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## Rethinking School Lunch

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# Rethinking school lunch

Amy Dillard, Lisa Holmes Published 4:00 am, Thursday, May 10, 2007

Just as the scales beneath the feet of our nation's children are reaching a tipping point, so too is the social movement of providing local, organic foods for America's schoolchildren. This is welcome news to Berkeley chef and culinary revolutionary **Alice Waters** and others who have long-promoted the health and lifestyle benefits of consuming whole, organic, locally grown and produced foods.

Change is afoot in many public school districts around the country; one of the most promising programs is the Berkeley Unified School District, which has undergone a complete overhaul of its school lunches under the leadership of the "Renegade Lunch Lady," chef **Ann Cooper**. With much-needed supplemental funding from Waters' **Chez Panisse Foundation**, Cooper has set herself to the task of providing healthy, delicious food consistent with Berkeley's progressive Wellness Policy, to schoolchildren. Her work isn't easy. And sadly, Cooper has to fight the federal government every day to achieve her goal.

Cooper knows that under her tutelage kids will clamor for freshly roasted red potatoes over high fat, processed Tater Tots, but first she has to get them on their plates. Before she can do that, she has to purchase fresh red potatoes. But the federal government makes it easy to purchase the processed potatoes and nearly impossible to purchase the fresh potatoes through the National School Lunch Program.

The nation's schoolchildren are fed, in large part, by the over-produced agricultural commodities that are promised a market by the Farm Bill. The **Department of Agriculture**'s commodities policy, which will be revisited by Congress this year when it passes the new Farm Bill, puts the **USDA** in a conflict of interest between agribusiness and promoting the good health of U.S. schoolchildren.

The USDA buys hundreds of millions of pounds of excess beef, pork, milk and other high-fat meat and dairy products to bolster or normalize dropping prices. It then turns around and dumps those raw commodities into the National School Lunch Program, which creates a shopping list from which Cooper may select her ingredients.

According to the **Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine** and the International Journal of Pediatric Obesity, by 2010 nearly half of the children in North America will be overweight or obese.

Although medical journals are full of evidence of the health benefits of near-vegetarian meals, the vast majority of public schools offer meals based on meat and dairy products because meat and dairy are the most over-produced commodities and, in turn, the most readily available ingredients.

The National School Lunch Program was enacted by Congress in 1946, with an explicitly stated, dual policy: "to safeguard the health and well-being of the nation's schoolchildren" and "encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other foods." Today, the USDA acts as a broker between farmers and school kitchens. As agribusiness and mega-farms have increasingly taken over a larger share of the agricultural market, the beneficiaries of commodities subsidies are not the family farmers that the Farm Bill originally intended. Instead, big business, with its powerful pocketbook, has bought the USDA, to the detriment of the nation's schoolchildren.

Processing commodities intensifies the conflicts of interest within the USDA. Through the National Processing Agreement, designed to reduce paperwork and costs, the USDA holds agreements with agribusiness to turn commodities into processed foods that can be easily heated in school kitchens, because most lack stoves for actual cooking. A full two-thirds of the listed commodities being processed are meat and dairy. The remaining third covers everything from oil and fruit (in the same proportion) and flour and vegetables. The only vegetable listed with any specificity is the potato, and the few fruits on the list are being processed with flour and shortening to become high fat muffins and fruit pastries. Of course the most popular processed food on school lunch menus is high fat pizza.

The National School Lunch Program should be treated like a healthy part of our overall educational system, and to that end, Congress should give children an independent broker that runs no risk of bowing to the powerful agribusiness lobby. Chefs such as Ann Cooper need a voice within an appropriate agency, such as the departments of **Health and Human Services** or **Education**, which puts the health and well-being of children first. Recognizing in the pending Farm Bill that the National School Lunch Program is

not an agricultural program, nor an appropriate dumping ground for a glut of unhealthy commodities, would be a decent first step.

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## Pasta with greens and feta cheese

4 servings

This quick and easy pasta dish is both flavorful and flexible. Instead of spinach, greens could include arugula, watercress, or endive. For a more substantial meal, add roasted or grilled squash, eggplant, or peppers. It's easy to send to school, too, because pasta holds up well to dressings and moisture, and it tastes great at room temperature.

Salt

2/3 pound penne pasta

1 cup diced yellow onion (1 medium)

2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

1 clove garlic, minced

2 cups washed and chopped fresh spinach

1/4 cup water

2 1/4 teaspoons lemon juice

1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

1/3 cup crumbled feta cheese

1. In a large pot of boiling salted water, cook the pasta according to package directions until al dente. Drain and set aside.

2. In large saute pan, saute the onions in the oil until lightly browned. Add the garlic and

cook for 2 minutes taking care not to burn. Add the spinach and the water, then cover the skillet and cook for 3 more minutes. When the spinach has wilted, add the pasta and toss to heat through.

3. Add the lemon and pepper and toss again. Top with feta cheese and serve.

## Nutrition facts

Serving size: About 5.5 ounces

Amount per serving:

Calories: 391

Calories from fat: 107 (27 percent of total calories)

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