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The Lunchroom Rebellion

by Burkhard Bilger

The lunch ladies of my elementary-school memories in Oklahoma are a stout, sweet-tempered breed. They wear cat's-eye glasses and have beauty-shop perms, with hairnets drawn taut across their foreheads. They have gray uniforms and dishwater complexions, and stand in line dolloping out grayish food—boiled okra, spinach with vinegar, corn bread and black-eyed peas—smiling wearily, as if they knew that they were slowly killing us. I'm not sure what they would think of Ann Cooper, the new executive chef of the Berkeley public schools, in California. I suspect that she would make them nervous.

Cooper, who calls herself “the Renegade Lunch Lady,” was hired last fall to revamp the city's dismal school-lunch program. She is small and tightly wound, with shoulders bunched from lifting weights. She has bright, defiant eyes, unruly brown hair, and a raspy alto that tends to break when she gets excited. In the kitchen, she moves with quick, stiff-legged strides, nipping at heels, barking out instructions, and sending her large, slow-moving colleagues into bewildered stampedes. She is, in short, a typical chef, landed in a world where real cooking is almost unknown.

Cooper is quick to admit that she's making the worst food of her life. In her twenties, she attended the Culinary Institute of America and cooked on cruise ships. In her thirties, she owned her own restaurant, in Telluride, and was named an “up-and-coming chef” by *Gourmet*. In her forties, she transformed the Putney Inn, in Vermont, into a bastion of New American cuisine. Now, at fifty-two, Cooper has ended up where most chefs wouldn't deign to begin: in an under-staffed, under-equipped cafeteria, trying to wean four thousand children from deep-fried chicken nuggets. “I spent my whole career making fancy food for rich people,” she says. “I've cooked for Hillary Clinton and Emmylou Harris, Jimmy Buffet and the Grateful Dead. I don't want to do that anymore.”

Cooper's first experience with cafeteria cooking was of a more utopian sort. In 1999, her work at the Putney Inn caught the attention of Courtney Sale Ross, the wealthy widow of a former chairman of Time Warner. Ross had founded a school for fifth to twelfth graders in East Hampton, New York. It had a progressive, ecologically minded curriculum, and she wanted its food to be equally enlightened. “At first, I said, ‘No way! I'm a chef, not a lunch lady!’” Cooper recalls. But when Ross showed her the school's new, ten-million-dollar Wellness Center, where students could do yoga or dine overlooking a forest of silvery pines, Cooper agreed. Over the next few years, she hired a local poet-farmer to grow organic vegetables and sent students to help with the harvest. She lured sous-chefs

from French and Asian restaurants in New York and wrote recipes linked to the curriculum—a feast of fifteenth-century dishes, for instance, for a course on the Renaissance. She made celery-root soup and green gazpacho, Caprese salad and fennel stew, and the children cleaned their plates, after a little cajoling.

People used to joke that the Ross School had the best restaurant in the Hamptons. Martha Stewart filmed a segment of her television show there, and a magazine for Lexus owners ran a story on it entitled “Haute Cafeteria.” But although Cooper had hoped that other cafeterias would adopt some of her methods, few could afford to do so. Elsewhere in America, one in five schools was selling fast food and less than half had working kitchens. The country was in the midst of an epidemic of childhood obesity, the Surgeon General had declared, yet eighty per cent of school lunches contained more fat than federal guidelines allowed. “I got tired of everyone telling me that what I was doing could only be done at the Ross School,” Cooper says.

Berkeley is her first attempt at cooking for the masses—at making private-school lunches on a public-school budget—but she is hardly alone anymore. America is suddenly full of people who want to save school lunch: celebrity chefs like Jamie Oliver, who exposed the sorry state of British cafeterias two years ago and has threatened to do the same in New York; guerrilla documentarians like Morgan Spurlock, who championed healthful lunches in “Super Size Me”; and a swelling horde of angry parents, crusading cafeteria directors, and politicians with bitter lunchroom memories of their own. Last year, more than two hundred bills in forty states sought to ban sodas and junk food from schools, and in May the major beverage companies voluntarily agreed to remove non-diet drinks by the fall of 2009. Bill Clinton, whose foundation helped broker the deal, called it “courageous.”

