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Pack-a-punch lunch

• First step: Make food fun; second step: make it wholesome.

By Jackie Burrell
STAFF WRITER

Article Launched: 09/26/2007 03:03:27 AM PDT

Five days a week, 38 weeks a year, year after year after year ... it's no wonder refilling your kid's lunch box begins to resemble a scene from "Groundhog Day." Morning comes, the alarm clock clangs, and there the lunch box sits once more, waiting for culinary inspiration or at least -- oh God, not another overly fragrant tuna sandwich.

Families end each summer with a host of new-school-year resolutions: meticulous assignment notebooks, unprocrastinated homework, and bagged lunches that would make the pediatrician proud, what with all those veggies, protein, calcium and a modicum of carbs. Banish the chips! Oreo-a-no-no! Yeah, right. There's a thriving black-market Fritos business on even the healthiest campus.

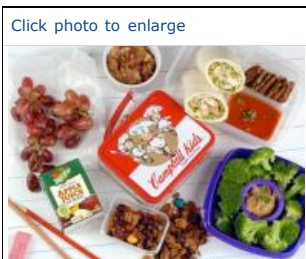
Fortunately, Mike Axinn understands. The Berkeley dad is the creator of "DooF: Food Backwards," a PBS-bound children's cooking show filmed in Oakland and Berkeley's public schools, school gardens and at the Kitchen on Fire cooking school (info at <http://www.foodbackwards.com>).

Axinn was filming a DooF episode, "School of Broc," last spring at Berkeley's Le Conte Elementary -- a school with a "very evolved" food education program, he says, and a cafeteria that serves healthful, not particularly popular burritos -- when a young food critic weighed in on them.

"You know those burritos that we had?" the youngster asked Axinn. "They took out the fun in the food."

It's true, Axinn says, and although children understand

what school lunch programs are trying to do to make lunchtime more healthy, getting them to like it is something else entirely



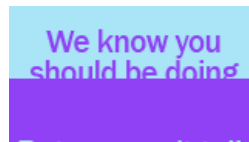
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Lunchbox food featuring Caesar salad wraps, steamed broccoli with Chinese peanut sauce, and trail...

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"They're really trying to upgrade the food programs, but they're not necessarily getting the kids to eat the good stuff," says Axinn. "If they take out the fun, then the kids are not going to go for it. My contention is the fast food manufacturers and the media are really good at finding that fun factor."

That's why McNuggets with their little dipping tubs of ranch dressing or barbecue sauce are always going to delight, and soggy sandwiches ... not so much. The trick, Axinn and his team say, is making vegetables, fruit and other healthful choices delicious and engaging.

"Everybody's got an apple that's still there at 3 in the afternoon," says Axinn. "It comes right back home. If I slice up the apple, it's much more likely to get eaten."

And if you sprinkle it first with Meyer lemon juice to keep it from oxidizing, says cookbook author and Doof consultant Mollie Katzen, and give it a dash of cinnamon, it's downright yummy.

The author of the venerable vegetarian "Moosewood Cookbook" doesn't spend much time on brown bag duty these days -- her youngest is at Berkeley High and prefers to make her own lunches -- but if Katzen had to do it all over again, she says she'd make sure every lunch "had raw vegetable nibbles as a focal point. I like to see kids snacking on sweet bell peppers and cucumbers, baby carrots, cauliflower, if they're willing to risk it."

She likes to pack lightly steamed broccoli -- "a really nice portable vegetable," she says -- with a Chinese peanut dipping sauce. And if you want to dip chicken satays in there too, that's OK with her.

"I was never on a campaign to make people vegetarian," she says with a laugh. "They can eat meat. That's fine with me. But I'm on a total campaign to get people to eat vegetables."

Kids are natural dippers, so providing a dip -- peanut sauce, hummus or a light ranch-type dressing -- for celery sticks, carrot coins and cucumber slices turns vegetables into something considerably more engaging. For fruit, says Katzen, use peanut butter or yogurt for dipping, but beware the sugar content. Parents think they're being careful when they buy low-fat yogurt. The fat's not the problem -- 2 tablespoons of sugar is.

Axinn, Katzen and the Doof crew are hosting Doof-a-palooza at Google headquarters in Mountain View next month. The event showcases fun, hands-on cooking activities for families -- name-that-cheese smelling contests, pizza dough sessions, cooking demos, a Google cafe street fair and live music. Katzen will be signing her children's cookbooks and manning a bagel decorating station: halved bagels, smears of cream cheese and piles of chopped fresh vegetables so kids can "decorate" their meal.

It's a great way to get veggies into kids' diets, says Katzen.

Roll lettuce and veggies into a flour burrito for a Caesar salad wrap. Puree vegetables into soup. Make an apple or pear cobbler to top a family dinner, then send the fruit-filled leftovers to school as a lunch-box treat. Make your own trail mix with nuts, grains and dried fruit. Or pack a DIY lunch, a taco salad perhaps, that older kids can finish assembling at school ... which, of course, may be way too much bother for a teen who'd rather power down a PowerBar, grab a soda and go.

