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Fresh Gets Invited to the Cool Table

By [MARIAN BURROS](#)

YOU don't usually find a college tour guide showing off the school cafeteria to prospective applicants. But at Middlebury College in Vermont this summer, that was where a student guide made her four-star sales pitch. "The food here is amazing," she said. "When I went home for spring break, I actually missed it."

At a time when many school cafeterias are still serving traditional, mass-produced food, Middlebury has replaced "mystery meat," canned vegetables and other institutional menu staples - the butt of freshman-year jokes for generations - with locally raised chicken and lamb, and heirloom tomatoes, emerald green broccoli and plump ripe strawberries grown within a few miles of the campus.

Middlebury is not alone in serving food that did not come from far away and out of Costco-size cans. From the University of Montana to public schools in Tallahassee, Fla., officials at more than 200 universities and 400 school districts are supporting a farm-to-cafeteria movement to build their menus around fresh local ingredients. And students are cheering instead of complaining.

In the Owego and Whitney Point school districts in central New York, canned vegetables have been replaced by local farm-fresh tomatoes, broccoli, squash and cabbage. "Sometimes it costs less, sometimes right around the same price, but the quality is so wonderful," said Betsey Bacelli, food service director for both districts, who nine years ago accepted an offer from local farmers to buy their produce. "The older students really recognize the difference in quality, so we make little steps, like more cabbage in the soup than we used to."

The movement among administrators to support local and regional sustainable agriculture, while helping their students eat better-tasting and better quality food, started on the East and West coasts and expanded across the country.

But making the transition is not so easy. Food costs are often higher, supplies can be hard to find and it takes more money to pay qualified cooks and install working kitchens.

Those who have embraced the concept cite the advantages, from fighting obesity among the young to helping the local economy. And while the Department of Agriculture has provided very little money for farm to cafeteria programs, individual administrators are using sustainable agriculture as part of the new federal wellness initiative, which requires school districts, in consultation with parents, students and schools, to create a comprehensive wellness program, especially nutrition guidelines.

Rising oil prices provide an additional incentive. "This is the perfect time to do it, because fuel costs are so high that distribution companies are interested in the program," said Kate Adamick, project director for SchoolFood Plus at Food Change, a nonprofit that helps improve schoolchildren's eating habits in New York City.

"Children's obesity issues have highlighted the farm to school program," said Marion Kalb, director of the national farm to school program for the Community Food Security Coalition. "It appeals to taste as well as nutrition and how to get kids to change their eating habits." The nonprofit coalition works to build sustainable food systems that ensure access to affordable, nutritious food.

Doug Davis, food service director for the Burlington, Vt., schools, said that the idea of using local produce in the schools, where 5,500 meals are served each day, was first discussed in September 2003. "It appeared overwhelming, almost impossible," he said. But now the schools are buying tomatoes, lettuce and peppers in season and have developed recipes to use other produce like kale and carrots. This year, for the first time, they bought 500 pounds of zucchini, which was delivered earlier this month and processed for use in zucchini breads.

"One of the goals is to get more fiber in the schools, through fruits and vegetables," Mr. Davis said. Last year the children ate 10 to 20 percent more vegetables than they did in 2003, and purchases of local produce jumped to 38 percent from 8 percent, he said.

The farm to cafeteria program in Albuquerque, where schools are on a year-round schedule, featured local peaches, blackberries, watermelon, green chilies, sunflower sprouts and a salad bar this summer. "Albuquerque and Santa Fe are great markets for the small Hispanic producers I work with," said Craig Mapel, a marketing specialist with the New Mexico Department of Agriculture.

Fred Martinez of Dixon, N.M., has been selling apples to the program from his 18-acre orchard for several years. "The program has helped stabilize our market," he said. "Before, we could sell only four or five weeks before the big fruit producing districts like Washington took over."

Ms. Bacelli's school districts keep increasing their program, too, as she finds creative ways to use more produce, like acorn squash in cookies and muffins.

"We're hoping that with the federal government's new wellness initiative, all the districts in our area will do what we're doing and buy local fruits and vegetables, she said. "My other dream is to get the students to eat rutabagas. I pray every night for world peace and funding."

Among all of the nation's school districts, New York City, because of its sheer size, faces the most daunting problems in changing the menus and the culture: it serves 860,000 meals a day at 1,500 locations, said Ms. Adamick, of SchoolFood Plus.