Still, expelling junk food won’t do much to improve school cafeterias. In East Hampton, Cooper had twenty-seven employees for five hundred diners; in Berkeley, she has fifty-three for four thousand. In East Hampton, Cooper spent about twelve dollars per day, per child on breakfast and lunch. In Berkeley, she spends three and a half dollars for the same two meals. Can a decent lunch be made for so little? And, if so, will anyone eat it?

The Central Kitchen of the Berkeley Unified School District lies on a quiet side street in northwest Berkeley not far from the city’s foothills. It was built in the nineteen-fifties, as part of Jefferson Elementary School, and has survived periodic upheavals from desegregation, bilingual education, No Child Left Behind, and the Loma Prieta earthquake. The kitchen occupies a dingy, high-ceilinged room. It smells of stale bread and disinfectant, and is populated by hulking industrial machines: a steam kettle, a sautéing vat, a pair of convection ovens, and a Hobart mixer with a vaguely menacing air, like the hooded mother beast in “Aliens.” There is no blender, no food processor, no stovetop or grill, yet the kitchen produces food for thirteen of the city’s sixteen schools, including all eleven of its elementary schools. (The other schools have their own kitchens, which Cooper also oversees.)

On a Tuesday morning in May, the menu called for meat loaf—four thousand servings of it, with mashed potatoes and oven-roasted squash. In the kitchen’s walk-in refrigerator, thirty cylinders of government-supplied ground beef, each two feet long, five inches in diameter, and ten pounds in weight, awaited Cooper’s attention. She heaved two of them onto her shoulders and dropped them on a butcher-block counter. “Now you can see why I lift weights,” she said, then took a swig from a protein shake. She’d had braces put on her teeth in January to fend off gum disease, and this was the only breakfast that wouldn’t stick to them. “It’s a chef’s worst nightmare,” she said.

Cooper had been up since three-thirty, and cooking since five. She lives alone in a rented house in Moss Beach, an hour’s drive to the south, and commutes to Berkeley every day before dawn. Her crew is usually there when she arrives. The assistant chef, Alan Lyman, an amiable Englishman with the shape and blush of a Bartlett pear, was making a tub of coleslaw. He had spent ten years cooking in British hospitals and twelve in the Berkeley schools, but he was still getting used to Cooper’s pace. Across from him, a team of eight black and Hispanic workers was scooping chicken and noodles into take-out trays. The group was led by Cecelia Adams, the kitchen manager, a middle-aged black woman with a deep, easy voice and an unflappable manner. Because the other schools lacked proper kitchens, the food had to be prepared well in advance. The chicken had been made on Monday for Wednesday’s lunch; the meat loaf would be served on Thursday; and a truck outside was unloading Friday’s lunch—tamales and enchiladas made by a local company. Cooper had met the owners at a stand at a farmers’ market. “Do you think you could make four thousand of these a week?” she’d asked.

To make the meat loaf, Cooper dumped the tubes of beef into the Hobart’s bowl, then added ingredients one by one. The full recipe called for three hundred pounds of meat, seven and a half pounds of bread crumbs, three gallons of milk, ten pounds each of beaten eggs and Parmesan cheese, twenty pounds each of diced onions and shredded carrots, and nearly four pounds of garlic and spices. Cooper worked in batches, calculating the proportions as she went. She has always had a good head for numbers: growing up in Hingham, Massachusetts, she was kicked out of high school twice for smoking pot, but she passed her equivalency tests in a day when she needed them for culinary school. When she had finished adding ingredients, she set the dough hook spinning. “They never would have served meat loaf here before,” she said. Why not? I asked. “Because it’s food.”

