School food program – a necessity for many in LTUSD

By Kathryn Reed

Using a spork, Odette Sosa eagerly scoops out the fruit of the kiwi that has been cut in half. She got it off a friend's tray. She had already eaten her orange – what she said at the time was the best part of the meal. But she wanted more fruit.

This Bijou Community School first-grader said she's used to eating lots of fruit at home.

Natalie Bedlre, her friend sitting next to her, says one of her favorite school lunches is the chicken with gravy over brown rice. Good thing – because that was on the menu Monday.



The cafeteria staff at Bijou serve about 400 lunches a day. Photos/Kathryn Reed

But pizza is still an all-time favorite at all grade levels. Only these slices are healthier than what their parents were likely served when they were in school. Crusts are at least half whole wheat, cheese is reduced in fat and sugar content of sauces is noted.

While the elementary kids probably don’t know it or even care, the tray of food before them is designed to ensure they have a well-balanced meal.

Because Lake Tahoe Unified School District is part of the National School Lunch Program it must follow all of the federal guidelines. This includes having five components with each lunch – meat or meat alternative, fruit, vegetable, grain, and milk.

The offer vs. serve aspect allows a youngster to choose three of the five choices and still meet the federal guidelines. This recognizes not everyone is going to eat everything – whether because of taste or dietary restrictions.

Plus, food waste is something to consider. No reason to pile something on that won’t be consumed.

On Monday, most of the trays are empty. But Patty Lefteroff, who runs the Bijou kitchen, knows to cut the whole grain bean and cheese burritos in half for the younger students. If any of them were still hungry, they just had to ask for more.

With about 60 percent of LTUSD students qualifying for a free or reduced lunch, it means the feds are paying for the bulk of the food program. It also means having to follow their rules and most of their recipes.

Even though the feds released regulations Jan. 25 about what districts must serve, California’s rules are stricter and therefore LTUSD is already doing what much of the country will have to do to meet the federal rules.

Deep fat fryers left LTUSD school kitchens in 2001, trans fats were eliminated in 2008, sodas have not been allowed at the high school for years and never were at the elementary level, whole grain regs are the norm now and flavored milk is already nonfat.

Shelley Giannotta, director of LTUSD food services, said the one item she will struggle with is sodium content. Salt is in everything. The just released federal rules say by 2014-15 current sodium levels must be cut by 5 percent to 10 percent; going up to a 25 to 50 percent reduction from today's baseline in 2022-23.

But LTUSD does not have to offer a food program. California law leaves that choice up to the districts.

"If we did away with it, we would have a lot of kids going hungry," Giannotta said while in the Bijou cafeteria Feb. 6. "We are here for the kids."

Giannotta knows if they didn't eat at school, some may not eat anything – and if they are given food at home, it may not be a hot, balanced meal.

Most of the kids in the room are eating the school lunch. Very few lunch boxes are visible.

But it's impossible to know who has paid or who is getting a subsidy. This is because kids give their student number to one of the lunchroom workers and it's calculated via the cash register.

About 1,800 lunches are served a day and 700 breakfasts throughout the district.

The magnet school has a different menu than the other three elementary students because fewer students eat the hot lunch. This means they are given one choice of entrée instead of two like the other students.

The middle and high school students have another menu. But that is likely to change next year when the student union opens at South Tahoe High School.

With that addition comes the opportunity to offer more items in a food court setting. South Tahoe High School's food area

will be set up to have eight points of service, though it may start with fewer offerings. One area may be soup and salad, another for burgers (not just beef), another for rotating world themes – it's all still being worked out.

New dishes will be incorporated to balance out the favorites.

Entrée salads are offered to elementary kids in the fall and spring, to the older kids year-round.

When meat is on the menu food preparers are always able to accommodate the vegetarians in the crowd.

Lefteroff said a handful of kids at Bijou don't eat meat. Grilled cheese, a cold cheese sandwich or PB&J are back ups.

To avoid the expense of tahini and possible peanut allergies, the hummus is made with sunflower seed butter.

Giannotta wants to provide locally grown food, but being in the mountains makes it difficult. Mt. Moriah Farms in Davis supplies pesticide-wax free apples. She works with Bonanza Produce as well. Money is an issue, but there isn't an idea she isn't willing to pursue.

Being part of the federal program means getting the commodity discounts that are offered.

