

Don't let lunch flunk

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A chef need not be a celebrity to call out school food, nor do parents need to be chefs to cook with their kids

By M.E. Malone, Globe Correspondent | April 21, 2010

It's a simple notion: Equip every child in school with 10 healthy recipes that will last a lifetime — easy things like pasta with tomato sauce or chicken stir-fry.

The idea comes from British celebrity chef Jamie Oliver's "Food Revolution" campaign. Many people are more familiar with his 6-part ABC-TV reality series with the same name, which turned up the heat on the sorry state of cafeteria food and what passes for home cooking in a West Virginia town with one of the highest rates of obesity in the nation. In one episode, Oliver sits at a kitchen table laden with a pile of junk food the size of a deer carcass and exclaims, "This is going to kill your children early!" as mom sits nearby and begins to cry. In another, he is pulling french fries off cafeteria tables and baiting the lunch ladies.

His series is grabbing attention at a time when Congress is set to renew funding for the Child Nutrition Act. President Obama recommended \$10 billion to be spent over the next 10 years on nutrition programs for children, including school food. Already the amount has been halved by a Senate committee, angering those who had pushed for \$1 extra per lunch in federal reimbursements. The Senate is expected to debate the measure, which now includes a 6-cent increase in the allocation for a child's lunch, from \$2.68 to \$2.74. Advocates are also targeting the federal guidelines that spell out food items that qualify for reimbursement.

"What do they think we're going to do with 6 cents?" says Ann Cooper, a professional chef who cooked at ski resorts and on cruise ships. Cooper ran the public school cafeterias in Berkeley, Calif., for five years and turned them around. Now she's interim nutrition director for the Boulder Valley, Colo., school district. "It's definitely possible to change a district in three to four years. But it takes a tremendous amount of work. And it does take money."

Oliver's zealous bid for change has stirred the pot. "I think what he's doing is really wonderful," says Jody Adams, owner and chef of Rialto in Cambridge. "He's peeling back the layers of the onion and showing us what we either didn't know existed or just didn't pay much attention to because it doesn't affect us."

Adams, the mother of Oliver, 20, and Roxanne, 14, recognizes the challenges the school lunch program faces in switching from a diet based on high-fat, processed foods to meals prepared from fresh ingredients. "I don't think the general public understands the monumental change required to really make the shift," she says.

At home, she's teaching her son and daughter to enjoy preparing healthy foods they can eat together around the table. "The priority for me with my children was to take an active role in introducing them to all the wonders of food, and cooking, and the table," she says. "It's important to have all three." Adams's advice for parents just starting to cook with their kids: "Don't just make cookies or cakes. Give them a knife to cut up some carrots. Don't worry about the mess," she says. "Have fun. Tell stories. Grow beans if you can. My husband got our kids to eat parsley by telling them that knights used to chew on parsley to freshen their breath before greeting a maiden."

In Michael Leviton's kitchen at home, cooking projects are sometimes his daughter's idea. The chef and owner of Lumiere, in West Newton, was reading Laura Ingalls Wilder's "Little House in the Big Woods" with Isadora, 7, when she expressed an interest in making butter. So they did. "I think in young kids it's a matter of instilling a desire to experience new things," he says. But he also lays down the law: You don't have to eat it but you do have to try it, he tells her.

"I didn't worry so much about whether or not my kids could cook," says Peter Davis, chef of Henrietta's Table in Cambridge. "I wanted to make sure they were comfortable with it and not afraid of the kitchen as so many kids are." Jackie, 21, makes her own meals in a college apartment and Sean, 23, enjoys cooking, says their dad. It was time in the kitchen with his own mother that led Davis to his career.

Ming Tsai, chef and owner of Blue Ginger in Wellesley, also learned cooking from his parents and grandparents growing up in Dayton, Ohio, helping out at his family's restaurant. He and his brother would help make hundreds of dumplings at home, setting them out on the basement ping-pong table.

"Fast forward to me now with two boys," Tsai says. "I love to cook with them. Fortunately, they like it, too; making fried rice, making dumplings. They like to get their hands dirty." Henry, 7, and David, 10, aren't firing up the wok by themselves just yet, but they love to fold spring rolls, chop, and "like every kid in America" make sweets, their father reports.

He often leaves the restaurant for an hour and a half to make and eat dinner at home. On weekends, they cook together. "If the attitude is that cooking is a pain or a chore, kids won't want to cook. I say, Look how great these carrots are. Taste this maple syrup from Vermont. That'll make or break how they look at it," he says.

Some chefs who can't get home bring their children to them. At 2:30 every weekday afternoon, Manny Sifnugel collects his daughters from school and heads back to Masona Grill, the restaurant he owns in West Roxbury. "Then, we start making lunch," he says. Some days, it's grilled cheese. Others, a salad with grilled chicken and sesame orange dressing. Another favorite: yucca fries with steamed mussels. "They love food," says the Peruvian-born chef. His youngest, Natalia, 12, knows how long to cook a piece of chicken so it stays moist, and how to deglaze the pan. "They'll chow on just about anything," says dad.

In many circumstances, cooking can be comforting. James Boyd, executive chef at Children's Hospital Boston, loves to go to the bedsides of young patients with fondue and fresh fruit skewers. "Some of the kids I deal with don't want to eat," he says. "I like to go up there and cook whatever they like." Boyd has made an effort to take chicken nuggets and chicken Parm and make them more nutritious. He's done the same at home when cooking with daughters Carley, 13, and Lila, 11.

Didi Emmons of Haley House Bakery Cafe in Roxbury and Joshua Riazzi of the Urban Culinary Institute's Kids Can Cook program are mentors to youngsters who want to cook. Both chefs think kids will try something new if they have a hand in making it.

In her after-school youth culinary classes, Emmons starts with foods she knows they like, such as sweet potatoes, and introduces new vegetables with similar textures and tastes, such as butternut squash. "I am kind of sneaky," she admits, citing a lasagna recipe that includes spinach. "I try to get greens in whenever I can."

"I try to introduce some interesting techniques with food that will intrigue them," says Riazzi.

Sifnugel thinks that even parents on tight schedules should take a few minutes to bring their children into the kitchen. "Kids have been too removed, not only from good food, but also making good food," he says.

If Jamie Oliver saw the yucca fries and mussels on Sifnugel's table, he would rejoice. ■

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