

# OUT TO LUNCH

Children in the Gobi Desert are better fed than ours. With few exceptions, Toronto schools feed our kids crap **By James Chatto**



**Food fight: a typical meal from Ryerson Community**

**School's innovative food program**

**Image credit: Virginia MacDonald**

School food. If you're English and my age, those two small words are enough to drain the colour from your cheeks. Life in London in the 1960s was a groovy, swinging affair, but not in the sweltering, steam-wreathed kitchen of Hill House Boys' Preparatory School. Wednesday lunch was always roast lamb and vegetables—which doesn't sound so bad until you look at the plate more closely. The school cook—a formidable woman in a white coat and hairnet—made the mashed potatoes by heaving a sack of yellowish powder onto her shoulder, then tipping the contents into her bubbling cauldron. The soft, khaki-coloured peas were drained from a huge metal drum and tasted like zinc and mildew. The lamb came all the way from Australia to be heated and carved into slices of glistening gristle and pallid fat veined with

thin streaks of meat as fibrous, grey and rank as a gamekeeper's coat. School rules forbade us to leave the table until our plates were completely clean. So we'd roll the peas onto the floor or press them onto the underside of the table, using the stiffening mashed potato as putty. We would spit the unchewable lamb into our handkerchiefs or slip a slice inside a sock to be flushed down the lavatory later. Lunch was disgusting, but it was also nutritious in a basic way, and there was enough of it to stave off our hunger. Here in Toronto, in our dazzling modern age, there are children who aren't so lucky.

School food is a can of worms. Pry open the subject, peep inside and you're suddenly face to face with all sorts of political issues: the growing inequality between rich and poor; Canada's failure to deal with child poverty; the imminent disaster of a "pizza generation," in which childhood obesity has tripled over the past 30 years. Both obese and undernourished children grow up to be a massive drain on our health care system—in 2001, the direct health care costs of obesity alone totalled \$1.6 billion. It's stupid as well as shameful that Canada is one of the only developed countries without a federally funded nutrition program guaranteeing every child and teen at least one healthy snack or meal a day. While kids in Brazil and in villages in the Gobi Desert are fed by their respective governments, Ottawa gives our schoolchildren little more than the finger.

While queen's Park has never subsidized school cafeterias, the school board's budget became even tighter in 1997, when Mike Harris cut \$2 billion from Toronto's education funding. These days, provincial money is a pathetic trickle that joins a dribble of cash from impoverished city hall to drip into the Toronto District School Board's empty cup.

The board does what it can for the 83,000 students who rely on breakfast, snack and lunch programs to make it through the day: an average per diem of 25 cents per child in the city's 400 elementary schools and 47 cents for each teen in Toronto's 100 secondary schools. The trouble is that an elementary school lunch costs \$1.83, and a high school lunch costs \$2.95. In a typically Canadian way, the various levels of government rely on a patchwork of parents, students and charities to make up the difference. If a family has money, it's not so bad. The problem, however, lies with the 27 per cent of children who report they don't eat lunch. Moreover, child advocates cite that one in three children in this thriving metropolis lives below the poverty line. Often, they just go hungry.

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- Those Harris government cuts had another grim effect on our children. After amalgamation, the former City of Toronto board could no longer run its school cafs at a loss. Two-thirds of them across the city are now run by catering companies, and though many of them do offer healthy alternatives, profits are more easily derived from processed foods laden with fat, salt and sugar—in other words, crap.



**Lunch from Harbord Collegiate Institute**

**Image credit: Virginia MacDonald**

The TDSB tries to discourage reporters from bearing witness to these realities. I wanted to check out a typical cafeteria lunch myself, but the TDSB turned down my request, and I was forced to recruit a mole at Harbord Collegiate. Amid the daily speed-eating frenzy, I was told that the easy favourite is the battered chicken burger oozing pale greasy juice, paired with salty fries that have spent much too long in the deep fryer. Lasagna is a slightly healthier option, though the corners of the pasta sheets are curled and leathery, the core gummy with cheese. Snacks include faux McMuffins with bacon or sausage, as well as croissants and bagels. At the checkout, chocolate bars have recently been replaced by fruit leather, but you can still buy junk from the vending machines in the hall.

