
AT TABLE

BY SHARON LAUER

STARTING IN THE GARDEN

The journey to sustainable school dining.

Good school food is considered by most an oxymoron. But does it matter? Kids come to school to learn, not to eat, don't they? The truth is that what we eat and how it is prepared impacts not only our health but also the environment. Acting on that truth is an important part of a thoughtful life. Should we not also consider it part of a thoughtful school day? The quality of school lunches is a hot topic, and schools are under the microscope for serving soda and junk food, especially with recent alarming statistics of rising juvenile diabetes and obesity nationwide. Here in Connecticut, politicians are attempting to address this problem through legislation, but there is so much more to the role of food in school and its connection to the lives of children than the simple solution of removing soda and Twinkies from our schools' dining rooms.

I can remember a time in my own childhood when my family's diet consisted of mostly what was available where we lived during the season in which it grew. I grew up in southeastern Pennsylvania where farms were everywhere and fresh produce, meats and cheeses were readily available at large farmers' markets and roadside stands. Children knew when things were in season because "in season" was the only time you could eat them: strawberries and sour cherries in June, raspberries in July, peaches and Silver Queen corn in August.

Family recipes like cherry pudding, peach cobbler, fried tomatoes and corn fritters were waited for all year and savored when they were available. But by the time I was in sixth or seventh grade, *supermarkets* were competing with *farmers* markets for my mother's food budget and television advertising had come into our lives to give my sister and me new desires. Suddenly we were eating Stouffer's lasagna, California strawberries and hothouse tomatoes that *looked* beautiful but had no real flavor or texture. Prepared foods made my mother's life easier, and access to everything all the time seemed like progress.

Our raised beds are packed with grape tomatoes, peppers and herbs that will be picked by our children daily.

If individual households could be lured by the convenience of prepared foods and year-round availability of produce, it's not hard to imagine how schools and other institutional dining services wandered into this modern phenomenon and why they may find it hard to reverse the trend. What will they cook, where will they get it and how will they stay under budget—both of money and time—if they *don't* use the processed, frozen ingredients that their current vendors push? At the Unquowa School we began to ask ourselves this question over a year ago. As part of our commitment to UNESCO's Decade of Sustainable Education, we had decided that we would focus on creating a sustainable dining program as one of our first-year projects. Granted, we were not starting from the challenging position of a daily menu of pizza, fries and soda. We were already a school that served a real meal family-style and we had a varied salad bar as well. But we used many processed, frozen foods and while we served fresh apples, they came from Washington State with a heavy oil tax attached to them. As Ann Cooper and Kate



Photographs: Courtesy of The Unquowa School

Adamick so aptly put it in their recent article on industrial organics, “We were well-fed but not fed well.” We agreed to start small so that our goals would be reasonable, our progress measurable, and we could stay within our modest budget. We decided to try to reduce waste, to serve organic milk and cage-free eggs, and to replace items in our lunch with regional and seasonal foods as much as possible.

We began with tremendous enthusiasm from faculty and parents, curiosity and willingness from students and the help of an experienced consultant, John Turenne. John’s Sustainable Food Systems LLC consulting firm grew out of his own experience in building a sustainable dining program in Yale’s Berkley Dining Hall during his tenure as Executive Chef there. With his help, our first year exceeded our hopes. We replaced packaged snacks with fresh fruit and bulk snacks; we served organic milk and beautiful terra cotta cage-free eggs laid by the Rhode Island Reds from Sherwood Farm which was just up the road, and we worked hard at procuring as much local produce as possible. Because we felt strongly that kids could only understand the importance of these decisions and their implications if they took part in the process, we built organic kitchen gardens on our campus, established a composting program that the students would run, and by year’s end made a connection with an organic farmer, Patti Popp of Sport Hill Organic Farm in Easton, who was willing to allow our students to spend time at her farm planting and harvesting so that they could experience the cycle of food production and the simple magic of growing things.

Now, in year two, we are excited about continuing our progress. We achieved our goals last year while staying under budget and have planned a menu for this year that will do the same. Our new chef, Peter Gorman, has—in addition to experience in other independent school kitchens—the advantage of having organized local farmers to provide as much as 80 percent of what he served in his dining room



Opposite: Unquowa students planting seedlings in raised beds.
Above: Students making nut-free gator granola.

when he served as executive chef at the Mark Addy Inn in Virginia. With the continued support of Sustainable Foods Systems, we are adding grass-fed beef from Stuart Family Farm in Bridgewater and free-range chicken to our menu. Our milk will come this year from the Farmer’s Cow, a cooperative of Connecticut dairy farmers managed by Robin Chesmer of Graywall Farms in Lebanon. We continue to expand our relationship with Sport Hill Farm. Not only will our children continue to go there to learn how to plant and pick, but Patti Popp will be supplying our kitchen with produce this year and we will be supplying her with any composting materials we generate that we can’t compost ourselves. Of course, our little kitchen garden at school is expanding, too. Our raised beds are packed with grape tomatoes, peppers and herbs that will be picked by our children daily in the fall for lunch; a new espaliered pear tree *may* provide the treat of one pear each for our kids, and the beautiful, big bean teepee planted by the kindergarten this past spring should not only provide us with beans, squash and mini-pumpkins this fall—it will provide our youngest children with the *coolest* place to play during recess.

The problems of the world are too great for children or their teachers to solve, but we can try to do the right things on our campuses to live sustainable lives and to be stewards of the small part of the world that we can control. The plants, animals, woods and water systems on Unquowa’s campus are under our care, and they are affected by the decisions we make each day regarding what we eat and the waste we produce. Educating our children to understand the implications—nutritional, environmental and ethical—of these small everyday actions is the first step in creating adults who can solve the problems that our precious planet faces. □

RECIPE

ROASTED ROOT VEGETABLES Courtesy of Sustainable Food Systems, LLC

Before you start: Spread thin in sheet pan, so that the vegetables roast instead of steam. Cook thoroughly, fork should glide through them, caramelized on the outside and smooth on the inside.

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| 1 lb. beets | Kosher salt, to taste |
| 1 lb. parsnips | Whole peppercorns, |
| 1 lb. carrots | ground, to taste |
| 1 lb. turnips | 2 tsp. balsamic vinegar |
| ¼ c. extra virgin olive oil | |

Preheat oven to 375°. Peel the beets, parsnips, carrots and turnips and cut into ½ inch cubes. Toss the vegetables in a bowl with the olive oil. Sprinkle with salt and pepper. Spread onto baking pan. Roast vegetables in oven, about 15–17 minutes, or until browned and crisp. Drizzle balsamic vinegar very lightly over the vegetables at the end of cooking. Makes 10 servings.