IN A BUNGALOW just off the playground of Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School in Berkeley, Calif., in a bright, spacious room with sunflower-yellow walls and indigo-blue tiled floors, some 20 eighth-graders have come in from the April rain and are huddled around a half-dozen worktables.

“Raise your hand if you did not have breakfast today,” asks their teacher, Nicole Thomas. Six hands—more than a quarter of the class—go up. For such an urban school in which 40 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals, this is not unusual. But what happens next in Thomas’s classroom is.

“You are in for a treat,” she tells the students. “We’re making polenta with egg and herb sauce. Let me tell you, it’s a magical combination!”

Thomas, a full-time “chef teacher,” and her students are participants in an innovative program called “The Edible Schoolyard.” An unlikely collaboration between a world-renowned chef and a local public school principal, the Schoolyard could be a model to radically improve the health of American schoolchildren. As childhood obesity rates skyrocket and more young people than ever before are being diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, finding such ways to improve kids’ dietary habits has taken on a new urgency.

Thanks to world-renowned chef Alice Waters, the kids in one California school went from eating fast-food lunches on a crumbling blacktop to growing and preparing their own fresh-food feasts. Could this idea help stave off a national obesity epidemic? BY EMILY KAISER
Winnowing Wheat

Want To Know More?
You can learn more about The Edible Schoolyard and how to set up a garden program in your local school by going to www.edibleschoolyard.org.
From Graffiti To Greens

Chef Alice Waters is a teacher by training, and she has the soft voice and gentle manner of someone well-equipped to handle little children. After graduating from the University of California at Berkeley, she studied at the Montessori School in London. She returned to California to teach, but found herself cooking more and more for her friends in the evenings. Realizing she preferred cooking to teaching, she and some friends opened a restaurant, Chez Panisse, in 1971.

The restaurant transformed American cuisine to such an extent that Waters is sometimes referred to as the Mother of American Cuisine. Within a decade, chefs around the country had adopted its emphasis on locally grown, seasonal ingredients, simply prepared. Anyone who’s eaten a fresh arugula salad, a goat cheese pizza, heirloom tomatoes, even a grilled fish with a fresh salsa accompaniment probably has Waters and her crew to thank.

In the early 1990s, Waters would drive past King Middle School on her way to work. The school was hidden under graffiti, sealed windows, and crumbling walls. Budget cuts had forced the school to shutter the cafeteria, and King’s more than 900 students dined on Taco Bell and Pizza Hut from plastic containers on the blacktop.

After Waters lamented the school’s deteriorating condition in an interview with a local paper, Principal Neil Smith invited her to see the school on the inside in the hopes she might be able to help.

The two met and saw an opportunity to translate the “Seed to Table” principles of Waters’ restaurant into a school’s entire lunch program and curriculum. Together with local organizations and school faculty, Waters and Smith raised several million dollars to realize their dream.

Helping Kids Make Healthy Choices

Overhauling your family’s eating habits can seem a daunting task. Here are some tips from Alice Waters and her colleagues.

- **If the kids help prepare meals, it makes them feel invested, and it’s not a chore.**
  - **Kids should be allowed to cook for the whole family sometimes.**
  - **Three-year-olds are old enough to start helping out.**

- **Serve vegetables in a variety of different ways.**
  - If you’re serving carrots, serve them as curls one night, sliced another night, and sticks a third night.

- **Separate a dish into its components, serving condiments on the side.**
  - For a salad, don’t put vinaigrette on the salad and mix everything up together. **Set the vegetables out separately, and let the kids assemble their own.**

- **Bread-making is like magic for smaller children.**
  - They love watching the ingredients transform from something inert into something alive.

- **Take kids to an orchard to pick fruit.**
  - **Raspberries are a popular item in The Edible Schoolyard; the bushes are right at child-height, and they can snack on as many or as few as they like.**
Earth As Classroom
A half-acre of blacktop was broken up to put in a vast garden, with fruit trees, berry shrubs, and countless vegetable patches. In the mild coastal climate of the San Francisco Bay, everything from apple trees and amaranth to kumquats and kiwi vines would grow along the garden’s meandering paths. The shuttered cafeteria was converted into a kitchen classroom, equipped with handsome work areas and professional-grade equipment where children would learn to prepare their food.

While many schools have gardens and kitchens—a survey counted 3,000 school gardens in California alone—the team decided that The Edible Schoolyard would uniquely incorporate the traditional required curriculum into its activities. Today, four full-time staff, two garden

continued on page 56

Kid-Tested, Kid-Approved
Here is the breakfast dish teacher Nicole Thomas recently helped her students prepare.