“About a quarter of the kids go across the street to eat lunch at the greasy spoon or a lousy Chinese place,” my 15-year-old mole confides. “If you made everyone eat healthy food in the caf, they’d all go eat somewhere else.” Rather than an ineffective moratorium, the TDSB has come up with a strategy for the cafeterias it runs: undercharging for healthy food and overcharging for junk. For instance, they ask \$2.75 for a whole grain bagel with cheddar, a piece of fruit and a glass of milk, but charge \$6 for chicken fingers, fries and a large Coke. It’s a good first step.

The Board is fuelled by good intentions, but the real changes taking place in our school system are the result of a few individuals’ hard work. The TDSB was happy to let me visit

Ryerson Community School, an elementary school near Dundas and Spadina. It boasts a thriving food program, thanks in large part to its strong-willed principal, Karen Barnes, and the school's cook, Nimo Salah. Mrs. Salah, as the children call her, used to volunteer in the kitchen when her own children were students here in the '90s, but for the past eight years she has been on staff, running the snack and lunch programs. There's a huge cultural, religious and economic diversity among the students, but she sees that as an opportunity rather than a problem, happily introducing Asian kids to spaghetti and meatballs or Portuguese children to tandoori chicken.

Mrs. Salah welcomed me into the school's basement kitchen—cum—dining room, and I watched as she and her assistant set bowls of lettuce, cucumber and tomato on each of the half-dozen dining tables. Juice boxes and a squirt bottle of creamy, mildly flavoured dressing were placed beside them while Mrs. Salah stirred the main course: a giant casserole of halal chicken stew, the tender meat chopped small and mixed with corn, peas, lots of diced potato and a light tomato sauce. Textures were soft and the seasoning was kept deliberately subtle, but the taste of the meat and vegetables was disarmingly honest. A bell rang and suddenly the room was filled with kids, waiting for Grade 7 volunteers to bring them plates filled with delicious, fluffy brown and white rice and a ladleful of stew. The children told me, with considerable satisfaction, that they were allowed to mix and match—some choosing just rice and decorating it with a drizzle of dressing, others just salad. Smiling, Mrs. Salah gave a second helping to anyone who asked. The cheerful, well-mannered sense of community was palpable.

“Half our children bring their own brown bag lunch,” Karen Barnes explained to me later, “or parents pay \$1.50 a day for a child to be part of the lunch program. But we aren't going to demand the fee if someone can't pay it.” Thirty per cent of the program is funded by the Toronto Foundation for Student Success, the board's arm's-length charitable foundation. The rest comes from parents who can afford to pay—which helps subsidize families who can't. The same system works for the 25-cents-a-day snack program (it was fresh fruit with croissants and jam on the day I visited). “A hungry child can't concentrate or learn,” adds Barnes.

No one knows this better than Catherine Moraes, executive director of the TFSS. “We don't stick needles into our kids for that sort of research in Canada,” she points out, “but they do in the States and the science is the same. A reasonably active 17-year-old boy needs 2,700 calories a day for healthy muscles, organs and cognitive development. Hunger affects behaviour. School breakfast programs have a positive effect on attendance and psychosocial development.” As an example, she cites a 12-year-old boy in south Etobicoke who was continually disruptive in class. His teacher would send him down to the vice-principal's office four or five times a week. Eventually the vice-principal found out the boy was getting only one meal a day, at 8:30 at night. The teacher now buys him lunch, and he's become a mode



**Happy meals: Nimo Salah, the cook at Ryerson Community School, likes broadening her students' palates, introducing Asian kids to spaghetti or Portuguese kids to tandoori chicken**

**Image credit: Virginia MacDonald**

At the other end of Toronto's economic spectrum stands Upper Canada College. For the past seven years, its food has been catered by an international firm called Aramark, which also services 14 other private schools in and around Toronto. In the wood-paneled, portrait-hung upper dining hall, the boys line up for a 27-item salad bar, a deli sandwich station, soup, dessert and one of several hot dishes. Once or twice a week, Aramark chef Alvin Waldron and his team set up a cooking station in the corner of the hall. On the day I dropped by, they were offering a choice of three pastas for \$6.99: whole wheat penne rigate with tofu, purple broccoli, cauliflower and zucchini in a fresh-tasting, well-balanced tomato sauce; fusilli with chicken and vegetables; or the favourite, penne with moist poached salmon, sliced mushroom, onion, and plump, juicy shrimp in a delicate alfredo sauce. Rating it against the city's restaurants, I'd give it a creditable star. But UCC also has a retail cafeteria with an in-house Pizza Pizza that's equally popular.