Lunches at the six Lake Tahoe Unified schools are probably the cheapest place in town to eat – especially considering the nutrients involved. Elementary lunches are $2.25, while it costs $2.75 to eat at the middle or high school.

While some districts subsidize their food programs, the opposite happens in LTUSD. In the 12 years Giannotta has been at the helm, she keeps making changes. Besides food content and nutritional upgrades, she returns more than $50,000 a year to the general fund that can then be used for textbooks, class size reduction or whatever the school board deems necessary.

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K’s Kitchen: Drumsticks for the Super Bowl

By Kathryn Reed

What’s up with all this talk of chicken? My *Cooking Light* and *Bon Appetit* magazines arrived this week with chicken on the cover. An issue of Single Leaf Winery’s newsletter I picked up last weekend featured a chicken recipe.



Food photos can really sell a person on a recipe. Even though I don’t eat meat, photos of these dishes don’t bother me. I’ve had veggie pictures nearly make me nauseous. So, it really is what the cook and photographer come up with. Both are artists in their own right.

The *Bon Appetit* photo might have converted me to vegetarianism had I not already done so years ago. My goodness, the fried chicken was so horrible looking even Paula Dean might have winced. However, the image of pan-cooked chicken with wine and plums on the cover of *Cooking Light* almost (OK not really) made rethink the no-meat thing.

And what a difference in the topics. One magazine talks fried foods, the other has 25 healthy chicken dinners.

With the National Chicken Council reporting that 1.25 billion chicken wings will be consumed this weekend – maybe all on

Super Bowl Sunday – I thought it appropriate to help you eat some chicken during the game.

I have not tried the recipe below. It is from Pam Miller at Single Leaf in Fair Play. She suggests pairing it with her winery's 2009 Reserve Cabernet.

Ginger Spiced "Legs"

24 chicken drumsticks

1 C soy sauce

1/3 C sesame oil

½ C sesame mustard

3 T fresh lemon juice

2C fresh bread crumbs

1 T chopped fresh ginger root

2 tsp chopped fresh garlic

Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

Marinate the drumsticks overnight in the soy sauce in the refrigerator.

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.

Drain the chicken and place in rows on a large baking sheet. Using a pastry brush, brush each drumstick with a thin coating of sesame oil.

Whisk the mustard and lemon juice together and brush generously over each drumstick.

Combine the bread crumbs, ginger, and the garlic and sprinkle evenly over the top and the sides of each drumstick. Sprinkle with salt and pepper.

Bake 1 hour, covering with aluminum foil if the drumsticks get too brown. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Matchmakers put people with farmland

By Carlos Alcalá, Sacramento Bee

Putting farmers onto underused land was once a matter of creating homesteads.

Now it has entered the computer age, with nonprofits using the Internet to match farmland with growers.

The need, advocates say, comes in part from an aging farm population.

California farmers age 65 or older outnumber farmers under 35 by 9 to 1, said Liya Schwartzman, Central Valley coordinator for California FarmLink, one of those nonprofit groups.

“In many cases, their children don’t want to go into farming,” she said. “We need more beginning farmers right now.”

At the same time, many landowners are hoping to preserve the land for agriculture, not development, and want to help younger farmers – not large agribusiness.

It led to a dating service of sorts for farms.

“We’re kind of a Match.com, a little bit,” Schwartzman said.

Read the whole story

K’s Kitchen: A casserole with Minnesota’s state grain

By Kathryn Reed

Between 4 million and 6.5 million pounds of wild rice are harvested each year in Minnesota. A few ounces arrived in my post office box the other day. In the package was a recipe for wild rice casserole.



With the recipe and wild rice (which is actually an aquatic grass and not rice) came a handwritten note from Barb talking about her Minnesota roots and how wonderful this native grain is.

A couple weeks ago I published a wild rice soup recipe my sister in Minnesota shared with me. With wild rice seeming to be a big deal, it seemed like it was time to do a little research about this edible these Minnesotans are so fond of.

My brother-in-law Mike says it comes down to how it’s produced. Old ways have people going in canoes in shallow lakes to harvest the rice. People each fall harvest rice this way from the lake Tami (my sister) and Mike live on.

Big grain harvesters can extract the plant now. But according to those in the know, the end product is not as good.

Mike equates a good wild rice to a good wine – you can taste the difference compared to bad rice or bad wine. A rich, nutty flavor is what a good wild rice should taste like.

