

# *Recipe for Change*

One Lunch Lady's Fight  
for Our Children's Future



by Ann Cooper

**ORGANIC  
VALLEY**



*Family of Farms*

*education series*



RECIPE  
 for   
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ANN COOPER



**MOST** PEOPLE DON'T consider "lunch lady" a flattering title. I am privileged to be changing that fact every day I get up and go to work. My story is about choosing challenges, and the unexpected discoveries we make in life's journey, if we are paying attention.

I'm an unlikely advocate for childhood nutrition. Before 2000 I spent most of my 30 plus years in the culinary world as a "white tablecloth" celebrity chef, never cooking for kids, and in fact having no idea what they ate.

The road that led me from celebrity chef to lunch lady started years before, when I first found my passion and the talents born of my own way of learning.



# 1

## Food for Thought

**AS** A CHILD I STRUGGLED IN THE CLASSROOM, and in today's world I'd probably be diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder as well as dyslexia. I simply don't learn in the same way as other people, and so I don't approach my work in ways that others would consider "normal." So I dropped out of high school and ended up in Colorado, intent on being a professional "ski bum."

I soon discovered that being a ski bum isn't very lucrative, and even though I had never worked, much less cooked, I talked my way into a position as an assistant breakfast cook. Here I discovered my great love, food—and discovered myself as well. I often say it saved my life. I found that cooking was something I loved to do, but moreover it revealed the gifts and talents hidden behind my unusual learning style. Food is a learning vehicle to all the senses, and it awakened all of mine. Cooking made me hungry in every sense of the word...hungry to learn, to explore, to share, to create, to give back all that I was receiving, in new and delicious ways.



After a while, to support myself, I started a baking company with my best friend. Here I was, graduated from ski bum to business owner, transformed by food. I was inspired to attend culinary school—but was promptly rejected because I did not have a high school diploma.

Inspiration may not move every mountain, but a dash of determination kept me pushing. I pursued my GED and after receiving it was accepted into the Culinary Institute of America. The school years were tough. When I started school I was living in my car, working full time while striving to make the most of my learning experience. I graduated with honors, at a time when there were only 3 women in our class of 72.

This was the beginning of a colorful career that has spanned over 30 years, many states and two continents. My willingness to take risks (I was a former ski bum, after all) led me to accept my first Executive Chef job at the age of 28, and later to start a catering company that worked the gamut from parties serving 20,000, to intimate events for Hollywood stars, to backstage for the Grateful Dead. I never met a challenge that I didn't believe could be successfully overcome—which brings me to my work today. I aim to save the world by teaching children about the food they eat.

This not-so-humble goal began with a convergence of ideas in the early 1990s. In writing my first book, *A Woman's Place is in the Kitchen* (Cooper, Routledge, 1997) I met some of the most amazing chefs—Alice Waters, Nora Poullion, Odessa Piper—whose passion and drive have become synonymous with healthy, nutritious food in our country.

# Bitter Harvest

COOPER  
HOLMES

# Bitter Harvest

A CHEF'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE MODERN  
DANGERS IN THE FOODS WE EAT  
WHAT YOU CAN

COOPER  
HOLMES

# In Mother's Kitchen

Cooper  
"A Woman's Place Is in the Kitchen"

So many of the women I interviewed were making natural, organic, sustainable food the hallmarks of their menus. The language of their ideals became part of the dining public's vernacular. Through the sustainable cuisine network Chefs Collaborative<sup>1</sup>, I found a great number of visionary chefs, farmers, and other food suppliers who are dedicated to changing the way Americans purchase and consume food. It was then that I began to realize our food was making us sick, and that was the inspiration for my second book, *Bitter Harvest* (Cooper/Holmes, Routledge, 2000).

In *Bitter Harvest* I explored the symbiosis between our food, our health, and the health of the Earth. I learned that over 40% of cancer is thought to be diet related. The cause? Chemicals and additives used in food production, as well as health implications of a diet high in trans fats and refined sugar. I discovered that the ages at which puberty and menopause are reached are going down, as are sperm counts. The cause? Hormones and endocrine system disruptors in our food and the environment. I also learned that excess fats, sugars, and food additives are making us fat—really fat. Two-thirds of all American adults and one-third of all American children are overweight or obese. And the fat is killing us. If we don't change our ways, we will eventually eat ourselves into extinction.