But perhaps a glance at Flickr will be enough to convince them that there are pleasant alternatives, or at least inspire a tired parent, faced with that yawning lunch box at 6 a.m. The photo sharing Web site boasts more than 13,000 images of lunch-box contents: steamed asparagus cut just so to fit inside a sectional bento box, inventive salad-filled wraps snuggled into Tupperware containers. Now that's a lunch-box obsession. Whoever loaded those could probably make it through all 2,470 lunches it takes to get from kindergarten to senior year without a single soggy sandwich.

Reach Jackie Burrell at jburrell@bayareanewsgroup.com.

Lunch box packing tips

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, the average middle school generates 40,000 tons of lunch trash a year, 30 percent of that from disposable containers and food packaging. Go green by buying reusable lunch equipment -- containers, water bottles and ice packs. Prices run the gamut from the \$21 new wave bento box sold by LaptopLunches.com -- a lunch box with four small plastic containers that nestle inside, and a dip or dressing canister -- to the \$4 Snack & Dip containers at the Container Store and the cheap divided containers available in any supermarket's foil and plastic bag aisle. Use a frozen juice box or water container to keep cold foods chilled, and a thermos-style container to keep hot foods safely toasty.

Doof-a-palooza

A food extravaganza for kids and families, including cooking demos, hands-on activities, lunch and live music, Oct. 20 from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Google Headquarters, 1600 Amphitheatre Parkway, Mountain View. Tickets \$12-\$20. For information, visit <http://www.FoodBackwards.com/doof-a-palooza/index.html>.

Mollie Katzen

Mollie Katzen will be signing copies of her newest book, "The Vegetable Dishes I can't Live Without," at A Great Good Place for Books, 6120 La Salle Ave. in Montclair, Oct. 10 at 7 p.m.



Broccoli with Chinese Peanut Sauce

Makes 2 cups sauce; serves 8 generously

Covered tightly and chilled, this sauce will keep for up to a week. It also makes a fantastic dressing for cold noodle salad, when thinned with a little more water.

1 large bunch broccoli, 1 1/2 pounds
 1 cup good peanut butter
 1 cup hot water
 2-3 tablespoons soy sauce
 3-4 tablespoons sugar
 1 1/2 teaspoons minced garlic
 2 teaspoons cider vinegar
 3-4 tablespoons finely minced cilantro, optional
 Cayenne to taste
 Salt to taste, if peanut butter is unsalted

1. Bring a large pot of water to a boil. Meanwhile, trim and discard the tough stem of the broccoli and slice the rest lengthwise into 6 to 8 spears.
2. Simmer the broccoli for 2 minutes, if you like your vegetables tender-crisp, and 3 minutes if you prefer them more tender. Drain in a colander, then run the broccoli under cold running water to cool it down. Drain thoroughly, then dry the broccoli, first by shaking it emphatically, then by patting it with paper towels. The broccoli will keep, stored in a zip-style plastic bag, for several days.
3. Place peanut butter in a bowl, add hot water and stir patiently with a fork or whisk until smooth.
4. Stir in remaining ingredients. Cover tightly and chill.
5. Bring to room temperature before serving with lightly steamed broccoli or other vegetables as a dip.

-- Mollie Katzen, excerpted from "The Vegetable Dishes I Can't Live Without," to be published in October by Hyperion Books

Per serving: 240 calories, 11 g protein, 17 g carbohydrates, 17 g total fat, 3.5 g saturated fat, 0 cholesterol, 550 mg sodium, 4 g fiber. Calories from fat: 63 percent.

-- Bay Area News Group analysis

Crunchy Zucchini Circles

Serves 4-5

3 small zucchini, 5 ounces each
 1 egg
 2 tablespoons olive oil
 6 tablespoons unseasoned fine bread crumbs
 3 tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese
 1/2 teaspoon salt
 1 teaspoon dried basil
 1/2 teaspoon dried oregano
 1/2 teaspoon onion powder

1. Slice the zucchini into circles about 1/4-inch thick.
2. Break an egg into a small bowl. Beat it with a fork until it is completely yellow and smooth.
3. Measure the olive oil into a frying pan and brush it all around the inside of the pan. Place the pan on the stove and turn the heat to medium.
4. Mix the bread crumbs, Parmesan, salt, herbs and onion powder in a bowl until well-combined.
5. Now spear a zucchini slice with a fork and dip it into the egg, then into the seasoned bread-crum mixture until it is coated on all surfaces. Repeat with all the zucchini.
6. When the oil is hot enough -- drop in a bread crumb to see if it sizzles -- place the zucchini in the pan in a single layer and cook for five minutes. Turn them over with a spatula and cook five minutes more. Serve hot, warm or at room temperature. And if you want a dipping sauce, plain, room temperature spaghetti sauce tastes wonderful with these.

