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Edible Education

by Jeanne Hodesh

Alice Waters believes that all children should be fed at school. And you can probably guess that the owner of Chez Panisse and founder of the Edible Schoolyard, a nonprofit at a middle school in Berkeley, California, does not mean the sloppy joes and mushy apples you might remember from your school days. At the "Edible Education" panel during Slow Food Nation, Waters argued that the only effective way to change our approach to food in this country is to feed every child breakfast, lunch, and an afternoon snack of good, clean, fairly grown food. Waters was joined by Anya Fernald, Josh Viertel, and moderator Katrina Heron, all activists in the Slow Food movement and passionate proponents of Edible Education.

Waters isn't talking about a simple upgrade in cafeteria food or the installment of a school garden. Instead, she advocates building an entire curriculum around food and how it is grown. "In math class they should be counting beans instead of buttons," she explained. "Little kids get it just like that...they learn these lessons very quickly." She believes we should focus less on "telling children what not to do," and more on "engaging them in a new relationship with food that is associated with pleasure."

To say this is a giant feat is an understatement. In order to successfully implement the goals of Edible Education, we must overcome societal habits, class and racial divisions, and cost factors. Where do we begin?

Fernald, executive director of Slow Food Nation, recounted the first time she tried to get farmers to interface with the school system, when she was working with Community Alliance with Family Farmers, a 30-year-old organization that supports family-scale agriculture and social justice. It was all warm and fuzzy feelings until the carrots arrived at the school kitchen caked with dirt. Here's what those dirty carrots have to stand up against: At a school in Fresno, Fernald encountered a cafeteria of children who were made to sit at tables eating their lunches with their backpacks strapped on. Other students who were recognized for academic achievement were awarded with Happy Meals that they ate on the cafeteria stage, in peace and under a spotlight. (They were also allowed to put their backpacks on the floor.) "What they are learning about being a model citizen is dictated by a fast food nation," Fernald said. And when children are eating Twix-flavored yogurt and frozen burritos, mushy vegetables and under ripe apples, is it any surprise that they often avoid fruits and vegetables altogether?

In addition to figuring out how to get healthy, fresh produce into institutional kitchens, another obstacle is finding and training people to prepare the food. Viertel, director of the Yale Sustainable Food Project, which directs a dining program at the university, described the kitchen staff's initial resistance to using produce from the Yale farm. Peeling garlic was arduous compared to opening a bag of lettuce. But after about three weeks, he heard a staff member say 'I used to feel like I was just a cook at Yale, but now I feel like a chef.'

While strides are being made, the bigger picture comes down to support. "We need to reinvest in public education," said Waters. She recalled how John F. Kennedy's administration introduced physical education into the curriculum. Gyms were built and teachers were hired; now students nationwide take gym class two or three times a week. A similar change in our approach to food-related education is not unimaginable. "Our government has been on the side of the problem makers for too long. We've got some problem solvers here," Heron noted. "For me, Edible Education has always meant the possession of pleasure. We should stand up and act; be militant. To be deprived of that connection is a disgrace. These are children going without."