Good-bye, Cryovac

Imagine college food for which students will fake IDs, write rap songs, and line up outside the dining-hall door

By Corby Kummer

I recently washed up after a supper consisting of four kinds of vegetables from the farmers’ market—all four of them vegetables I usually buy at the local right-minded supermarket. As I considered the vivid, distinctive flavor of every bite, I thought, What is that stuff I’ve been eating the rest of the year?

One of the twelve residential colleges at Yale University is trying to give students that kind of summertime epiphany at every meal, by serving dishes made from produce raised as close to New Haven as possible. In just two years the Yale Sustainable Food Project has launched two ambitious initiatives to bridge the distance from farm to table: the complete revamping of menus in Berkeley College’s dining hall to respect seasonality and simplicity, and the conversion of an overgrown lot near campus to an Edenic organic garden. The garden does not supply the dining hall—it couldn’t. Rather, it serves as a kind of Greenwich Mean Time, suggesting what is best to serve, and when, by illustrating what grows in the southern New England climate in any given week. The goal of the project is to sell students on the superior flavor of food raised locally in environmentally responsible (but not always organic) ways, so that they will seek it the rest of their lives.

A few dishes I tasted last summer during a pre-term recipe-testing marathon in Berkeley’s kitchen convinced me that this goal is within reach for any college meals program willing to make an initial outlay for staff training and an ongoing investment in fewer but better ingredients. I would be happy to eat pasta with parsnips once a week, for example, the candy-sweet roots sharpened by fresh parsley and Parmesan. Even the chicken breasts, coated with black pepper, grilled, and served with a shallot, garlic, and white-wine sauce, tasted like chicken.

Not long ago a college would never have thought to mention food in a brochure or on a school tour—except, perhaps, in a deprecating aside. Now food is a competitive marketing tool, and by the second or third stop on the college circuit parents and students practically expect to be shown the organic salad bar and told about the vegan options and the menus resulting directly from student surveys. Yale has gone these colleges what I consider to be a giant step further, showing students what they should want and making them want it.

As caring about food has become interwoven with caring about the environment, enjoying good food has lost some of the elitist, hedonistic taint that long barred gourmets from the ranks of the politically correct. The challenge, as with any political movement, is to bring about practical institutional change that incorporates ideals.

It’s a very big challenge with college food, almost all of which is provided by enormous catering companies like Sodexho, Chartwells, and Aramark, the company that has run Yale’s dining services since 1998. These companies have long offered vegetarian, organic, and vegan choices. But none of those options—not even, sadly, going organic—necessarily supports local farmers and local economies, or shows students how much better food tastes when it’s made from scratch with what’s fresh. Vegetarian, organic, and vegan
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The first step in showing that there is a better way is to give people something raw and ravishing, like a Sweet 100 cherry tomato or a ripe peach. The next step is to get them into a garden to pick tomatoes or sugar-snap peas or strawberries. This is often the deal-breaker, which is why the activist and restaurateur Alice Waters worked so hard to create the Edible Schoolyard, a program that brings elementary school students into a garden and the garden into the curriculum and the cafeteria. Her decade-long effort at a pilot school in Berkeley, California, blossomed last June, when the school board voted unanimously to incorporate the Edible Schoolyard program into every one of its schools.

In college, gardens offer students the psychic and physical release of manual labor, and serve the invaluable purpose of distraction from term papers and exams. They can be laboratories for any number of classes, but their chief utility seems to be as a spiritual oasis. Middlebury College, in Vermont, has for two years supported a student-run organic garden that Bill McKibben, a scholar in residence there, calls in his forthcoming Wandering Home: A Long Walk Through America's Most Hopeful Region the most beautiful spot on campus. Some of the food from Middlebury's garden is served in the dining halls, and the dining service has instituted a buying program that favors local products when possible.

The Sustainable Food Project goes further, by serving seasonal dishes and local produce at every meal—the plunge other institutions hesitate to take. Changing the way a school orders and prepares food is an expensive, time-consuming ordeal. Students may say they want one thing and then eat another. Cooks are likely to be skeptical or downright hostile toward menus that may offer fewer items with fewer ingredients but require far more labor.