She looked around for Adams, who was shuttling a row of take-out trays through a shrink-wrapping machine. “Cecelia! Get me one of those things you used to serve!” Adams gave her a long, heavy-lidded look. Like most of the staff, she had little formal training as a cook, but she’d worked in the schools for seventeen years and was getting tired of being reminded of her deadly, grease-dispensing history. She trudged off to the freezer and back, then thumped a rectangular object on the counter. Cooper pounced on it. “El Extremo Burrito!” she shouted. She flipped it over and pointed to the ingredients list, a block of small-faced type six inches wide and an inch deep. “They’d go into the oven just like that,” she said. “They didn’t even get opened until the kids ate them.”

When Cooper took charge of the Central Kitchen last fall, she began by banning heat-and-serve dishes. She then made a list of undesirable ingredients—transfats, preservatives, and foods with too much salt, refined flour, sugar, or high-fructose corn syrup—and began looking for substitutes. White bread gave way to whole wheat, canned fruits and vegetables to fresh, and generic hot dogs and hamburgers to ones made from grass-fed beef. “Those changes anyone can do,” she said. “I banned chocolate milk. Easy. I only accepted hormone-free milk. I banned vending machines. I banned fried foods. That is not brain surgery. The hard part is to get back to scratch cooking, and getting around the commodity program.”

Every year, the federal government buys nearly a billion dollars’ worth of raw and processed foods and sends them to schools for free. Many schools then have some of the food sent to plants to be turned into ready-made dishes. The commodity program provides about twenty per cent of the food in cafeterias. Last year, schools got about seven hundred million dollars’ worth of meat and dairy products, and less than two hundred and fifty million dollars’ worth of vegetables. Cooper blames this imbalance on the Department of Agriculture, which uses the program to buy up farm surpluses and stabilize prices. “The U.S.D.A. is the marketing arm for agribusiness,” she said. “It’s responsible for the national organic standards, and it’s responsible for school lunch. How many ways can you say conflict of interest?” Yet schools are free to choose their own commodities, and they can fill their quota with vegetables and other nutritious staples. The real problem for Cooper was that the items must be ordered months in advance, so she was still using food chosen by her predecessor, now the food-service director for a prison system.

“Look at this printout!” Cooper said, flourishing a long list of processed cheese, canned fruits, and condiments, laden with sugar and salt. Cooper couldn’t afford to throw out those items, so she tried to incorporate them into more nutritious dishes: “beef crumbles” went into spaghetti sauce, croutons into turkey stuffing, canned peas into split-pea soup, and canned apricots into a barbecue sauce. Just that week, she’d received twenty-six cases of cranberry sauce and eighteen cases of lo mein noodles. “Oh, what are we going to do with it?” she said. “I don’t want to use any more shitty food.”

The answer was coleslaw. When Lyman had filled a five-gallon tub with shredded cabbage and carrots, raisins, salt, and apple-cider vinegar, Cooper came over with a can of the cranberries. “It’ll be like a sweet vinaigrette,” she said, without much conviction. She measured out a pound of the sauce on a scale, dumped it into the tub, then slipped on a pair of rubber gloves and mixed it with her hands. When she was finished, the coleslaw looked as if someone had bled into it. “Ah, that’s lovely,” Lyman said after he’d tasted it. “But I do think it needs a little more salt.”

Feeding four thousand on a public-school budget is at best a loaves-and-fishes affair, and at worst the equivalent of a bad casserole—full of dubious proteins cleverly disguised. The federal government subsidizes meals according to a sliding scale: schools get two dollars and forty cents per lunch served to the poorest students, and as little as twenty-three cents for more affluent students. In Berkeley, the state contributes another fifty

cents or so, but it doesn't add up to much. "It's impossible," Cooper said. "It's egregious. It makes me want to cry." But she's lucky to get any subsidies at all.

In 1946, when the National School Lunch Program was first proposed to Congress, the country still had fresh memories of the Depression, when children sometimes fainted from hunger in class. Yet plenty of politicians were leery of paying for their food with federal dollars. "It was a highly improbable program," Janet Poppendieck, sociologist at Hunter College who is writing a book on school lunch, told me. "Congress was looking at one of the largest deficits in national history—two hundred and eighty billion, in yesterday's dollars—and it was full of articulate conservatives who wanted to shrink government." No one wanted to take lunches away from needy boys and girls, the Republican whip at the time, Leslie Arends, declared. But, he added, "the greatest thing that we can hand down to our children is a solvent government." The bill was finally signed by President Truman as "a measure of national security." The country didn't need healthier students, it seemed, so much as stronger soldiers: more than a third of the conscripts who failed the Army's physicals had been malnourished at one time.