In fact, we are already headed down that path. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) recently stated that children born in the year 2000 (6 year olds at the time of this writing) will be the first generation in America's history to die at a younger age than their parents, due in



large part to what we feed them. The CDC went further to state that of those same 6 year olds, one out of every three Caucasians and one out of every two Hispanics and African Americans will have diabetes in their lifetimes—the majority before they reach their eighteenth birthday.

What I learned while writing *Bitter Harvest* overwhelmed me, and inspired me to use my talents to make a difference. Still, when I was offered the position of Executive Chef at The Ross School in East Hampton, New York, I couldn't at first imagine taking the job. I thought, "What, me? Walk away from the applause and the glitter and the egoism—the cutting edge of the culinary world—to be a *lunch lady*?"

Well, walk away I did. Ross School founder Courtney Ross and I shared a dream that if we could change the way children ate and thought about food, that we could make a positive impact for generations to come. With the help and support of an amazing team of chefs, we "grew" a program called **R.O.S.S.** (Regional, Organic, Seasonal, Sustainable).



**Regional:** The best food is grown close to home and comes without the consumption of large amounts of fossil fuels.

**Organic:** Healthy food is produced without the addition of synthetic chemicals, pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers which pollute our food, water and bodies.

**Seasonal:** Food should be eaten at the height of its season, which is also when it is most flavorful and delicious.

**Sustainable:** Food should be grown and produced in ways that promote the long term viability and health of everyone on the planet—including our children and our farmers.

R.O.S.S. became a mantra for the school food service team and it literally changed the way the Ross students, faculty, staff, parents, and even the larger community ate and thought about food. Once we had Ross up and running I began working in New York City at the public school level as well as with Harlem Children's Zone's Promise Academy.

During this work I became more and more convinced that we need a major change to our entire food system if we are to save our health, the health of our children and the future health of the Earth—and this change needs to happen in the places where our next generation learns.

It was then that I made the decision to commit all of my time to working in the public school system. In 2004 I began working for Alice Waters' Chez Panisse Foundation<sup>2</sup>. The following year I became the Director of Food and Nutrition for the Berkeley Unified School District, working on the School Lunch Initiative<sup>3</sup>, a comprehensive strategy to transform the way children are educated about food, health, and the environment. I think it's the hardest job I will ever have.

National School Lunch Guidelines became a federal mandate in 1994, but 12 years later schools are still struggling to meet its demands. While 70% of all elementary schools meet government mandated nutrient guidelines, only a mere 20% of secondary schools have been able to do so. Some people assert that while in school, children most often choose the foods they get at home, and while there may be a great deal of truth to that, it's also true that kids are being bombarded with an overwhelming amount of extremely persuasive advertising for high-fat, low-nutrient foods every day. In fact, food companies spend approximately \$17 billion to underwrite about 10,000 commercials annually, most for foods of little or no nutritional value.


School meals reach nearly 27 million kids a day and for some, what they eat at school remains the most nutritious

meal of their day. With childhood obesity at an all time high, kids need help and it is our job to help them.

## *A Recipe for Change*

1. Feed children better food.
2. Teach children about the importance of where their food comes from.
3. Teach them that their health and the health of the planet is one.
4. Serve—and save—the world.



A black and white photograph of a sage plant. The plant has several upright stems with small, opposite, lanceolate leaves. At the top of the stems are clusters of small, tubular flowers. A small, rectangular wooden label is placed in the center of the plant, with the word "SAGE" written vertically on it in capital letters. The background is dark and out of focus, showing more of the plant's foliage.

SAGE

# 2

## Growing a New Future, One Child at a Time

**NATIVE** AMERICANS BELIEVE THAT WE don't really inherit the earth; we borrow it from our children. If we agree that this is the case, we are obliged as trustees to care for our children's environment much as we care for our children themselves. Moreover, we (parents and educators alike) need to teach our children to be caretakers. We must instill in them a sense of the earth's value and the connection between its health—the health of its soil, air, water, plants and animals—and their own.

Much of this teaching can be accomplished in a school garden. The hands-on, real life experience of planting, tending, harvesting, preparing and eating food captures children's attention, creating awareness through all the senses. When kids work in a garden, when they smell and taste their own homegrown produce, they take the value of good food to heart. Playing in the soil and watering the plants brings home the connection between what we put in our environment and what it puts back in our bodies.



For kids all this can open the door to health awareness and a lifelong appetite for wholesome, organic foods.