"We are not operating under any delusion that this is a short-term project," Ms. Adamick said. Her program, with \$3 million funding for its first year, part of it from the Agriculture Department's nutrition education program for low-income people, was designed to improve eating habits at school - and, through them, academic performance - while strengthening the state's agricultural economy.

"We talk about this as a 30-year project," said Ms. Adamick, an attorney and a former chef. "We need to change an entire culture, and you know how long it has taken to change the social view on smoking. This is more difficult. We are taking small steps, getting apples, carrots, pears, even broccoli into the schools."

At the college and university level, using local food has many pluses, said Dr. S. Georgia Nugent, president of Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio. As colleges compete for students, locally grown food has become a marketing tool for baby boomer parents, who created the organic food movement, and their environmentally aware children.

"You get higher quality food and lower environmental impact," Dr. Nugent said. "You support the local economy. And it is a way of teaching young people about their local environment and connecting it with what happens internationally."

It also helps the town and gown relationship.

"It's so important for this college to be part of the place," Dr. Nugent said over dinner on the eve of the second annual National Farm to Cafeteria Conference, which took place at Kenyon this summer. "We are perceived as an elite institution on the hill, surrounded by a rural community. We needed to come down off the hill and be good neighbors. We wanted to make a tangible commitment to the local economy."

On a smaller scale, the University of Montana in Missoula increased its local purchases to 13 percent from 7 percent of its total in the second year of its program. "Parents like it; students like it," said Mark LoParco, the university's director of dining services. Among the local products are bread made from local wheat; burgers, chili and quesadillas from local beef; granola and tortillas; and potatoes, carrots, cherries, salad, even safflower oil and salsas.

In addition to the health and taste advantages, Mr. LoParco said he finds other reasons to buy locally. "This is a regional sustainability program," he said. "We do it for food security, which is pretty compelling, and for environmental reasons."

Some colleges feature occasional seasonal menus with local products. A number of them, including Bates College in Lewiston, Me.; Oberlin in Ohio; Ohio University in Athens; Berkeley College at Yale; and Penn College of Technology, an affiliate of Penn State, as well as Kenyon and Middlebury, offer menus on which 30 percent or more of the food is locally grown.

Costs, a significant issue in public schools, are less an issue at the college level. Kenyon added \$100,000 to its food budget to support its buy-local program. Middlebury College has not earmarked additional money, yet as much as 33 percent of the food it serves in its cafeterias comes from local sources, a figure Nan Jenks-Jay, director of environmental affairs at the college, describes as "extremely high, considering we only have a 10-week growing season."

In the beginning of the farm-to-cafeteria movement, big food-service companies like Aramark and Sodexo, which run many college and university dining halls, made it difficult to buy locally, preferring to make one phone call.

But John Orobono, the senior vice president of supply chain management at Aramark, said the company no longer tries to discourage its collegiate customers from buying local. He acknowledged that Aramark still has a lot to learn.

"Initially there may be costs which Aramark may decide to absorb," Mr. Orobono said. "We can't afford to pass them on because we have to be competitive. Aramark will not be left behind."

"We can move product from Chile, from the West Coast, but we are challenged by moving product from Camden to Philly," he added. "Hopefully, this whole program will grow, and then there will be normal profitability. I believe there is a groundswell."

Niles Gebele, Aramark's food service director at Kenyon, who helped pioneer the company's participation in such programs, said: "It's a real departure from the traditional industrial supply source: one phone call and you get all your stuff. Now it's a little more complicated, but there is evidence that good operators can respond to this." Serving local foods at public schools and colleges and universities "is not just a fad," said John Turenne, who was with Aramark for 25 years, most recently as the executive chef at Yale's Berkeley College.

"This is what we should be doing," he said. "The globalization of food, the hidden costs, the loss of nutrition: it's not healthy for the planet or for the human body."

Mr. Turenne, now a consultant, met Alice Waters when she instituted a pioneering food program at Berkeley College, where her daughter lived while attending Yale. She sent Mr. Turenne to work in the Chez Panisse kitchen, and he came out a changed man.

"Everything was bottom line and numbers, and now it's about the food," he said. "It was an epiphany."

The introduction to fresh local ingredients has been an epiphany for many young people, too. Kate Barney, who had been active in the farm to cafeteria program before graduating from Kenyon this June, talked about one of her fellow students, who clearly had never seen anything as lusciously red as the hydroponic tomatoes being served in the cafeteria.

"She asked me if they had been dyed," Ms. Barney said.