During the next thirty years, the program went from subsidizing seven million meals a day to twenty-seven million, and its annual budget grew to more than three billion dollars. Then, in 1981, Ronald Reagan appointed David Stockman as his budget director. Stockman had a simple plan for cutting subsidies: he redefined "lunch." A nutritious meal would now have to provide only an ounce and a half of protein instead of two, six ounces of milk instead of eight, and half a cup of vegetables instead of three-quarters—a quarter cup of which could be a condiment. To show how this would look on a plate, Patrick Leahy served his colleagues in the Senate a mock school lunch. It consisted of a silver-dollar-size burger on half a bun, a box of milk, a squirt of ketchup, and six grapes.

The Reagan Administration withdrew the new guidelines after thousands of letters of protest were sent to the Department of Agriculture. But funding for child nutrition still fell by nearly a billion and a half dollars. (The Carter Administration had previously cut it by four hundred million.) Grants for kitchen equipment were eliminated, forcing districts like Berkeley to move their cooks into centralized facilities, and most schools couldn't afford to cover their cafeterias' losses. They needed them to turn a profit. "The gospel was preached that cafeterias should be operated like a business, and students as customers," Poppendieck says. And these customers wanted sodas and snacks.

In the late nineteen-eighties, when my former high school started offering Coca-Cola and Mazzio's pizza alongside regular lunches, I was more jealous than appalled. Fast food had yet to be demonized, fat kids were still just fat—not the tragic victims of an obesity epidemic—and name-brand pizza sounded a lot better than the cartilaginous stews we'd been served. Even in pure business terms, though, the new foods were often a failure. The more snacks and sodas students bought from vending machines or fast-food lines, the less they spent on regular lunches. Two years ago, when Texas banished junk food from its elementary schools and tightened nutrition requirements for all grades, cafeteria sales increased so much that the state received an extra fifty million dollars in federal subsidies—more than compensating for the loss in vending-machine revenue.

Berkeley first tried to reform its cafeterias in 1999, calling for salad bars in every school and organic vegetables for all. Like many of the city's social campaigns, the effort was both pioneering and impractical. It drew mocking news coverage nationwide—the Washington Post accused locals of liking “to brag about how progressive they are”—and the salads disappeared as soon as the grants that paid for them ran out.

When Cooper was hired, last fall, after working with the cafeterias for a year as a consultant, her plan was to rebuild the system from the inside out. She wanted not only to improve the food but also to create a step-by-step manual for lunchroom reform nationwide—complete with recipes, menu cycles, and staffing and ordering guides. But she answers to three masters in Berkeley: the school district is her official employer; the U.S.D.A. subsidizes her meals; and the Chez Panisse Foundation pays her salary (ninety-five thousand dollars, plus benefits, a year). The first needs her to stay within budget; the second insists that she conform to its dietary standards; the third wants her to hurry up and start a revolution. She may yet fail on every front. “We’ve got union issues. We’ve got kitchens that don’t cook. We’ve got the same shit everybody else has,” she says. “This is the reality of school food.”

Tuesday is pizza day at the Malcolm X elementary school. When the second graders arrive for lunch, they bounce up and down and do little dances in line, chanting, “Oh, pizza! Oh, pizza! Oh, pizza! Oh, pizza!” The school has four hundred students, from kindergarten through the fifth grade. About a fourth of the students are white, a fourth are Asian and Hispanic, and close to half are black, and for many lunch is the best meal of the day. Berkeley’s wealth, like its houses, is distributed on a steeply inclined plane, with the poor clustered below and the rich perched high in the hills. People at the two extremes have a twenty-year difference in life expectancy, a study in 2000 found. About forty per cent of the city’s students are eligible for subsidized meals. At Malcolm X, the children wear bar-coded payment cards around their necks, so that no one can tell who pays full price. They get a slice of pizza, some grapes or an orange, and the pick of a salad bar that Cooper recently installed, then hold their cards up to the scanner.