As an educational setting, the garden is a powerful equalizer for kids—a level playing field. Just as the kitchen piqued my interest in ways a conventional classroom could not, the garden provides different learning opportunities that can inspire children who may otherwise struggle academically. The word “kindergarten” actually means “children’s garden,” guided play to cultivate children like plants and let them bloom. In the teaching garden, work is learning and it’s also creative play. In many ways—intellectually, interpersonally, often emotionally, even spiritually—the children grow along with the plants.

One of the best examples of this type of learning is the Edible Schoolyard at Berkeley’s Martin Luther King Middle School. The garden is a beautiful, lush oasis, and watching the students work in the garden, cook in the kitchen, and eat the fruits of their labor is a joyous experience for teachers, parents, and even passers-by. But there is so much more to it than what is seen by casual observation.

The Edible Schoolyard program is literally at the heart of the King Middle School experience. Farming is cyclic, and there is ritual in the act of growing food. Every year one of the first things sixth graders do is harvest the corn planted in the summer by the previous year’s outgoing sixth graders. They walk into the field where the cornstalks stand well above their heads. Many of them have never seen corn in its natural state before harvest, and just standing there with

the corn plants is a very powerful experience. Each child picks his own ear of corn and will likely be shocked to find a worm hiding behind the silks. The garden is organic, so pests are a natural part of the process. This early discovery gives teachers a jumping off point for a discussion of pests and the chemicals used in conventional farming. They show the children how to cut out the wormy bit and then cook the ears on the Edible Schoolyard's outdoor grill. Learning is accomplished through a process as natural and organic as the corn they have picked and this first lesson in agriculture, for many, is mind-blowingly intense. Right away, they're hooked.

After ten weeks in the garden, the students move into the kitchen where everything really comes together for them. Some of the crops they planted in the fall are ready for harvest, so their first big event—for many, their first cooking experience—is the winter squash and end-of-season tomato harvest. Each grade level is structured similarly, with the students rotating between the garden and the kitchen until they've experienced all growing and harvesting seasons.



# 3

## Road Map to Health

**SOLVING** OUR CRISIS OF FOOD, health, and planet takes two kinds of actions: those we can do in the public realm (in our schools, communities, and within our political system) and those we can do at home with our children.

From a community and government standpoint we need to work with our leaders to allocate more money for school food, including fresh whole foods in our schools. We need to work with our school administrators to enact strong nutrition policies in our schools to eliminate trans fats, high fructose corn syrup, and foods of minimal nutrient values (including soda, candy and the like) and promote healthy, delicious, nutritious fare.

I strongly believe that we need to make sweeping changes to the national policy behind the structure of school lunch programs. School lunch needs to be part of a national health initiative. We need to publicly recognize good food as preventative medicine for our children's health.

Public policy is slow to evolve, but in our homes we can have immediate influence over our children, and we can help to educate them in ways that will allow for their life-long health. Just as you would buckle your kid's seatbelt for a ride in the car, you can add some simple food health habits to your family's routine and increase the well-being of your children and yourself. It can even be fun!

First and foremost, cook and eat with your children. Bring them to the grocery store and the farmers market, and allow them to explore new foods and flavors. I always tell my cooks that to be successful you have to taste everything. To me, that adage holds true with life—taste it!

Sit down and eat with your kids, as often as you can. Make food time into family time, and nourish both body and soul.

Pack your child's lunch. Choose nutritious, healthy foods—high in complex carbohydrates, low in saturated fats, trans fats, and refined sugars. As you make purchasing decisions invoke the precautionary principle: When in doubt it's better to be safe than sorry. So buy as much organic and natural as possible. And pack it all in a lead-free, reusable lunch box.

Get dirty! Grow some food with your children, be it an organic garden, a box of herbs, a bucket of tomatoes, or a bowl of bean sprouts! You can take your kids to visit a community garden, a farmers market, or a nearby organic farm. Whatever you choose, what's important is to show children that food comes from the earth and that soil and water is best for our health and our planet

if it is free of chemicals and poisons. When kids learn where their food comes from, they learn a lot.

There's a simple recipe for creating a better future for the next generation. Make it one child at a time. That is, one plate of organic food, one garden, one cooking class, one farmer's market, and one child with dirty hands and a melt-your-heart smile at a time.





# Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Chefs Collaborative is a national network of more than 1,000 members of the food community who promote sustainable cuisine by celebrating the joys of local, seasonal, and artisanal cooking.  
<http://www.chefscollaborative.org>
- <sup>2</sup> Chef Alice Waters launched the Chez Panisse Foundation in 1996, which started the Edible Schoolyard project at Martin Luther King Middle School in Berkeley, CA. The nationally acclaimed Edible Schoolyard program inspired a movement that calls for putting gardens in all of California's schools.
- <sup>3</sup> The Edible Schoolyard also inspired the School Lunch Initiative, a collaboration between the Chez Panisse Foundation, Center for Ecoliteracy, Oakland Children's Hospital and the Berkeley Unified School District. The goal is to reinvent school lunch by giving food a central place in the academic experience, through three integrated components: cooking and gardening classes, healthy and delicious school lunches, and classroom curricula.  
<http://www.chezpanissefoundation.org>  
<http://www.schoollunchinitiative.org>

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Special thanks to Lisa Holmes for all of her help on this treatise and to Harper Collins for allowing parts of this to be adapted from *Lunch Lessons: Changing the Way We Feed Our Children* (Cooper and Holmes, 2006)

# Online Resources

## [www.DrGreene.com](http://www.DrGreene.com)

Up-to-date perspective from Dr. Greene on the latest findings in pediatrics, answers to parents questions, and a robust online community. Lots of organic information provided.

## [www.ChefAnn.com/blog](http://www.ChefAnn.com/blog)

Chef Ann Cooper is the renegade lunch lady who works to transform cafeterias into culinary classrooms for students—one school lunch at a time. Join this site for information about the importance of changing the way America feeds its children.

## [www.LunchLessons.org](http://www.LunchLessons.org)

Chef Ann's Healthy Kids Report Card and meal wheel provide parents and kids fun and educational ways to approach making healthy food choices.

## [www.ecoliteracy.org/programs/rs1.html](http://www.ecoliteracy.org/programs/rs1.html)

The Center for Ecoliteracy's Rethinking School Lunch program uses a systems approach to address the crisis in childhood obesity, provide nutrition education, and teach ecological knowledge.

## [www.foodsecurity.org/farm\\_to\\_school.html](http://www.foodsecurity.org/farm_to_school.html)

Farm to School programs work to counteract negative health trends while simultaneously promoting local sustainable agriculture by incorporating healthy, nutritious, produce into school lunches, snacks and salad bars. The Community Food Security's National Farm to School program provides information, policy support and technical assistance to community farm-to-school initiatives.

## [www.edibleschoolyard.org/homepage.html](http://www.edibleschoolyard.org/homepage.html)

The Edible Schoolyard is a non-profit program located on the campus of Martin Luther King Junior Middle School in Berkeley, California. The celebrated program provides urban public school students with a one-acre organic garden and a kitchen classroom. Using food systems as a unifying concept, students learn how to grow, harvest, and prepare nutritious seasonal produce.

## [www.slowfoodusa.org/education/index.html](http://www.slowfoodusa.org/education/index.html)

Slow Food in Schools is a unique national program of garden to table projects with children that cultivates the senses and teaches an ecological approach to food.

## [www.organicvalley.coop/school\\_lunch](http://www.organicvalley.coop/school_lunch)

Organic Valley Family of Farms fosters a deep commitment to childhood wellness initiatives, including supporting efforts to improve the quality of school lunches in the U.S. This page provides access to additional information on model school lunch programs and resources.



*Chef Ann Cooper, renegade lunch lady, is working to transform cafeterias into culinary classrooms for students—one school lunch at a time.*

*At The Ross School in East Hampton, NY, Chef Ann developed an integrated school lunch curriculum centered on regional, organic, seasonal, and sustainable meals. Now, as director of nutrition services for the Berkeley Unified School District, she is putting innovative strategies to work and providing fresh, organic lunches to all students.*

*Chef Ann is a graduate of The Culinary Institute of America, and the former president and current board member for Women's Chefs and Restaurateurs. She has sat on the U.S. Department of Agriculture National Organic Standards Board as well as the board of Chefs Collaborative.*

*She is the author of several books, including In Mother's Kitchen and Bitter Harvest. Her new book (September 2006) is Lunch Lessons: Changing the Way America Feeds its Children.*

*Organic Valley Family of Farms™ is a cooperative owned by hundreds of organic farm families joined across America. We are earth stewards honoring the interdependency of all of living things. Using nature as our teacher, we are proud to provide your family with farm-fresh dairy, juice, eggs, soy, and produce without the use of antibiotics, synthetic hormones, or pesticides.*

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[www.organicvalley.coop](http://www.organicvalley.coop)