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Doing Lunch

by ANNA LAPP&EACUTE;

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It has not been easy to find time to talk with chef Ann Cooper since she became director of nutrition services last October for the Berkeley, California, Unified School District, where she oversees gardening programs at eleven schools and food programs at sixteen, covering 10,000 children. It turns out 6 in the morning is the best time for an uninterrupted interview. "Because we're closed in the summer," she explained, "I can sleep until 5:30."

*How did this white-tablecloth-restaurant gourmet chef become one of the nation's leading advocates for healthy school food? Cooper, whose book *Lunch Lessons: Changing the Way We Feed Our Children* is out from HarperCollins this September, talked with me by phone from her home in Moss Beach, California. --Anna Lappé*

For years, you were head chef at Vermont's tony Putney Inn. How did you go from that line of work to being, as you like to call yourself, a lunch lady?

I had just finished my first book, *Bitter Harvest*, and had begun to get interested in sustainable agriculture and angry about how we're feeding our kids. Around that time, I got a call asking me to apply for the position at the Ross School in East Hampton [New York] to transform their school food

program and make it truly sustainable, including buying as much local food as possible. Lunch lady? I thought: Not interested! But I went to look at the school anyway. As soon as I got there, I fell in love with it. My time cooking lobster sushi Napoleons for rich people was over; it was time to try to make the world a better place. I took the job.

It's been less than a year since you came on board as head of nutrition services for the City of Berkeley's public schools. How much have you been able to change so far?

We've been able to change everything: We've gone from 95 percent processed foods to 95 percent made from scratch. When we reopen, every school will have a salad bar. We have only hormone- and antibiotic-free dairy and offer fresh fruit and vegetables at every meal.

We instituted a swipe-card system, so that instead of reduced-meal kids being conspicuously checked off a list, every child swipes a card to pay. We've eliminated the stigma about who is free and who is not.

We canceled all of our food contracts and are now buying much of our food from locally owned businesses. All of our Mexican food is made by a locally owned Hispanic company; all of our baked products come from a local, women-owned company.

These meals sound like they cost much more than the standard school meals.

It costs about 18 percent more per kid per lunch--which is about 50 cents a day--more than what we get in reimbursements from the Feds and the state. (That's not just for food; it includes labor--but not overhead, which adds another 50 cents.)

But there's cost and then there's price: Yes, you can buy things at a cheaper price, but what's the real cost? When you include fossil fuels used in food production, and the several-billion-a-month war in Iraq, what is the real price? When you think about the health of kids, and the \$117 billion a year we spend for diet-related illnesses every year, what is the real price?

The Centers for Disease Control estimates that of US children born in the year 2000--the 6-year-olds starting school this year--one out of three will develop diabetes in their lifetime. With those figures, how can we not think spending a little more on food is worthwhile?

You're in Berkeley, arguably the nation's foodie hotbed. Would these kinds of changes have legs anywhere else?

In part, we've been able to do what we've done so quickly because of the supportive community here and the groundwork laid by the Center for Ecoliteracy and the Chez Panisse Foundation, but there are pockets of change everywhere. New York City, the country's largest school district, has been making changes, bringing in local, fresh foods. Santa Monica has a great salad bar program. Marin County has a wonderful program connecting organic farmers with local schools.

The change you're promoting seems to be a no-brainer: Obviously we should feed our kids healthy food. So why aren't we seeing even more change than the "pockets" you describe?

Well, who benefits if we fix this? If diabetes goes away, who wins? If there is no high-fructose corn syrup, who wins? Agribusiness, the medical-industrial complex, the government, don't benefit. So who is going to push this? That's the real problem. The welfare and health of our children are being mortgaged by big business.

We need to see school lunch as part of a health initiative, not just as a dumping ground for agribusiness. School food service is now administered by the US Department of Agriculture, which is basically a marketing arm for agribusiness. Really, school food should be housed in Health and Human Services or the Centers for Disease Control.

For most of us, it's been many years since we had a school lunch. Jog our memory. What's different about an Ann Cooper lunch and a typical school lunch?

A typical lunch would be chicken fingers, tater tots, maybe a carrot stick and canned fruit cocktail made with high-fructose corn syrup and, of course, milk. [According to federal guidelines] you have to serve a grain, but a tater tot or a chicken finger is considered a grain because it is breaded.

Our lunch would be something like roast chicken, a baked potato wedge. We absolutely always include a fresh vegetable, like broccoli or squash, and a fresh fruit. And we now have a salad bar in every school.

The transformation you're talking about is huge. The school food program in the United States is a multibillion-dollar industry. What will it take to transform the whole system?

Look, this is not brain surgery. It's not that I'm so special that I've been able to figure this out; it's just because I care that we're able to do this. If I can do this, anybody can. I'm a high school dropout, for goodness' sake. We just have to care enough to make it a priority. We have to have the will to stand

up and say we're going to serve our kids healthy food and that we have to do it because we're killing our kids.