Cooper doesn’t have a problem with pizza. When it’s made right, it contains vegetables, protein, fibre, and calcium—a full meal. “A slice of pizza isn’t bad for you,” she says. “A diet of pizza is bad for you.” When she first arrived, the cafeteria’s pizza came in bags, like its burritos. The Central Kitchen had neither the staff nor the equipment to make it, so Cooper hied Karen Trilevsky, an old friend who owns FullBloom Baking Company, in nearby Menlo Park. Trilevsky put her staff to work in her test kitchen for the next three months, then called Cooper in for a tasting. The FullBloom pizza had a thick focaccia crust made with spelt and whole-wheat flour. It had homemade tomato sauce, skim-milk mozzarella, and a variety of sophisticated vegetarian toppings: zucchini, corn, and fresh tomato; blue cheese, walnut, and roasted onion. “It was fabulous,” Cooper recalls. “It was fresh. It was delicious.”

The kids couldn’t stand it. The toppings were weird, they said, the crust too bready, the cheese too brown and not cheesy enough. At Malcolm X and the other ten elementary schools, the trash cans overflowed with rejected slices. “It was across the board,” Cooper

says. The cooks at FullBloom tried chopping the vegetables into tiny pieces; the complaints continued. They tried hiding the vegetables beneath the cheese; the children rooted them out. Finally, in January, the cafeteria manager from Malcolm X came to Cooper's office with a tersely worded petition ("We do not like the veggie pizzas, nor do we like the pork roast with applesauce. . .") and a large sheet of butcher paper signed by more than two hundred students. Cooper hung it beside her desk, beneath a line of Tibetan prayer flags. In the bottom left corner, a girl named Shalika had drawn a frowny face. Next to that, her classmate Tajahniqua had written, "Veteteriyin pizza. I hate that food."

Two weeks later, Cooper put on her chef's whites and went to face her critics. They marched into the Malcolm X auditorium in three shifts, during recess, and listened politely to her explanations. Then they raised their hands and began the inquisition. "What happened to the double hamburgers?" "Why haven't we had orange chicken lately?" "Where are our nachos?" Cooper told them that there was hardly any chicken in the orange chicken and no real cheese in the nacho sauce, but they didn't care. "They were really pissed off," she says. "I took away all the crap they liked."

Children can learn to eat almost anything, given time. In Mexico, they consume fiery chilies; in Japan, whale meat; in Sweden, pickled herring. But a palate, once formed, isn't easily expanded. At Penn State, the psychologist Leann Birch has tracked the eating habits of a hundred and sixty girls between the ages of five and fifteen, as well as various tortured attempts to improve their diets. The most common ploys tend to backfire: forbidding sweets instills a craving for them, and insisting on vegetables can instill an aversion. Labelling foods as "healthy" makes them taste worse to children, and offering sweets as rewards for eating vegetables makes the latter seem even less appetizing. (Birch also tried offering vegetables as rewards for eating sweets, but the children just laughed at her.) Peer pressure sometimes helps. When Birch had kids who hated peas eat at tables surrounded by kids who loved peas, the pea-haters switched sides within a week. But cafeterias tend to breed complainers. At the Ross School, Cooper served three or four entrees a day, two desserts, and two kinds of pizza baked in a brick oven. Yet a month after she arrived she was cornered by a gang of sulky fifth graders. They were going on hunger strike, they told her, until they got their grilled-cheese sandwiches back.

The best way to broaden a child's palate is to start early. When mothers eat garlic or carrots while pregnant, recent studies have shown, their newborns have a taste for those flavors as well, and breast-fed babies tend to be less picky about solid food than bottle-fed babies. By the age of four or five, almost all children become "neophobic": they develop an aversion to new foods, and to vegetables in particular—an ancestral memory, perhaps, of too many poisonous plants eaten by children in the past. To overcome this instinct, preschools in Minneapolis, New York, and other cities have lately experimented with hand puppets, gardening and cooking programs, and color-coded vegetable charts. But there's no real substitute for patience; the average five-year-old has to taste a new food between five and ten times, Birch has found, before he'll accept it.