The rice Barb sent me is from Byerly's – an upscale grocery store she shopped at when she lived in Minnesota. The recipe is from "The Best of Byerly's" – which was first published in 1985.

"My changes were to add the bacon and water chestnuts. I probably got that idea from another Minnesota friend way back. I am not sure the rice itself is that much better than the brands/varieties that can be purchased in California. Perhaps it is the fond memories of living in the Midwest," Barb told me. "To me, this recipe is one of those that is definitely better the next day or so, and so good when one is really hungry!"

I used veggie broth and almonds. It is definitely rich and nutty. And it definitely takes a long time to cook.

Wild Rice Casserole (serves 6-8)

1 C uncooked wild rice

½ pound fresh mushrooms, sliced, about 3 cups

3 T minced onion

½ C sliced almonds and/or water chestnuts

3 C chicken broth

¼ C butter or margarine

Rinse wild rice under running water using a strainer or in a bowl of water, drain. Combine rice, mushrooms, onion and almonds and/or water chestnuts in 2-quart casserole. Add broth; dot with butter. Bake, covered in a 325-degree oven until rice is tender and liquid is absorbed, about 1½ hours.

Barb's notes: In Tahoe, due to altitude, I bake this about 2½ hours. And a few times during baking, stir it. I have improvised a lot. I have added fresh asparagus the last 30 minutes, and about ½ pound of fried and crumbled bacon. This dish freezes well, although you may have to add some water as you heat it after freezing. It is a great "make it the night before" casserole also. Personally, I think it is better the next day and reheated.

Ma Nature, lack of publicity hurt El Dorado wineries

By Kathryn Reed

FAIR PLAY – Not a cloud in the sky, not many people in the wineries. From a consumer standpoint the first day of the El Dorado County barrel tasting event was great. From the viewpoint of some of the 27 wineries that are part of the event, Saturday was disappointing.

Coming off a harvest that was bizarre by most definitions, having a special event that is less than successful is not welcome. The event continues today. But at $35 for the weekend, it is more money than 2011.



Barrel tasting continues today at designated El Dorado County wineries. Photos/Kathryn Reed

Some industry officials who spoke to *Lake Tahoe News* off the record on Jan. 28 attributed the less than stellar turn out to the public relations-marketing firm that is in its first year for El Dorado Winery Association.

The latest stats on the website are from March 2011. The latest press release is from February 2009.

Twenty-seven wineries were on the list this year as participants in the barrel tasting event – one more than 2011. In 2010, 1,200 tickets were sold, while 2,000 were sold in 2011. Ticket sales for this year have not been released.

An increase in price during a recession could be a contributing factor to the decline of participants in this event that started in 2007. This year the weekend pass is $35 (tickets still available for today), compared to $20 or $25 for the two days in 2011. No Sunday-only tickets were for sale, as was the case last year for a price less than the weekend rate.

A Fair Play winery said the barrel tasting event in 2011 attracted about 1,400 visitors. About 10 were at this particular winery midday Saturday. Usually people are flowing out of the tasting area – even when the weather has been less than ideal.

Lake Tahoe News reporters are used to having to struggle to get to the counter to get a pour. Of the five wineries visited

Saturday, the opposite was the case.



Vines are dormant -- but it's still dry, as evidenced by the brown at Skinner vineyard.

Besides the lack of people, the lack of rain is everywhere. Brown terrain proves moisture has been scarce. Cows are munching on grass in fields that are normally green and several inches tall.

John Latcham, who manages the vineyards for Latcham Winery, says he knows of people who have already started to irrigate.

“If this continues, we’ll be irrigating soon,” Latcham said. “The water table is way down.”

The irony about this dry winter is last year was extraordinarily wet – setting records for moisture totals in so many parts of Northern California.

But growing grapes is farming. And farmers and Mother Nature have a love-hate relationship. The love seems to be lukewarm based on the inconsistencies.

Last year at this time Single Leaf Vineyards had 70 inches if rain. This year 10 inches have been recorded. Pam Miller, who

owns the winery with her husband, said someplace in between would be ideal.

“Don’t tell me there is not climate change,” Miller told *Lake Tahoe News*. “There is no doubt Northern California is changing.”

With the abundance of moisture a year ago, which kept coming during the fall harvest of grapes, it meant Latcham lost 40 percent of its harvest. The white grapes were off the vine before the problems arose, but the reds – especially the tender Zinfandel grapes – were hit hard.



