

# THE EDIBLE SCHOOLYARD

“IT’S A BEAUTIFUL, CIVILIZING CENTER OF THE DAY,” SAYS ALICE WATERS OF SHARING A GOOD MEAL AND GOOD CONVERSATION AROUND A TABLE. WATERS IS NOT, HOWEVER, WAXING RHAPSODIC ABOUT A MEAL AT CHEZ PANISSE, HER BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA, EATERY THAT SERVES FRESH, IN-SEASON INGREDIENTS FROM LOCAL ORGANIC FARMERS. RATHER, SHE’S TALKING ABOUT \$2 MEALS, THE DAILY SCHOOL LUNCH.

EVERY CHEF ALIVE KNOWS THAT ALICE WATERS IS A GURU. BUT NOW SHE’S GOT AN EVEN BIGGER IDEA THAN MERELY RECONCEIVING WHAT CHEFS PUT ON THEIR TABLES. JOHN GROSSMANN LAPPED UP WHAT ALICE HAD TO SAY—AND SERVE.

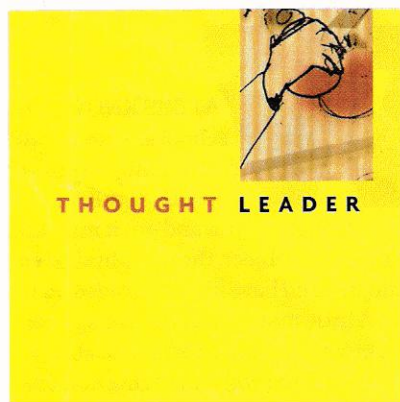


ILLUSTRATION BY MAJELLA LUE SUE

**W**ATERS KNOWS many lunch periods at school are not beautiful or a highlight of the day. Making them so is the revolution she proposes. “I think we should take school lunch out of maintenance and put it into academia,” Waters says. “Make it a subject, the way physical education was made a subject, and have kids get graded on it.”

A little more than a decade ago, reflecting on her accomplishments at Chez Panisse Restaurant and Café ([www.chezpanisse.com](http://www.chezpanisse.com)) and eyeing new challenges, Waters helped launch an innovative, still flourishing program, The Edible Schoolyard ([www.edibleschoolyard.org](http://www.edibleschoolyard.org)), at the Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School, not far from her restaurant. Her daughter was then 10, and Waters “worried about the future of our kids and the need to educate them about the consequences of the decisions that they make about food.” Her project turned Joni Mitchell’s classic line about paving paradise on its head: Out went an unused asphalt parking lot at the middle school and in came 100 tons of compost, followed by paradise, a 1-acre organic garden—the counterpart of an indoor kitchen classroom, where middle schoolers get to cook

“We know that kids *like* it, we know they learn about ecology and NUTRITION, and that when they’re involved in the *growing* and the *cooking*, that they want to eat those foods,” says Waters.

and eat vegetables they’ve watched ripen on the vine.

Before she became a star chef, Waters was a Montessori teacher, and her garden/kitchen project would have made Maria Montessori proud. The late Montessori’s education philosophy encourages teaching practical skills, including having children tend plants and animals as a part of school.

Often, Waters’ garden lessons and hands-on experiences in the kitchen dovetail with the curriculum. “The Edible Schoolyard is such a rich experience,” says Waters. “It relates to everything. It’s history. It’s math. It’s science.”

Blown by the winds of publicity, the seeds of that one project in 1994 have taken root elsewhere. “At this point there may be as many as 3,000 school gardens in California,” says Chelsea Chapman, program coordinator for the Edible Schoolyard at the Martin Luther King Jr. school in Berkeley. Moreover, so-called farm to school programs are growing apace.

“When I came on board four years ago,” says Anupama Joshi, program director of the National Farm to School Program, headquartered at the Center for Food and Justice ([departments.oxy.edu/uepi/cff](http://departments.oxy.edu/uepi/cff)) at Occidental College in Los Angeles, “you could count the number of participating school districts across the country on your fingers and toes. And most

of those did not really have comprehensive programs. Now you see 400 programs—and that’s a conservative estimate.” But perhaps even more emblematic of the growing interest in feeding America’s children healthier foods is who might be on the other end of the line when Joshi picks up her phone. “A couple years back, the inquiries were from parents or community groups working on school food issues,” she says. “Now it’s food service directors and school board members calling for information and asking, ‘Where can I find farmers?’”



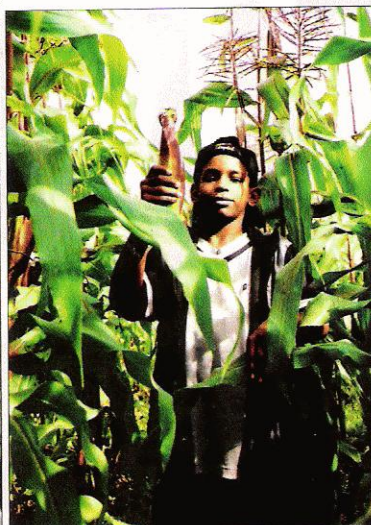
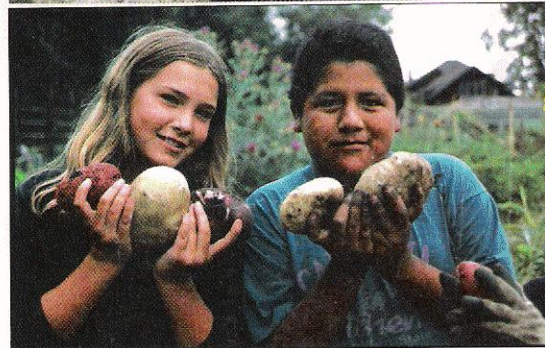
Waters showcased a smaller, demo version of the Edible Schoolyard in the nation’s capital on the National Mall last summer, serving lunch to federal agriculture and health department officials and a number of interested senators while pressing the latest, far more ambitious initiative that’s on her plate. The Edible Schoolyard, she’s now letting America know, was in effect only the appetizer. Now comes the entree.