Given that Waters once got Bill Clinton fired up about planting an organic garden on the White House lawn, it
was unsurprising that she proposed a student garden and better food when she first met Yale's president, Richard Levin. The occasion was a reception for freshmen and their parents in the fall of 2001; Waters's daughter, Fanny, had just arrived on campus, and the families soon discovered that both Fanny and the Levins' daughter Becca had attended the Mountain School of Milton Academy, in Veshire, Vermont, where high school juniors spend a term learning to farm organically. The master of the coincidentally named Berkeley College, John Rogers, signed on enthusiastically, and Waters recruited young people to help run both the new meals program and the garden. She also found a donor who anonymously underwrote the added expense of hiring directors for the project, planting the garden, and changing the college's food.

Like most programs in which Waters has been instrumental, the Yale Sustainable Food Project at a distance sounds high-minded and precious, conceivable only in a liberal redoubt like Berkeley or New Haven. Also like most programs Waters is involved in, the project up close is simple, earthy, and immensely appealing. All those ideals result in straightforward, perfectly fresh food you'd like to eat—and even wash up after—every day.

I found it hard to believe that really good food was being served at Yale. My memories of undergraduate food there were of working around it as best I could—spending a lot of time at the salad bar and cooking at friends' and advisers' houses whenever possible. The food at a reunion I attended a year ago was startlingly unmemorable—reunions, after all, are usually the time when schools put on the dog, to elicit donations along with memories of happy golden bygone days. The dark, sticky communal tables of Commons, the large building where freshmen took meals, certainly brought back memories, and so did the carrots devoid of flavor and the brown if-this-is-a-reunion-it-must-be-beef. It seemed improbable that even a force as relentless as I know Alice Waters to be could make much of a dent.

On my summer visit I spoke at length with the people who would be the toughest sell in any such scheme, tougher even than a conservative administration: the cooks. No matter how many enlightened, organic-oriented chefs came in to consult on menus (and several did), any new program would need the buy-in of those cooks, who—despite Yale's turbulent history with unions—have worked there for years. An early enthusiast was the college's "first" cook (of three), Michael Schoen, who had been a Yale chef for twenty-six years. Schoen, an easygoing man who enjoys his work, had helped introduce "natural food" and vegan dishes into various college dining halls, he told me, but the Sustainable Food Project menus required something completely new: peeling and chopping carrots and onions and celery and garlic rather than opening Cryovac bags of pre-chopped soup base and jars of peeled garlic cloves.

Catherine Jones, a Waters recruit who had worked in the kitchen of Waters's Chez Panisse and at several food magazines, told me about arriving as a food manager just as the project was getting started. Waters had warned her that a school kitchen would be very different from a restaurant, and Jones soon saw why. "I was used to talking to cooks who wanted to open a restaurant and would do anything it would take to get ahead," she told me. "Here it all has to be in the job description." She faced a hurdle even higher than her highflying restaurant experience: as a Yale graduate she was breaching a usually inviolate town-gown barrier, and was subject to teasing and worse.

The cooks did need some help through what they described as the chaos of the first few months. "Jicama and daikon," Dawn Boulas, the head pantry cook, said to me. "They come in and you think, What is this? You're expected to make salad for four hundred people in two hours and put it out for lunch. The beginning was not pleasant."

Soon enough the problem shifted from whether the cooks would be willing to prepare the food to whether there would be enough to feed all the students who wanted it. Lines formed
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out the dining-hall door whenever hamburgers made of grass-fed beef from Wolfe's Neck Farm were on the menu. One night when scallions were in season, the cooks set out a few pans of whole scallions roasted with just olive oil and salt. They assumed that most students would think them peculiar and leave them; in fifteen minutes, Schoen told me, the pans were empty. Reports circulated of faked Berkeley ID cards. Students at Pierson, another residential college, recorded a rap song about how hard it was to get to eat at Berkeley, and the MP3 made the college rounds.

Embracing the superiority of local food was easier than obeying the seasons. "Students couldn't get over the difference between the salad bar here and in other colleges," Melina Shannon-DiPietro, the co-director of the Sustainable Food Project, told me. "They'd say, 'The tomatoes—they're so flavorful!' We'd say they had flavor because they came from a farm ten miles away, not from California." But once tomato season was over, students still wanted tomatoes, and so did cooks. Catherine Jones recalled trying to physically bar Berkeley cooks from bringing tomatoes from Calhoun, the residential college next door, to the Berkeley salad bar. Certain rules of seasonality seemed arbitrary, Jones admitted: no cantaloupes when they were out of season in New England, but bananas year-round, because even though they don't grow in most of this country, they aren't limited by a season where they do grow. In the case of foods, like bananas and coffee, that can't be supplied locally, the program tries to buy Fair Trade products.