It takes more than money and good intentions to feed children well. In England, celebrity chef Jamie Oliver drew global attention to the junk diet of most British schoolchildren with his Feed Me Better campaign. The Blair government responded with an extra £640 million to fund healthier meals along Oliver's recommendations, but the results have been disappointing. According to an article in *The Times* last September, students are shunning

the newly nutritious school meals. When they can't find candy, chips and other deep-fried hollow calories in the canteen, they crowd into the franchises, or (as seen in one notorious front-page photograph) get their mothers to hand them burgers and fries through the school fence.

The backlash doesn't surprise Paul Finkelstein, the culinary arts teacher at Stratford Northwestern Secondary School in Stratford, Ontario. "You can't just tell kids to eat this but not that," he says. "You have to teach them how to connect to food, how to think about what they're eating."

Finkelstein may be the closest thing Canada has to Jamie Oliver—at least where school lunch is concerned. His Food Network TV show, *Fink*, follows the fortunes of the culinary club he formed seven years ago with a bunch of his students, and of the café they opened in their school, a place called the Screaming Avocado. They run it in direct competition with the cafeteria and with considerable success, even attracting students and staff from neighbouring schools with their local, seasonal dishes. Finkelstein doesn't just talk about good food values, he shows the kids—driving them to a farm or into Toronto to cook at a shelter for the homeless, followed by dinner at Canoe. He brings in guest chefs, such as Jamie Kennedy and Michael Stadtländer, to teach a class every two weeks, and the kids also take local catering gigs (the Anglican Bishops luncheon in October, for example). The money they raise is spent on field trips, most recently to Italy and Japan.

Why can't every school in Canada provide that sort of leadership and initiative? "The problem is that you have to start with a creative and courageous administration," says Finkelstein. "A principal who'll take chances, who'll let you dig a vegetable garden and take kids to an abattoir." Not that Stratford Northwestern is perfect. The school raises money for its elite athletes' sports programs by selling slushies to students. Finkelstein is aware of other such ironies. "The Ontario government will tell you they've banned pop vending machines," he says, "but they haven't banned the sale of pop." He points to the many schools that raise funds by sending kids door to door selling candy bars: the children can buy the ones they don't sell at a discount. Kids play ring toss over two-litre bottles of pop at family fun nights and go home hugging the prize. The school might as well give a cigarette company a booth on the playground.

The idea of protecting children from junk food marketing is a favourite hobby horse of nutritionists. It's also a small part of the Children's Health and Nutrition Initiative proposed by Toronto NDP MP Olivia Chow. Here, at last, is an opportunity for Canada to catch up. Chow is calling for the federal government to provide every Canadian child access to one nutritious meal a day, working closely with the parent, volunteer and local organizations already in place. She also wants Ottawa to develop national program standards for healthy foods in schools. Achieving all of this requires a government contribution of \$250 million in the first year, with incremental increases of \$250 million every year for five years. That's a

bargain: a proper subsidy would help give students healthier alternatives to junk food and potentially pay for itself by lowering the current generation's risk of long-term health problems. I can't imagine a politician of any party opposing her initiative. Then again, Ottawa has a dismal record of failing to tackle child poverty, despite being a signatory to several UN resolutions.

Only once has the federal government seen fit to fund school meals for Canadian children. That was during World War I, when the army found it was turning away too many recruits because they had rickets or were malnourished in other ways. Suddenly every high school had a milk program, a dietitian and a staff that cooked a full meal for the kids every day. Yet once the war ended, the money dried up.

One hot, healthy meal a day is surely the minimum every Canadian child deserves. When that requirement has been met, we can start to repair the broken connection between our children and healthy food, teaching them why it's important, why local and seasonal ingredients are a good thing, and how best to cook them. We can point out how hunger leads to anger, despondency and an inability to learn, and how eating together is a fundamental part of any successful culture. Having gone to school in England makes me a child of privilege in the Canadian context, because I was guaranteed lunch along with my fractions and Latin verbs. I would love to see all Toronto children turn up their noses at roast lamb and peas because they were too full to care.