Soft Polenta with Cheese
12 servings
SERVING SIZE: ¾ cup

7 cups water
1 cup reduced-fat milk
2 tsp. salt
3 cups polenta (course-ground yellow cornmeal)
3 oz. freshly grated parmesan cheese

1. In a large, heavy-bottomed pot, bring water and milk to a rowdy boil.
2. Add the salt.
3. Add the polenta in a steady stream, stirring constantly. Keep stirring for 10 to 15 minutes to make the polenta creamy.
4. Add in grated cheese.

Optional: You may drizzle 1 tsp. or so of the Herb Sauce* over the top before serving; this will add to the saturated fat content of the dish. You may also use the sauce to jazz up other favorite dishes.

NUTRITION FACTS
Serving Size ¾ cup
Starch Exchanges 2
AMOUNT PER SERVING
Calories 162
Calories From Fat 25
Total Fat 3 grams
(Saturated Fat 1.3 grams)
Cholesterol 7 milligrams
Sodium 446 milligrams
Total Carbohydrate 28 grams
(Dietary Fiber 3 grams;
Sugars 1 gram)
Protein 6 grams

*Herb Sauce
12 servings
SERVING SIZE: 1½ Tbsp.

1 cup washed, picked, and chopped assorted herbs (such as parsley, chives, thyme, basil, mint)
½ cup olive oil
1 tsp. lemon zest
1 Tbsp. fresh lemon juice
Salt and pepper to taste

1. Wash and dry all herbs. Rough chop herbs and combine with olive oil, lemon zest, lemon juice, salt, and pepper.

NUTRITION FACTS
Serving Size 1½ Tbsp.
Fat Exchanges 2
AMOUNT PER SERVING
Calories 82
Calories From Fat 81
Total Fat 9 grams
(Saturated Fat 1.2 grams)
Cholesterol 0 milligrams
Sodium 1 milligram
Total Carbohydrate 0 grams
(Dietary Fiber 0 grams;
Sugars 0 grams)
Protein 0 grams

Want more “kid-tested” recipes from the Schoolyard? See next month’s Diabetes Forecast.
teachers, and two kitchen teachers, along with a crew of volunteers from the local community and AmeriCorps, run the garden and kitchen together with the school faculty.

Science classes spend one day a week in the garden, examining the elements in the soil, beneficial insects, soil erosion, or sugar development in a ripening raspberry. Humanities classes spend one day a week in the kitchen, making flatbreads for a class on Ancient Egypt, hosting a café-style poetry reading for English, or simply writing recipes and journaling.

“You can teach so much,” says Esther Cook, the head chef-teacher. “You can teach science, culture, history. They can understand just how much work it was before automation to prepare food.”

These pre-automation tasks also provide vigorous exercise. Students build trellises, dig irrigation trenches, turn the compost piles, and feed the chickens. They harvest, dry, thresh, and winnow wheat before grinding it into flour with a mill powered by an exercise bike.

In the kitchen, they pound dried blue corn to make tortillas. And they make creamy polenta with egg and herb sauce.

So when Thomas asks the class to identify the herbs picked from the garden for the sauce, the kids can name them easily: cilantro, parsley, mint, rosemary. After all, they helped grow them.

“For most of these kids, their idea of cooking is microwaving a frozen dinner or boiling water for Cup O’Noodles. But they’re capable of so much more,” says Cook.

One holdout gets a friendly visit from his social studies teacher urging him to give the dish a try. He shakes his head, no thanks, and says he’d rather have Lucky Charms for breakfast. His teacher smiles and rubs his back before moving on. But later on, observing his peers eating polenta contentedly, the boy sneaks a tiny taste.

Getting children to eat healthier foods can be an almighty struggle. Up against the luscious sweetness of a chocolate milkshake or the earthy saltiness of a crisp French fry, a lump of spinach or a wan pile of brown rice stands no chance.

“We’re not trying to fool them with food,” Waters says. “We’re not doing an ad campaign. If we give them food and they don’t like it, it’s our job to change it so that they do like it. The goal here is their enjoyment.”

Expanding The Idea

King’s students are learning to think about food differently, but Waters and her Schoolyard partners know that in order to make a wider impact, their approach will need to go beyond that school’s garden gates. That’s why they are expanding the program to the rest of Berkeley Unified School District. Both the Children’s Hospital of Oakland and the University of California at Berkeley’s School of Public Health hope to conduct long-term studies of the changes in students’ health and well-being.

And last fall, the district hired chef and childhood nutrition activist Ann Cooper to revamp the lunch menus as the new director of child nutrition services. Cooper has set up several food committees, no teachers allowed, where students critique the school district’s meals.

Both campaigns will require a lot of work and expense. “I wish there was another solution that was less radical and less expensive, but there isn’t one,” Waters says.

“We did this for physical education in this country. We built gyms, we built tracks, we spent lots of money,” she says. “We’re going to have to spend a lot more money on this to do it well. But if we don’t, the costs will be so much more.”

Emily Kaiser is a writer in the San Francisco area.

MICHAEL PIAZZA

DIABETES FORECAST | JULY 2006

56