At the Ross School, Cooper could afford to wait: within a year, her students were happily eating jicama. In Berkeley, she had no food to waste. And so, in the month after the meeting at Malcolm X, the veggie pizza was slowly stripped bare. “They would call every week and say, ‘Take off the zucchini. Take off the corn. Take off the fresh tomatoes,’ ” a manager at FullBloom told me. “Within three weeks, all the vegetables were gone.” The crust was still rich in protein and fibre, and the cooks pureed some squash, carrots, and other vegetables into the sauce, where even the students’ X-ray eyes couldn’t detect them. But by and large the pizza began to look like pizza again.

The second graders at Malcolm X had made their peace with it. Across town, though, the fourth graders at John Muir were unconvinced. Not having had a meeting with Cooper, they blamed the food on their new principal, Mr. John, whom they suspected of being a vegetarian. “It’s all vegetable,” a small, apple-cheeked girl named Melika told me. She hunched her shoulders and shook her ropy braids: “Oooooooooo! That principal get on my nerves!” Her tall, skinny friend Naeemah was of two minds. The food was better for you, she said, now that it wasn’t extruded by “this big machine thing” anymore. But the pizza was still overcooked, and she missed all the meat from last year. She picked at her pink coleslaw. “I’m moving to Texas,” she said.

The low point of Cooper’s lunchroom crusade came in February. She had always known that her food costs would go up, but she had hoped that her revenues would rise as well. Fewer than half of the district’s ten thousand students ate school lunches: most of the high-schoolers went off campus, to places like Top Dog and Extreme Pizza, and many of the middle-and grade-schoolers brought their lunch. If Cooper could lure a few hundred of them back to the cafeteria, she would be able to pay for a lot of organic vegetables. By late winter, however, she was tens of thousands of dollars over budget, and cafeteria attendance had yet to go up. Then came the inspectors.

The Department of Agriculture has devised a welter of well-meaning regulations over the years to insure that schools serve healthful lunches. Its original scheme, which is still used by most schools, is known as “food-based menu planning.” It requires that elementary-school lunches contain at least six hundred and sixty-four calories and portions of meat, grains, milk, and fruit or vegetables. Less than thirty per cent of the calories can come from fat, but carbohydrates are unrestricted. This has led to some predictable perversities. Corn and French fries are by far the most popular vegetables in schools, followed by other potato dishes. To keep fat down, schools often ban whole milk and deep-fried foods, only to find that they’re not serving enough calories. “It’s really an Alice in Wonderland situation,” the sociologist Janet Poppendieck told me. “They can increase the size of entrées, but it’s hard to do that without increasing the fat. They would like to increase the vegetables, but that they can’t afford. So they end up adding dessert. Or they sweeten the milk with strawberry or chocolate. They’ve taken the fat out of it, then put the calories back in with sugar.”

In the mid-nineties, the U.S.D.A., led by a former health activist named Ellen Haas, introduced a more flexible alternative called “nutrient-based menu planning.” Cafeterias could make almost anything they liked, as long as a week’s worth of meals contained all

the necessary nutrients. If Monday's lunch was heavy on beef, Tuesday's could be a stir-fry. The only drawback was that every recipe had to be entered into a database so that its ingredients could be broken down into vitamins, minerals, protein, and so on. The most common ingredients and processed foods were preloaded in the software, but Cooper was cooking from scratch and reworking recipes continually. She didn't have time to analyze her dishes before serving them. So she didn't bother. She hired a consultant to enter the recipes as she perfected them, but otherwise kept cooking. "I never met a rule I didn't want to break," she says. "Especially stupid rules."