Currently under construction just downhill from the King school organic garden, and scheduled to open in September 2007, is a multimillion-dollar Dining Commons that will boast a kid-friendly open kitchen and space to seat 400 students. Here, sponsors including the Berkeley Unified School District ([www.berkeley.k12.ca.us](http://www.berkeley.k12.ca.us)), the San Francisco Bay-area Center for Ecoliteracy ([www.ecoliteracy.org](http://www.ecoliteracy.org)), Children’s Hospital Oakland Research Institute ([www.chori.org](http://www.chori.org)) and Waters’ own Chez Panisse Foundation ([www.chezpanissefoundation.org](http://www.chezpanissefoundation.org)) seek nothing less than a total makeover—philosophic, operational and nutritional—of school lunches, which nowadays deserve mostly failing grades nationwide.

“It’s horrendous,” says Ann Cooper, author of the forthcoming book *Lunch Lessons: Changing the Way We Feed Our Children* and the director of nutrition services for Berkeley’s

Unified School District—pointing to the flood of heavily processed, cheap commodity foods fed to U.S. children every day.

“The CDC [Centers for Disease Control] said recently that of children born in the year 2000, 30 to 40 percent will develop diabetes. That will cripple the healthcare system in America. We spend \$50 billion a year on diet aids and \$117 billion a year on diet-related illness. And \$7 billion a year on school lunches,” says Cooper. She pegs the average daily per-student expenditure at \$2.32, with almost half of that not



and meats will never be as cheap as government surplus chicken nuggets or breaded mozzarella sticks. “It’s really whether you want to pay up front or out the back,” says Waters, stressing the value of spending on prevention instead of treatment, of investing in the health of children versus paying many times more to address obesity-related diseases later.

When asked how well this school lunch experiment can be transplanted beyond garden- and farm-friendly California, especially to colder regions of the country where prime harvests coincide with summer vacation, Waters mentions Eliot Coleman, an organic farmer in Maine: “He does greenhouseing—and raises terrific lettuces and carrots. And we have to think about dried beans and grains and eating more seasonally.” Chez Panisse, she notes, offers tomatoes only four months of the year. “Maybe this isn’t a stumbling block,”

Waters suggests. “Maybe it’s an opportunity. We have to put all of our best minds to sharing the experience of agriculture.”

Todd Wickstrom is a co-founder of Ann Arbor, Michigan-based Heritage Foods USA ([www.heritagefoodsusa.com](http://www.heritagefoodsusa.com)) who helped start a program called Agrarian Adventure at the city’s Tappan Middle School. “If this can work in Northern California, why can’t it work in Michigan?” he asks. “We’re going to [use] greenhouses and root cellars, and a lot of preserving, like curing ham, even making cheese. The ultimate goal is much like what Alice is working on in

even going toward food or milk, but to overhead and salaries.

The School Lunch Initiative ([www.schoollunchinitiative.org](http://www.schoollunchinitiative.org)) seeks to accomplish on a daily basis what the Edible Schoolyard program only begins to approach with its once-a-week sessions in the garden and kitchen classroom. The goal: to prepare a nutritious, locally sourced meal and gather classmates and teachers around a well-set table daily. Afterward, students will be encouraged to help clean up, loading the dishwasher and carrying food scraps to their garden compost pile.

“The idea is to replicate this across the country in every public school,” says Waters. “The obesity crisis is so serious that we need to teach this—and teach it in a way that’s interactive and really engaging. From the experience at the Edible Schoolyard, we know this works. We know that kids like it, we know they learn about ecology and nutrition, and that when they’re involved in the growing and the cooking, that they want to eat those foods.”

Most of the food will have to come from local farmers, as the on-site garden alone can’t possibly feed hundreds of students a day. And even with teachers and parent volunteers lending plenty of hands in the Dining Commons, per-student lunch costs will necessarily rise. Organically raised vegetables

Berkeley—get the students to take over the lunch program by making lunch for each other with food that they either raised in their garden or have gotten from local farmers.”

Waters admits her idea may sound radical. “It’s a different way of seeing food,” she says. “It’s bringing kids into a relationship with food that’s connecting them with culture. I don’t want food to be ‘over there’—in that place in this country that is simply about health and disconnected from the rest of people’s lives, about whether we’re overindulging or we’re denying ourselves. As in other cultures, it needs to be an everyday experience that is rewarding to people.”

“Have you bitten off—”

Waters finishes the question. “—too much? Well, if I could think of any other way, I would do it. This is clearly a complicated idea.”

“Yet at its core,” it is suggested, “a very simple one.”

“Yes,” she agrees. “When you look at what’s happening at the Martin Luther King Jr. school and you see these kids, it looks as right as rain.”

*Sky Contributing Editor John Grossmann writes about business and travel from his base in New Jersey.*