Scott Miller is about to pour from the barrel Jan. 28 at Single Leaf.

The rain drops the sugar content of the grapes.

“Not only was it a difficult harvest, it was expensive,” Latcham said.

Bunch rot was a problem for some wineries.

Still, winemakers believe the 2011 vintage will be good.

“We’re optimistic about 2011,” said Greg Baiocchi, winemaker at Miraflores.

What will come of 2012 remains to be seen. This is the normal

dormant season for the vines. Every place is below normal for rainfall, but there is still time for that to be made up.

Local-food movement gets verbal support from El Dorado County officials

By Carlos Alcalá, Sacramento Bee

The grass-roots (and grass-fed) agriculture revolution that Patty Chelseth started last summer is picking up steam.

Chelseth, of My Sisters' Farm in Shingle Springs, has launched a campaign to get a "Local Food and Community Self-Governance" ordinance. Her effort got a warm reception Tuesday from the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors.

Although supervisors did not pass anything with teeth, they gave strong verbal support to Chelseth and others who believe they are starting a revolution against onerous state regulations that hurt small farmers.

"I am personally appalled that they will come onto my ranch and tell me I can't share my cow or I can't share my chickens," said Supervisor Ray Nutting, after speaking of his homesteading, cow-milking, (and chicken-decapitating) grandmother. "Whatever we need to do, I'm in full support."

Chelseth was backed by more than 20 speakers and more than 100 onlookers who overflowed the board's meeting room.

Her cause began last year when the California Department of Food and Agriculture issued a cease and desist order against Chelseth. She was selling shares of cows on her farm in an attempt to deal with rules that prohibited her from selling raw milk directly to consumers.

She only keeps two cows.

Sheriff John D'Agostini told supervisors he consulted with the district attorney about Chelseth.

"I made the decision that the El Dorado County Sheriff's Office was not going to be the milk police," he said. "So I support this ordinance."

Read the whole story

LTCC offering 4 workshops devoted to healthy eating

The Community Education department at Lake Tahoe Community College is having a Get Fresh and Healthy workshop series in February. Take one, all four or any combination.

Cooking with Spices is Feb. 2 from 6-9pm.

Winter Soup is Feb. 10 from 6-9pm.

Food the Kids will Love too is Feb. 16 from 6-9pm.

Gluten Free Cooking is Feb. 28 from 6-9pm.

Register online.

K’s Kitchen: A soup of carrots and corriander

By Kathryn Reed

Even though it didn’t seem like winter in Lake Tahoe until a few days ago, that was not stopping me from making soup. But something about the snow falling on Monday made it even more appealing to create something hot to eat.



It was easy to forget about work as the aromas from the kitchen filtered through the house and the woodstove made things even cozier.

Something about soup is so calming. Maybe it’s the simplicity of it – the eating part, not always the making part. Maybe it’s how one bowl can be a whole meal.

All of this got me thinking about where the word soup came from. So I did a research and came up with the following.

John Ayto in “An A-Z of Food and Drink” says, “The etymological idea underlying the word soup is that of soaking. It goes back to an unrecorded post-classical Latin verb suppare soak, which was borrowed from the same prehistoric German root (sup-) as produced in English sup and supper. From it was derived the noun suppa, which passed into Old French as soupe. This meant both piece of bread soaked in liquid and, by

extension, broth poured onto bread. It was the latter strand of the meaning that entered English in the seventeenth century. Until the arrival of the term soup, such food had been termed broth or pottage. It was customarily served with the meat or vegetable dishes with which it had been made, and (as the derivation of soup suggest) was poured over sops of bread or toast (the ancestors of modern croutons). But coincidentally with the introduction of the world soup, it began to be fashionable to serve the liquid broth on its own, and in the early eighteenth century it was assuming its present-day role as a first course."

The following recipe was sent to me from a friend who got it from Raley's Recipe Center.

I used vegetable broth. I did not use fat free half & half. Sometimes fat is a good thing.

Carrot and Coriander Soup

2 T butter

1 medium onion, peeled and chopped

1 lb. carrots, peeled and sliced

2 ribs celery, sliced

1 medium sweet potato (8 ounces), peeled and cubed

1 (32 ounce) container chicken stock or reduced-sodium broth

2 tsp ground coriander

½ C fat free half & half

½ tsp salt

Freshly ground pepper to taste

Melt butter in a medium saucepan, cooking until golden brown.