The three inspectors who came to Cooper's office in February weren't pleased with this attitude. They asked to see her recipes and her analyses. She did not have them. They asked how she knew that the children were getting enough calories. She said, "Have you looked at the obesity rate?" They told her that she was not in compliance and was in danger of losing her federal subsidies. "I felt like a comet slamming into the side of a mountain," she told me.

Cooper's friend Kate Adamick, a corporate lawyer turned cafeteria consultant, sat in on one of the meetings. "I listened for a while, as they told Ann that she was doing everything wrong, that they were going to have to shut her down, and they hadn't even tasted the food," Adamick told me. "So I stepped in and said, 'Would you rather Ann had spent a year getting the paperwork in place and then improved the food?' And they said, 'Yes.' I said, 'But the food they were serving was terrible!' And one of the women said, 'That is not true. They were using commodity foods.'"

As it happened, Adamick had recently attended a trade show in Los Angeles and had home pictures of the newest products being made for schools out of U.S.D.A. commodities. She called them up on the screen of her laptop one by one: corn dogs, pizza strips, and deep-fried cherry pies; grilled-cheese sandwiches, Texas cheese toast, and breaded chicken treats molded into hearts and moons and stars. "Look! Fried things in shapes!" Cooper joked, when she showed me the slides later. But, at the time, she was on the verge of losing her job. "Ann is basically fearless," Adamick says. "I've never seen her intimidated by anything, ever. But these women made her seriously nervous. She would say, 'We have a meeting with the mean people and they're going to put me in jail.'"

As usual, Cooper's cooking proved to be her most convincing defense. When the inspectors returned in March to examine the cafeterias, their attitude softened noticeably. Their report cited dozens of administrative and food-service infractions—"the children] received 1/2 kiwi instead of the specified '1 each' —but noted that the food was "very high quality and was visually pleasing as well as tasty." Cooper was given until November to fix the problems. "They could have made my life miserable," she told me. "They could have given me forty-five days to come into one-hundred-per-cent compliance, and in the end they didn't." She grinned. "I'm proud to say we coöpted the U.S.D.A."

By this spring, Cooper's outlook had improved markedly. Her staff was getting used to cooking fresh food again, the consultant was filling the database with recipes, and, in March, cafeteria attendance had finally begun to climb. At this pace, Cooper's losses would level off at around seventy thousand dollars—an acceptable amount, given all that she'd accomplished. And yet when she picked me up for dinner one evening in her Toyota Prius she looked haggard. She'd been to see her orthodontist for another radical tightening session, she told me. "It hurt so much I wanted to throw up." But her uneasiness had more to do with meat loaf.

Earlier that day, Cooper had gone to see Alice Waters, the chef and owner of Chez Panisse, whose foundation paid her salary. Waters was no fan of meat loaf. "I was really excited," Cooper said. "I told her that we were going to serve it with fresh vegetables and mashed potatoes. And she looked at me and said, 'Meat loaf! The kids can't possibly like meat loaf!'" Cooper took a long sip from her protein shake. "I almost got into it with her," she said. "I mean, what is a French country *pâte*? It's basically meat loaf, only it's steamed, right? But we can't possibly eat meat loaf."

Cooper and Waters had seemed like a perfect match. They met in the mid-nineties, when Cooper was writing an oral history of female chefs and Waters was breaking ground for the Edible Schoolyard—a vegetable garden on the site of an asphalt playground in Berkeley. Waters's vision, which has given rise to school gardens across the country, was that students would spend an hour or two working the soil every week, then cook and eat what they grew—learning history, ecology, and healthful eating in the process. Cooper's cooking was supposed to be an extension of this philosophy. "The whole experience of lunch needs to be completely transformed," Waters told me. "It needs to be a place where you can experience the ritual of the table, a way to teach kids about stewardship of the land, about nourishing yourself and communicating with people, about this rich subject of ecogastronomy."

