives, broccoli and kidney beans onto his salad, says he eats it every day "because it's healthy."

T'ara West, a junior, opts for salad, too, because "it's fresh." Still, she says, she goes outside "if I got money that day." One irony that's cropped up: The new, more healthful foods don't yet meet federal regulations because the recipes haven't been analyzed to be sure they have enough protein and vitamins, and not too much fat.

The "Uncrustables," though, were in compliance, Cooper says.

Meeting regulations

Nutrition services director Phyllis Bramson-Paul of the California Department of Education, which enforces federal school lunch standards, says inspectors found Berkeley's food to be "very delicious and appealing," but that its recipes have to be analyzed and meal production made uniform. Her office is working with Cooper to bring the program into compliance.

Is all this making Berkeley's kids healthier? UC Berkeley's Center for Weight and Health is designing a four-year study, paid for by the Chez Panisse Foundation, to figure that out. The U.S. Department of Agriculture, which oversees the federal school lunch program, is interested in taking part, to see what it would take to replicate Berkeley's program across the country.

Most schools don't have chefs and don't get the extra funding that Berkeley traditionally has pumped into the lunch program, Cooper says. So the district plans to create a bare-bones how-to manual, complete with menus and ordering guides to help other districts.

"You see how hard change is here. Imagine how hard it would be in Oklahoma," Cooper says.

"It's really hard, but it's really important. I think we're at a moment in time when we can make a difference, where people will listen. And I really do think if we can't do it in Berkeley, we can't do it anywhere."

Cutting the fat

Why are salad bars replacing soda machines in Berkeley, and around the Bay Area? It's part of an effort to comply with a state law regulating school lunches and snacks that goes into effect July 1, 2007.

As The Chronicle [reported a few weeks ago](#), under the upcoming law lunch entrees cannot exceed 400 calories, nor can they contain more than 4 grams of fat per 100 calories. Calorie counts and fat percentages found in vending machine snacks will also be subject to more stringent regulations.

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Ann Cooper looks over the vegetable selection as kids belly up to the salad bar at Thousand Oaks Elementary School. Chronicle photo by Craig Lee



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A salad composed of tuna, cheese and fresh produce. Chronicle photo by Craig Lee



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Ann Cooper (left) and Alan Lyman prepare pasta primavera at the central kitchen at Jefferson Elementary School. Chronicle photo by Craig Lee



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The pasta is packaged by Bridgette Wash (left) and Ansar Muhammad. Chronicle photo by Craig Lee



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Student Zoe Salnave holds a chicken at the Edible Schoolyard at Martin Luther King Junior Middle School in Berkeley. Chronicle photo by Craig Lee



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