Add onion and cook for 10 minutes over medium heat or until lightly browned. Add carrots, celery, sweet potato and stock to pan. Bring to a boil; reduce heat and simmer, covered, for 20 minutes. Remove from heat and puree with a stick blender or in a blender or food processor. Return to pan and stir in coriander, half & half, salt and pepper. Cook for a few minutes more just to heat through.

Makes 6 servings.

Opinion: LTUSD ahead of federal lunch guidelines

By Shelley Giannotta

First lady Michelle Obama and Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack released the new standards for school meals Jan. 25.



While I support and encourage ongoing changes and improvements to school meals, I am disappointed to read what Obama had to say. It is unfortunately a generic statement that put all school meals in a negative light.

“As parents, we try to prepare decent meals, limit how much junk food our kids eat, and ensure they have a reasonably balanced diet,” Obama said. “And when we’re putting in all that effort, the last thing we want is for our hard work to be undone each day in the school cafeteria. When we send our kids to school, we expect that they won’t be eating the kind of fatty, salty, sugary foods that we try to keep them from

eating at home. We want the food they get at school to be the same kind of food we would serve at our own kitchen tables."

As I review the new standards that have been released, I am so proud of what we have accomplished here at LTUSD over the past 12 years. We are already doing so much of what is considered "new" according to these standards.

· We offer more fresh fruits and vegetables than ever before.

· We offer only 1 percent or non-fat white or non-fat chocolate fluid milk.

· We ensure that students are getting appropriate portion sizes.

· We monitor sodium levels – we don't add salt to any foods.

· We have improved breakfast choices to include more protein (yogurt, eggs).

· There is no trans fat in any of our food.

· Nearly all breads, buns, grain items, and pizza products are at least 51 percent whole grain.

· We use brown rice and whole wheat pastas – very little white rice or pasta.

· New offerings such as sweet potato products, homemade hummus, improved entrée salads.

· In 2008, we formed a Farm to School connection with Mt. Moriah Farms.

· We eliminated all deep fat frying in 2001. All of our potato products are baked – never fried.

I know that we can and will continue to make improvements in regard to the 1,800 lunches and the 700 breakfasts that we serve to our student customers every day. I stand behind what

we have done to date at LTUSD. I appreciate all of the hard work, dedication, and positive attitudes that the Food Service employees bring to their jobs and our valued student customers every day.

I always remind folks that participation in our meal program is voluntary. It is a choice for students to eat our meals – and we will continue to improve, listen, and offer a great meal for a reasonable price.

Shelley Giannotta is food services director for Lake Tahoe Unified School District.

Chefs, farmers join forces

By Jenn Garbee, Los Angeles Times

It's ironic, in a rosemary-infused sort of way, that in today's farm-to-table restaurant era few chef-and-farmer relationships have evolved into the true collaborations those farm-specific menus often suggest. Their lives tend to exist in parallel worlds, firmly rooted together but never quite merging.

Like many farmers, Bill and Barbara Spencer of Windrose Farm have long focused their energy on the growing needs of their produce, such as Ashmead's Kernel and Hudson Golden Gem apples, on their 70-acre farm just outside Paso Robles. Their chef customers, including David Sundeen Jr., 36, and his wife, Susan Dumeyer, 40, have made all of the apple-inspired culinary decisions.

But what if, for an entire year, those chefs were farmers? Not

as pickers, though Sundeen and Dumeyer did plenty of apple hauling during those 12-hour workdays on Windrose Farm. Nor as chefs-in-residence, even if the couple's cooking leans toward apple cobbler-type fare. But as the farm's new managers.

"Bill and Barbara were at a point they needed help tightening their focus," recalls Dumeyer of their somewhat fortuitous arrival at the farm last January. "There are so many parallels, business-wise, between a farm and restaurant operations that often people on both sides don't see."

The chefs knew the Spencers from their former restaurant days when Dumeyer worked the pastry line at Grace and Sundeen was sous-chef at Govind Armstrong's former West Hollywood restaurant Table 8 (and later executive chef at Bouchon in Santa Barbara).

When Barbara Spencer bumped into the couple at the farmers market, she invited them up for a dinner. "We got to talking about the farm, but things really evolved over several months … we called it dating," jokes Barbara.

Read the whole story