

GREEN LIVING: CONSUMER NEWS

Hold the Sugar and Salt

Angry Moms are Demanding Big Changes in the School Cafeteria

By Jim Motavalli

Amy Kalafa is a seriously angry mom. Middle school kids in her Connecticut suburb (and elsewhere around the country) want to do the right thing when it comes to lunch. They also listen to the barrage of societal messages about staying slender, of course, so they often choose “light” yogurt as a snack. Healthy, right? “Wrong!” says Kalafa, a filmmaker whose documentary *Two Angry Moms* about school lunch scandals was just completed.

“Kids don’t read labels,” she says, “but if they did, they’d see that two of the main ingredients in that yogurt are high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS) and aspartame artificial sweetener. These are negative nutrients, depriving young bodies of what they need. Our kids are being deliberately misled by food companies marketing this stuff and saying it’s healthy.” *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* reported that consumption of HFCS increased 1,000 percent between 1970 and 1990, paralleling the rise of childhood obesity.

Changing Menus

The school lunch menu, immortalized as glop thrown on the plate by hairnetted “lunch ladies” with ice cream scoops, is under serious revision. Local and state “wellness” policies are having an effect, and some schools have removed soda machines and unhealthy snack foods. Select service providers have switched to “reformulated” products with less salt and sugar. But many parents would like to see deeper changes, including more locally grown, organic and fresh ingredients on cafeteria menus. That demand is creating entrepreneurial opportunity.

Brown Bag Naturals, launched by a former investment banker, is currently catering fresh lunches to 15 schools in the Los Angeles area, but it has plans to go national in four cities. Founder Adam Zauder says the natural food companies he worked with had grown frustrated by their inability to get their products into the closed shop

known as the school cafeteria.

Brown Bag Naturals started by working with private schools that did not have food preparation facilities, and were instead allowing fast-food providers to cater. Most of the schools were happy to offer the healthy, \$5-per-meal alternative. One day students might tuck into a vegetable teriyaki bowl, with edamame and pineapple chunks; another day, a bean burrito, baby carrots and vanilla yogurt with granola. “These are wholesome versions of the food kids love,” Zauder says.

Beth Kimble of Beth’s Kitchen, also out of Los Angeles, had a similar idea. She minimizes canned, fried and frozen products, while offering a colorful menu to independent schools that includes organic, vegetarian and even vegan meals in eco-friendly packaging.

Agitating for Change

Dr. Susan Rubin, the other “angry mom,” has actually been banned from her school cafeteria for advocating change. The New York-based holistic health practitioner and founder of the Westchester Coalition for Better School Food serves as a consultant to several nearby school districts which have since adopted strong wellness policies. A national model is provided by chef Alice Waters and the Berkeley, California-based Edible Schoolyard, which links a one-acre organic garden with the Martin Luther King Junior Middle School to provide fresh food and a unique learning experience.

It pays to be an agitator. Elaine Lipson, author of the *Organic Foods Sourcebook*, advocates an 11-point plan that includes: talking to your kids about what they’re eating and what they might try; doing your homework about existing meal plans; setting clear and achievable goals for change (do you want easy-to-serve organic options in food service packaging, or are fresh fruits and vegetables more important?); starting small but thinking big; and learning from successes and failures. “Keep your eye on the prize of healthful foods for kids and a respect for nutrition and sustainability in educational systems,” she says.

Another point could be “avoid being greenwashed,” since the industry will try mightily to prove it can police itself. The Media and Childhood Obesity task force, for in-stance, includes representatives from Kraft

Foods, Coca-Cola, General Mills, McDonald's and Walt Disney. "You must be kidding me," says consumer advocate Mike Adams. "These are the companies whose products actually promote obesity."

California's Project Lean offers an elementary-level Snack Food Calculator to determine the nutritional content of your child's lunch offerings. It gives high grades to non-fried fruits and vegetables, seeds (including sunflower seeds), nuts, string cheese and nut butters. And former surfer and Greenpeace member Todd Winant created Earth Voice Food Choice which advocates for a plant-based diet in school cafeterias, with an extensive manual and DVD for students, parents and teachers who want to make changes.

School lunch reform can mean working from within the agricultural system. Farmers in four southern states are collaborating with schools, providing the ingredients that have served more than a million students in 72 districts with freshly cooked meals. In Davis, California, one moderately sized district buys 49 percent of its produce from local farmers. Urban students take part in New York Harvest for New York Kids Week, which includes visits to farms (and visits by farmers) so that kids can see where their food comes from. Oxfam America publishes a 38-page "Food and Farm Toolkit" for student organizers.

Do-It-Yourself

If you're tired of waiting for your school district to get hip, you can take lunch into your own hands and opt out of the meal plan. Mainstream offerings for struggling moms include Kraft Foods' Lunchables. The nacho version has 580 calories, 27 grams of fat and half a day's worth of sodium, according to a Slate magazine test. "The only healthy thing in the lunch, the spring water, was spoiled by the addition of sugary Kool-Aid powder," the magazine said.

If, like Amy Kalafa, you give Lunchables a miss (she lets the kids have them once a year—if they're good), you'll have to provide your own healthy alternatives.

There are a bunch of new products to make that easier.

The Ecobags Lunch Sack (\$6) allows you to forego brown bags. It's made from certified organic cotton with Velcro closures and is machine washable. It comes both in natural canvas and with frog and cat prints. Another approach is the Laptop Lunch System (\$35), a recyclable plastic box with sealable containers for fresh ingredients. It contains an insulated carrying case, utensils, a water bottle and a book, *The Laptop Lunch User's Guide*. For \$2, you can add non-toxic freezable ice packs to keep everything cold.

In 2007, the concept of the healthier lunch is still relatively new and many of the emerging options are not yet available nationally. But it's only a matter of time before that void will be filled. There are a lot of angry moms out there.

JIM MOTAVALLI, *editor of E*, is the father of two school-aged lunch consumers.