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Where's the Kitchen Sink?

Degraded facilities and strained budgets keep fresh-cooked meals out of Santa Cruz County school cafeterias.

By Serena Renner



Photograph by Curtis Cartier

Here's the Beef: In the Pajaro Valley Unified School District's central kitchen, Paulette Carson stacks burgers for distribution to schools.

INSIDE the central kitchen at Pajaro Valley Unified School District in Watsonville, food service workers arrive at 6am to prepare the daily lunch shipment. Donning aprons and hair nets, the lunch ladies stand in assembly-line fashion as they remove individually wrapped frozen chicken patties from cardboard boxes, sandwich them between two buns and place them along a conveyer belt where they are shrink-wrapped for delivery to the district's schools.

Nary a pan is dirtied in the process--neither today nor on most days. Cast-iron stoves and convection ovens are on-site, but they are seldom fired up in preparation for student lunches. Food service employees used to pat out hamburger patties by hand and cook them in-house, but high labor costs have forced the department to scale down and centralize. The staff no longer has capacity to whip up 9,000 lunches from scratch and deliver them to 32 schools in time for the lunch bell to sound.

The rising cost of labor, coupled with outdated facilities, has led many local districts to contract with commercial processors like Advance and Tyson, which chop, pre-cook and package food for departments looking to reduce staffing hours. Districts can take the raw meat they receive through the federal commodity donation program and pay a minimal fee to have it processed into nuggets, patties, dinosaur bites, you name it, said director of Food Services Nicole Meschi.

"It's definitely a value to us because our labor is the biggest cost," she says. Space is another issue. "Even if we did have enough money to pay everybody, a lot of our kitchens are like closets."

Now the closest the district comes to cooking is adding water to dehydrated beans and mashed potatoes or baking pizza from pre-made dough. Most entrees are frozen and are warmed up at the individual sites before serving.

While reformers are fighting to see more fresh, locally grown food served at their neighborhood schools, they're running up against decades of industrial-style meal production that have left school kitchens nearly incapable of delivering any thing else.

The Rise of the 'Satellite' Kitchen

According to a recent survey by the Student Nutrition Association, more than 80 percent of schools cook fewer than half of their entrees from scratch. Not surprising, nearly 50 percent of schools use the commodity allocations they receive from the government based on the number of reimbursable meals served, mainly for processed foods.

According to Cynthia Hawthorne, chairman of the Santa Cruz City School District's Wellness Committee, many districts have slashed food spending to conserve money in strained general funds.

The result has meant lower-quality food and degraded facilities--either from neglect, renovation or being altogether left out of construction projects.

Santa Cruz City Schools allocated \$30,000 last winter for an extensive review of the food services department. The report, released in January, exposed inadequate dishwashing facilities, refrigeration, storage and temperature holding equipment, among other challenges.

"They no longer have anywhere for the kids to sit down and eat," says Beth Collins, one of the food system consultants who conducted the assessment. "The kitchens are in very poor condition, if you can even call them kitchens."

Pajaro Valley Unified School District faces similar obstacles, according to Sue Brooks, who held the position of food service director from 1994 until last year. In the process of building the central kitchen, other kitchens were transformed into "satellites," primarily responsible for storing and reheating meals, she says. At some schools, dishwashers were ripped out and replaced with freezers. In others, freezers were converted to refrigerators. Newer schools were built without fully-equipped kitchens to save costs and square footage.

Unhappy Meals

After paying for labor, which often accounts for about 60 percent of a food service department's budget, districts are left with a little over \$1 to prepare a nutritious meal of meat or protein, grains, fruits and vegetables and milk.

Deciding what goes on the menu is often an act of juggling pennies, where spending 30 cents extra on an entree could wipe out the entire budget for fruits and vegetables.

"The dollar for an entree is usually the breaker," Meschi says. "Once in a while, we might put on something that's a dollar, but we could not afford to do that every day."

Most of what the district can scrape together are processed items like chicken tenders, corn dogs and hamburgers that they can get for 50 to 60 cents from large distributors. However, there is a daily vegetarian option, and all entrees are served with a choice of fresh fruits, vegetables and milk.

While some would argue that the district is still serving what looks like fast food to the most needy students, kitchen manager Paula Barajas said meals have to meet certain federal guidelines that regulate fats, carbohydrates, sodium and cholesterol. The state has gone even further by banning the sale of candy and soda and raising reimbursement rates for districts that eliminate transfat, the nonessential fat that has been linked with higher risk of heart disease, and fried food from their lunches.

"When people see a corn dog on our menu, they're thinking, 'Oh my God, that's terrible,'" Barajas says, "but it's not deep fat fried, it has some whole grain cornmeal in it. We're using a chicken or turkey dog, so we're trying to be as healthy as we can in those areas."

Still others like Hawthorne maintain that schools can do better in addressing the country's childhood obesity and Type-II diabetes epidemic by introducing kids to more nutritious foods at an earlier age.

"Schools are absolutely key in changing our national health crisis and providing the educational tools for students, families and communities to pave the pathway to wellness," she says.

Kitchenless Chef

In response to growing concerns about processed food, Santa Cruz City Schools recently hired James Smith to head the nutrition services department and help move the district away from the heat-and-serve food model in favor of a scratch-cooking system.

Although Smith has a background in culinary arts, he will have to wait some time before the infrastructure is in place to start sautéing student lunches. In the meantime, the district has decided to outsource elementary and middle school meals to Revolution Foods, an Oakland-based vendor dedicated to offering fresh-cooked entrees comprised of organic and local ingredients whenever possible.

Revolution Foods' 17,000-square-foot Oakland kitchen opens at 3am, but preparation like grating cheese and mixing vinaigrettes could begin as early as the day before delivery. Meals are cooked on-site then chilled for the daily ride over the hill to Santa Cruz before being reheated again upon serving.

Some critics worry about complications en route from Oakland or question whether the district could produce similar meals itself, but Hawthorne maintains that the contract is an interim step to ensure quality food while the district assesses how to improve its facilities.

"We need someone to help us create options to provide healthier foods," she says. "Right now we didn't have another option."

Founder and CEO of Revolution Foods Kristin Richmond said the company's mission is to transform school meals nationwide and raise expectations for how students are fed.

"I think bringing real food back into schools is so important as we try to build life-long healthy eating habits among our students," Richmond says. "They can see the food they're eating and identify it and recognize that it doesn't come from a package or the freezer at a convenience store."

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While Stephanie Raugust, nutrition coordinator at Pacific Elementary School District in Davenport, agrees that scratch cooking is the best way to offer healthy meals, she thinks outsourcing ignores the real need to put kitchens back in schools. Raugust runs the "food lab" at Pacific Elementary, which uses the kitchen as an opportunity to teach kids nutrition education and life skills as they prepare daily meals for students and staff.

"Students learn to apply skills they will use throughout their lives," Raugust says. "They won't have to rely on processed food, or fast food to meet their needs. They learn to do it for themselves."

Parents, food service staff and educators alike are looking toward the reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act Sept. 30, 2009, to provide needed support for struggling departments trying to include more scratch-cooked food, fruits, vegetables and local ingredients in their programs.

The Child Nutrition Act, which governs federal child feeding programs including the National School Lunch Program, is renewed every five years to address funding levels, health standards and ways to improve child nutrition.

For Meschi and others like her in the trenches, nothing will happen until the public funds its schools.

"We all want to do what's right for kids," Meschi says, "but it always comes down to: what is it going to cost?"

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