-- Mollie Katzen, "Honest Pretzels and 64 Other Amazing Recipes for Cooks Ages 8 & Up," Tricycle Press

Per serving: 130 calories, 6 g protein, 6 g carbohydrates, 10 g total fat, 2 g saturated fat, 55 mg cholesterol, 400 mg sodium, 1 g fiber. Calories from fat: 69 percent.

-- Bay Area News Group analysis

Caesar Salad Wrap

Serves 1

1 large flour tortilla
 1/2 cup or more romaine lettuce, sliced into shreds

1/2 chicken breast, grilled and cut into bite-size slices
 Chopped tomato, to taste
 Shredded parmesan, to taste
 Caesar salad dressing, to taste

1. Toss the lettuce with just enough salad dressing to moisten.
2. Lay the tortilla flat and sprinkle the lettuce mixture down the middle. Top with the chicken, tomato and cheese.
3. Tuck in ends and roll tightly, burrito-style, dabbing a little extra salad dressing along one edge to seal. Cut in half, then roll tightly in plastic wrap. (Note: Keep the wrap well-chilled in the lunch box by packing a frozen juice box or water bottle.)

Per serving (tortilla, chicken and lettuce only): 310 calories, 20 g protein, 41 g carbohydrates, 7 g total fat, 1.5 g saturated fat, 35 mg cholesterol, 380 mg sodium, 3 g fiber. Calories from fat: 19 percent.

-- Bay Area News Group analysis

Happy Trails Mix

Mollie Katzen suggests packing your own trail mix by combining sweet, salty, crispy and soft ingredients from the health food bins at the grocery store -- peanuts, cashews, almonds, raisins, pretzels, sesame sticks, dried apricots and cranberries, for example, with granola, either purchased or a homemade crunchy fruity variety. Mix in a large bowl, then divide between small, sealable bags for a grab-and-go energy booster.

Crunchy Fruity Granola

Makes 6-8 cups

Nonstick spray for the baking pan and the honey measuring cup
 3 cups rolled oats
 2 cups combined seeds and chopped nuts (pumpkin and sunflower seeds, almonds, pecans, walnuts or whatever you have on hand)
 1/2 teaspoon salt
 1/3 cup brown sugar
 3/4 cup canola oil
 1/2 cup honey
 1 tablespoon vanilla extract
 1 cup assorted dried fruit (small varieties such as raisins, currants, cranberries or blueberries)

1. Preheat the oven to 325 degrees. Spray a 13-by-18-inch baking tray with nonstick spray.
2. Combine the oats, seeds and chopped nuts, salt and brown sugar in a large bowl.
3. Combine the oil, honey (spray the measuring cup with nonstick spray first so the honey slides out) and vanilla in a 2-cup measuring cup, and pour this into the dry ingredients. Mix thoroughly and spread on the prepared baking sheet.
4. Bake for 30 minutes or until golden, stirring once or twice during baking.
5. Cook on the tray. When it has cooled and become crunchy, add the dried fruit.
6. Eat plain or with milk, or use it to make fantastic trail mix.

-- Mollie Katzen, "Salad People and More Real Recipes," a cookbook for preschoolers and up, Tricycle Press

Per serving: 380 calories, 8 g protein, 30 g carbohydrates, 27 g total fat, 2 g saturated fat, 0 cholesterol, 100 mg sodium, 5 g fiber. Calories from fat: 64 percent.

-- Bay Area News Group analysis

Au Pears a la DoueF

Serves 6

6 large ripe pears; Bartlett, Comice or D'Anjou
 1 lemon
 1/2 cup apricot jam
 Sugar to taste
 2 tablespoons butter
 4 ounces crisp cookies: amaretti, crisp oatmeal or gingersnaps

1. Preheat the oven to 350. Peel, quarter and core one pear at a time. Cut into 1/4-inch slices and place slices in a bowl. Squeeze on a little lemon juice and toss to coat the slices. Repeat with each pear.
2. Add the apricot jam and stir gently to mix. Add 2-4 tablespoons sugar, depending on the sweetness of the pears.
3. Smear 1 tablespoon butter in the bottom of a 9-inch baking dish. Add the pear mixture and level the top.
4. Place the cookies between two sheets of wax paper and crush them to make coarse crumbs. Sprinkle crumbs evenly over the pears. Cut the remaining tablespoon of butter into small pieces and sprinkle over the top.
5. Bake in the middle level of the oven for about 30 minutes, or until juice is bubbling around the sides of the baking dish and the top is well-browned. Serve the pear crumble warm, topped with ice cream after dinner, then pack up the leftovers for a delicious lunch-box dessert.

-- "DooF: Food Backwards"

Per serving: 310 calories, 2 g protein, 65 g carbohydrates, 7 g total fat, 3 g saturated fat, 10 mg cholesterol, 135 mg sodium, 6 g fiber. Calories from fat: 20 percent.

-- Bay Area News Group analysis

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