Once the frenzy of adjustment had passed, the cooks began to enjoy themselves. They visited nearby farms and learned about some of the vegetables that had mystified them; they invited farmers to drop by their kitchens. Dawn Boulas devised several salad dressings, and cut and toasted her own croutons. After seventeen years of preparing ordinary dining-hall food, Boulas has become such a convert that her friends tease her about the thirty-odd heirloom tomato plants in her home garden. Diderot Desgrottes, a fourth cook hired to help with the extra work, e-mailed his sister in Haiti to ask how to make the carrots blanched, steamed and baked in a béchamel, that they grew up eating. Aldo Gargamelli, the second cook and a fifteen-year veteran, experimented with soups. "Everything is fresh," he told me, still marveling after almost a year. "The quality is so much better. I don't think any of us wants to go back to what we were using."

Frequent visits to the new garden down the road helped open the cooks' eyes and palates. It was the challenge of creating the garden that attracted Josh Viertel, the other co-director of the Sustainable Food Project. Viertel, who grew up in the New York suburbs, discovered a vocation for farming during a term at the Mountain School; after graduating from Harvard (also Shannon-DiPietro's alma mater) he ran a profitable organic vegetable garden in Connecticut. He'd been determined to move to California when Waters persuaded him to stay east.

As soon as Yale approved the use of a lot as a garden, a process that consumed the project's first months, Viertel and a group of student volunteers made remarkable progress. They arrived with axes on May 25 of last year to cut down trees, pull out old roots and new poison ivy, and clear garbage, and by mid-July they were selling produce at the New Haven farmers' market. After the fall term began, students would get to the garden at seven-thirty on Saturday mornings to help pick for the market. "Love, money, or wild horses couldn't get me up at that hour in college," Viertel told me. "They're knocking bumblebees out of squash blossoms, and they love it."

Several professors plan to use the garden and the Food Project for research and as lecture material. Kelly Brownell, a psychology professor who researches eating and weight, plans to study how eating fresh produce affects academic performance and whether students who eat more sugar-snaps eat fewer Doritos. Perhaps the Yale School of Management will use the garden to research the economics of small-scale farming, which has long been in crisis all over New England.
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Viertei plans to build a stone pizza oven in the garden, so that visiting schoolchildren can watch tomatoes they pick go straight onto pizza and eat it on the spot. He wants students to get excited every spring about asparagus and cherries. Shannon-DiPietro wants all graduates to leave feeling completely comfortable about cooking a pasta dish and roast chicken.

Even if he can’t grow food for the dining halls, Viertei has found local farms that can, and has impressively managed to integrate them into the Yale/Aramark ordering system. He tells nearby farmers that he will buy their entire crops of eggplant or squash or lettuce if they can deliver either straight to the dining hall or to a Hartford warehouse used by one of the university’s wholesale suppliers. Of course, this is more expensive: the per-plate cost at Berkeley last year, he says, was roughly one and a half times the cost at Yale’s other colleges.

Whatever the argument for spending more money on food (and Viertei has many eloquent ones, involving taking care of yourself and your community and the environment), the practical successes at Yale should encourage other schools to consider similar changes. Viertei gives the example of granola, a simple seduction tool. At the beginning of this year the Food Project’s formula of organic oats, almonds, and raisins, a local honey, and New England maple syrup was so popular that Commons had to take over making it for every college. And the project’s recipe is actually cheaper than buying pre-made granola in bulk. Viertei recently began a composting program; the first step is asking students to scrape their own plates, which shows close up the waste involved when they take, say, just one bite of cheese lasagna. Other schools ought to take that same step, even if they stop there.

As we spoke, sitting on stone steps in the late-afternoon sun, a white van carrying the Berkeley cooks passed by and beeped hello. Viertei’s thoughts turned to the next phase in the project: a limited roll-out of two dozen dishes to be rotated through the other resi-