A year later, here they were, serving meat loaf. Cooper had been as idealistic as Waters once, but the longer she struggled to feed the masses the more she appreciated mass production: centralized kitchens, mainstream recipes, economies of scale. FullBloom, for example, had grown from a small bakery in the back of an espresso shop in San Francisco—the kind of soulful local enterprise that Waters adored—into a factory that made two hundred thousand pastries a day. That size allowed the bakery to spend months formulating pizzas for Cooper, knowing that they might recoup the investment later by baking for other local schools. "Alice doesn't want to work with anyone as large as FullBloom," Cooper said. "And I'm not sure I can work with anyone smaller. If I asked them to do the kind of R. and D. FullBloom did, they'd just say, 'Get the fuck out of here.'"

Waters admitted that Cooper had made great progress—"We're not sort of in the nacho place anymore"—but she felt that they still had a long way to go. Why couldn't they serve vegetable curry, she wondered, or sauté dishes to order? Cooper, meanwhile, had decades-old refrigerated trucks that kept breaking down. Her produce sometimes looked as if it came from a compost heap. Her labor costs were fifty-seven per cent of her budget

(in most restaurants, it's less than forty), yet she couldn't cut union wages. "Alice is a really wonderful visionary," she said. "But this work is all about baby steps, and she can't see baby steps. In her perfect world, she'd like to have the kids served bountiful baskets of fresh-picked berries. And you know what? It ain't happening."

When I was in the seventh grade, my father took a two-year sabbatical in southern France and put us all in public schools. My lycée was a glum, disagreeable place. The hours were long, the students anarchic, the teachers authoritarian, but the cafeteria nearly made up for it. We sat at round tables in groups of eight and were served three courses of some of the strangest food I'd ever seen—sautéed squid, boudin noir, rabbit with mustard sauce. There were no choices to make, no variable subsidies to claim, no bagged lunches or vending machines. Everyone ate the same food, and the food, I discovered, was wonderful. Thinking back on those meals when I was in Berkeley, I could understand Waters's frustration. "What I'm imagining is happening all over the world," she told me. "It's not like we're inventing something that has never been done before."

For Cooper, too, the French system seemed an ideal model, if only she could afford it. A month before my visit, she had toured some cafeterias in the town of Challans, in the west of France. The lunches there were made in a central kitchen then trucked in bulk to the satellite schools, to be served family style, just as I remembered. "At one meal, the first course was raw beets in a vinaigrette," Cooper recalled. "The second was braised salmon with lentils and leeks, and the third was a cheese course. That was school lunch." The cost of food and labor came to about eight dollars a meal—more than three times as much as the average American lunch—of which every child paid about two dollars. (In Rome, which recently adopted a similar system on a much larger scale, the meals cost only about five dollars, and seventy per cent of the ingredients are organic.)

I asked Cooper, one morning, as we were driving to the Central Kitchen, how long it would take American schools to switch to the French or Italian system, if they had the money. "Two years," she said. "There are three big issues: investing in kitchens, food procurement, and staff training. But I've made all these changes in six months without any money. You can't tell me it's going to take anyone else more than two years." This sounded optimistic at best. The school-lunch program won't be reauthorized until 2009, and it already costs the country seven billion dollars a year. To double the subsidies "would take a profile in courage," one anti-hunger lobbyist told me. Then again, the program has always been a creature of implausible politics. "Come on!" Cooper said. "The war costs more than a billion dollars a week! Why don't we say we'll double what we spend on school lunch? Where are our priorities? Maybe I was high the day they explained that in school."

It was well before dawn, and Cooper had to focus on the long, looping coastal road from Moss Beach. I could tell, though, that she was still running the numbers in her head. Politics, more than cooking, consumed her these days. "If I was getting up every morning at three-thirty just to make tuna-fish sandwiches, I'd jump off the Bay Bridge," she said. She owns two houses on the East Coast, one of them with a former partner, but she said that she had no intention of moving back anytime soon. She had agreed to work in

Berkeley for three years and was already looking further ahead—to reforming the cafeterias of Portland, Oregon, perhaps, or to some other, more subversive scheme. “I want to sue the U.S.D.A.!” I’d heard her say, her eyes gleaming. “I want Oprah to pick this up! I want school lunch to be an election issue in 2008!” But first she had a few thousand mouths to feed.