

# Cafeteria Connoisseurs

*High school students appreciate healthy gourmet meals when they get the chance.*

By Caroline Alphonso

On the menu today is Szechwan carrot soup, penne pasta with Italian sausage and chicken, and pesto chicken quesadilla — each item under \$3.50. No, this is not what's being served at your local restaurant, mouth-watering as it may be. It's the lunch menu at a high-school cafeteria in Fergus, a town in southern Ontario.

At a time when childhood obesity is on the rise in Canada — one doctor has said it has tripled in the past 15 years — chef Alexander Mowatt is introducing teens at his school to healthier and more adventurous fare.

Forget the greasy-spoon cafeteria. Students at Centre Wellington District High School are savouring roasted butternut squash and ginger soup. Don't be surprised to find pheasant soup or curried chicken crêpes as the specials of the day.

If that's not enough, how about some roast Cornish hens with wild rice or smoked salmon on a bagel?

"Why shouldn't they be exposed to this? Why can't they have this for a reasonable price?" Mr. Mowatt asked. "My premise has been to throw the old notion of a high school cafeteria out the window."

But despite the popularity of his food — as many as 800 teens stop in for lunch, up from 300 when he first moved in more than five years ago — Mr. Mowatt could lose this job. His contract is up, and the school board will be tendering out the position.

"There's been a human outcry in the community . . . but we are a public body, and we don't want to be seen as picking our friends and awarding them contracts," said Maggie McFadzen, a spokeswoman at the Upper Grand District School Board.

Across the country, schools have adopted their own style of running cafeterias. There are a handful of those that are independently run, either by a chef or the school council.

## Sample Menus

### March 1

*Soup: Mulligatawny*

*Specials: Curried Chicken Crêpes, Vegetable Spring Rolls and Salad*

### March 2

*Soup: Roasted Butternut Squash & Ginger*

*Specials: Oktoberfest Sausage, Vegetable Lasagna*

### March 3

*Soup: Chicken Noodle*

*Specials: Chicken fingers & Plum Sauce, Reuben Sandwich on Rye*

### March 4

*Soup: Pheasant with Kohlrabi & Brussels Sprouts*

*Specials: Pierogies & Sour Cream, Chicken Shish Kebob on Rice*

### March 5

*Soup: Tomato, Corn & Black Bean*

*Specials: Chicken Schnitzel on a Bun, Roast Beef Melts*

But a number of schools are signing huge contracts with companies that serve hamburgers and chocolate bars, hoping to raise funds for team uniforms and ski trips — a growing concern among parents and health officials who are alarmed by the rapid rise in childhood obesity.

For its part, Ms McFadzen said the school board is revising a policy to ensure that food served in cafeterias is both nutritious and well-priced.

But students at Centre Wellington District High School are not letting their chef go without a fight. They have signed a petition saying just that. "I think he's incredible. His food is unbelievable. It's like gourmet food," said 15-year-old David Fischer, who's a fan of the chicken schnitzel.

Mr. Mowatt is more tight-lipped about the contract situation, saying only, "I think everything is working great" in the cafeteria.

Before coming to the high school, he worked at the local hospital and at a restaurant; he also ran his own catering company. Concerned about student nutrition, he applied for the high school position. At the time, a big company was running the cafeteria.

"I wanted to change people's eating habits. I wanted to give them the opportunity to sample a large variety of real food that they otherwise wouldn't be exposed to," he said.

Almost all the food, except for some pre-packaged goodies, is made fresh every day. How can he keep the costs so low? Mr. Mowatt said the numbers of students buying the food makes a big difference.

There are still the traditional hamburgers and French fries on the menu. But it's the variety that's important for Mr. Mowatt. "It takes a few years to change the attitudes," he said. "I'm training them to try these other things."

Parents and nutritionists are starting to demand that big food companies clean up their menu and provide healthy alternatives for students.

"People, like the chef in Fergus, are going to start to challenge them. I think you're going to see food service start to change because . . . there's a huge obesity problem," said Carol Dombrow, a registered dietitian and nutrition consultant with the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada.

For Mr. Mowatt, he's making small strides with his young customers. They're trying a bowl of mulligatawny soup one day, and the next day some parsnip bisque. "To even get some to try real food instead of fast food is a great thing," he said.

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