

EATER AT LARGE

READIN', WRITIN', COOKIN'

Tackling culinary literacy on the East End.

BY MARY MORGAN

Last year, in a story that some people still haven't heard, a group of precocious young ladies at the East Hampton Middle School stopped eating the school-provided lunches. These food revolutionaries had just seen the film "Supersize Me," in which the star nearly kills himself by exclusively eating fast food for one month. So the students turned their backs on pizza and burgers, and began to demand more fruit and vegetables. The boycott spread and, one month later, the school's foodservice company, having noted the drop in sales, brought in a salad and yogurt bar and began serving entrées with less sugar and fat and more real ingredients.

The East Hampton school didn't stop there. With a grant from the East End Convivium of Slow Food and teaching expertise from marine youth educators from Cornell Cooperative Extension, the school's existing nutrition program, Bonac on Board for Wellness, launched a 16-week afterschool program called "Healthy Bodies, Healthy Bays." Fifth and sixth graders visited farms, met with a beekeeper, picked apples, harvested potatoes, raked clams, hiked

a groundwater recharge area, and cooked a meal from scratch. This past spring, the students planted and tended an edible school garden, an idea sparked by chef and food activist Alice Waters, who in 1996 developed the first edible schoolyard in Berkeley, CA, and has since revamped the food kids eat in the entire school district.

In fact, more than 400 school districts, including New York City, the nation's largest, are buying produce from nearby farms in an attempt to make their meals tastier and more nutritious. Part of the motivation is the fact that nearly 20 percent of American kids are overweight and a childhood of soda, fried food, and sugared treats could mean that this could be the first generation in history to have a lower life expectancy than their parents.

But food also provides a perfect medium for teaching kids about a lot



more than healthy living. At the Hayground School in Bridgehampton, the newly finished Jeff's kitchen is the setting for lessons in chemistry, biology, and the surrounding land and water. ECCO Farm in East Hampton is developing a Learning Cart, modeled on the canary-yellow cart that Toad, Water Rat, and Mole, from *The Wind in the Willows*, use on their first adventure, that wheels into a classroom to capture the attention and imagination of the class with lessons that range from "composting from lunch" to "painting in the garden." (The farm has already spoken with teachers at Sag Harbor Elementary School and Springs School among others.)

Currently most of these projects are emanating from the South Fork's private schools, but they are spreading beyond. When it created its "cafeteria as culinary classroom" a decade ago, the Ross School in East Hampton showed that using seasonal (and mostly organic) ingredients didn't have to scare away students or break the school's budget. (A Harvard Medical School assessment of the program showed not only that students were eating twice as

many veggies as the national average, but the good habits rubbed off on 80 percent of parents.) *Edible East End* wants to help this interest spread, so if you need information on how to get your school involved, please write us at info@edibleeastend.com. Here's a sampling of images and ideas to get you inspired.

Joe Realmuto, executive chef, Nick & Toni's, East Hampton, who developed a cooking curriculum for the Hayground School and is sharing it with other schools.

"I have two young children that love to eat all kinds of food and also enjoy cooking with me at home, and I feel it is because I get them involved. I have also participated, in conjunction with Ecco Farm and Boys and Girls Harbor, in getting young inner city children involved



Above: The new garden at East Hampton Middle School. **Inset:** The ECCO Farm learning cart.



with harvesting from the farm then bringing it to the restaurant and cooking a three-course meal, and it is really cool to see children that will never dare eat some of this food at home eat it after they cook it themselves.”

Liz Bertsch, teacher, Hayground School, Water Mill.

“Built in loving memory of a Hayground founder, Jeff Salaway, Hayground’s state-of-the-art teaching kitchen houses the ‘Young Chef’s Program.’ Workshop model classes teach Hayground’s oldest students the skills, concept, and techniques of the culinary arts by cooking alongside master chefs of the East End. In addition to chef-lead workshops, the students attend field trips to the Fish Farm in Amagansett, Wölffer

Estates and Satur Farm.

“Hayground’s younger students also learn in the kitchen by cooking alongside their teachers while making lunch, and with parents on various cooking-related projects. Some of last year’s science fair projects involved cooking and baking. Hayground students learn not only the how’s and why’s of cooking during the school day from individuals who love what they do, they are learning that what they are preparing has immediate consequences—their learning culminates in a lunch or perhaps a cookie.”

Ginny Reale, teacher, and “Healthy Bodies, Healthy Bays” instructor, East Hampton Middle School.

“Watching the students’ progress from being reluctant to put their hands in the soil, to eagerly planting, weeding, adding worms, harvesting and tasting the many vegetables and edible flowers we grew. It was truly a teacher’s dream.”

Stacy Myers, marine educator, Cornell Cooperative Extension Marine Program, and “Healthy Bodies, Healthy Bays.”

“It’s been such a pleasure to see these students so excited about real food—raking clams and eating their first clam, planting edible violets and eating their first flower. We asked them what ‘slow food’ meant and they all knew—not fast food which is not real food. We also talked a lot about the importance of farming in our community, and planting native species. Now they’re hooked on gardening.

Ruby Honerkamp, former student at East Hampton Middle School, now sophomore at East Hampton High School.

“After Mary Scoscia’s nutritious visits [Healthy Bodies, Healthy Bays] to our lunch room, a lot of students began to realize the facts from fiction. We learned that the sweetened snacks the school was serving us was really bad stuff. She showed us scales of sugar as well as comparisons between different varieties of food, and the healthier, smarter choice. We realized from her visits that we needed to begin to make healthier choices or else bad outcomes would result. The only way to get through what we really wanted was a boycott.

“A lot more brown bagged lunches began to appear throughout the cafeteria. There was an article in the local paper and, as a result, an anonymous donor gave the money needed for a special fridge with healthier choices, such as fresh vegetables, water, and fresh fruit.

“I’m now entering my second year at the East Hampton High School, and there isn’t any motivation or support [for better food choices]. Being an underclassmen I don’t have much of a voice.”

Scott Chasky, Quail Hill Farm manager, Amagansett, quoted from his recent book, *This Common Ground* (Viking, 2005).

“On their visit to Quail Hill the children are introduced to carrots in the ground, an abundance of spuds in the hills under our silt loam, and Matt’s Wild Cherry tomatoes, sweeter than Snickers, right off the vine. I am left with a packet of drawings of lettuces, cabbage, workers in the field, the queen of the bees, the tire swing under a great beech tree, and ‘hen-baby’ in the coop. The children leave, I believe, with a deeper, more secure sense of the unpredictable, fertile, wild world of Nature. John Hay reminds us that the word “nature” has a Latin root that translates as ‘to be born.’

“Given the volume we hope to produce, we welcome the eighth-grade class that can complete the seeding of 40 trays in less than an hour (128 cells x 3 onion seeds per cell x 40 trays = 15,360 potential onions). For the sake of morale I praise the speed of the students, but secretly what pleases me is the contact between hand and seed. The infant plant is invisible, secure in a child’s palm, but the contact between the physical and potential is visible.” □

Above, left: Miche Bacher with students in Jeff’s Kitchen at the Hayground School. **Below:** The Ross School Café during breakfast.

