



in this issue . . .

Looking at School Lunches
Books and Apps on Food and Farms
Eating and Cooking from a Weekly CSA
Recipe for Butternut Squash Soup

A Look Inside School Lunches

New federal directives change Belmont's school lunch menu

How is Belmont's new school lunch program faring? Well, kids are eating smaller apples, but more of them, resulting in less waste. How do school officials know? Paul Browne, Belmont's Food Service Director, explains that one way to monitor the program is to check what's in the trash cans. Answer: Fewer apples.

An apple's size is determined by how many fit in a box: the higher the number, the smaller the apple. This year Belmont schools introduced "168 apples," which means 168 apples to a box. The smaller apples appear to be popular, especially in the elementary schools.

Healthier school meals

Offering "168 apples" is part of an ongoing effort to introduce healthier food into Belmont schools. Browne notes that when he arrived seven years ago, the Belmont school system had already introduced skim milk and low-fat ice cream, stopped offering soft drinks, and provided healthier low-sodium, baked snacks.

In September, Belmont implemented a new breakfast and lunch program, responding to state and federal initiatives to provide school children with healthier meals. To boil the detailed regulations down to what one observes in the cafeteria lunch line, options now include:

- More fruit and vegetables
- Whole grains
- Less salt and processed food
- Smaller portions

To both offer choice and reduce food waste, school lunches usually follow an "Offer Versus Serve" model. For example, a Belmont school lunch offers five meal components: a meat or

meat alternative, bread or grains, vegetables, fruit, and milk. To qualify for a reimbursable lunch, a student must choose one *serving* each of at least three of the five components, and one of the three servings must be vegetable or fruit. In Belmont, 6.8% of the students qualify for free or reduced-cost meals.

This year, Browne says that 50% of the grains offered are now whole grain; only pizza is not whole grain. The goal for next year is 100%. Rolls are whole grain, and students are not throwing away their hamburger buns. Whole-grain pasta, says Browne, is a harder sell—and more expensive.

Farm-to-School provides local produce

Browne reports that Belmont has taken an active role in the Massachusetts Farm-to-School Project, and Browne recently hosted a Farm-to-School meeting for the area.

The movement encourages the use of fresh, locally farmed produce in schools. For example, this fall Lanni Orchards in Lunenburg supplied the Belmont schools with apples (size 168), pears, peaches, tomatoes, and sweet potatoes. While New England's growing season is limited, Lanni sends weekly updates to the schools listing what's available. Browne has also sourced cheese from Vermont.

Without a middleman, the Farm-to-School effort can pose distribution problems. To address this, local schools have formed a buying collaborative. Farmers deliver fresh produce to a single, central location. Local school staff then pick up and distribute the produce to the individual schools.

(continued on page 4)

Food and Farming Books and Apps

Winter is a perfect time to curl up and read or discover apps that nourish your curiosity. Here are some ideas for reading and learning about farms and food. If you know of another great book or app on this topic, please let us know by sending a note to belmontfood@gmail.com. We may want to include it in the next issue!

Books for Children and Families

To Market, to Market by Nikki McClure uses striking paper-cuts to depict sellers at a busy farmers' market. Brief introductions are followed by detailed descriptions. The two-books-in-one style allows appreciation by a wide range of ages of children.

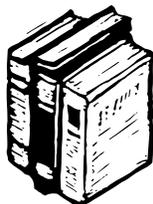
Chris Butterworth's *How Did That Get In My Lunchbox?* reminds preschoolers that food does not grow in stores. With charming illustrations by Lucia Gaggiotti, the book also provides information about healthy eating.

Julia Rothman's *Farm Anatomy: The Curious Parts and Pieces of Country Life* was originally published for adults, but it's a fun choice for the whole family. It's a friendly visual dictionary with a dash of farmers' almanac. From soil composition to the twenty-six distinct styles of rooster combs, you'll find it here.

How about cooking up some of the tasty treats being served to the President and his family? For inspiration, check out *A White House Garden Cookbook: Healthy Ideas from the First Family for Your Family* by Clara Silverstein.

Books for Adults

Farm City: The Education of an Urban Farmer by Novella Carpenter received a starred review from Publishers Weekly, which proclaimed: "In this utterly enchanting book, food writer Carpenter chronicles with grace and generosity her experiences as an urban farmer..."



The Pioneer Woman Cooks is a collection of photography, rural stories, and recipes that have defined mom-blogger-turned-author Ree Drummond's experience in the country. She shares, in her words, "cowboy-tested recipes I've learned to make during my years as an accidental ranch wife."

Apps (Applications, not Appetizers!)

Here are a handful of apps that promote healthy eating and home gardening:

Locavore allows you to easily find local, in-season food. Pinpoint nearby farmers' markets and farms, and discover seasonal recipes. Free at the App Store and Android Market.

Seafood Watch makes it easy to see if your seafood choices are sustainable. For example, Chilean sea bass may be tasty, but it is often harvested illegally, and some populations have become severely depleted. Play it smart with this app from the Monterey Bay Aquarium, and become a more responsible consumer. Free at the App Store and Android Market.

Gardenate is a gardening planning and tracking app. The "Planting Now" tab displays plans that are appropriate for the current season in your USDA zone. The interface is easy, and the graphics are a nice addition. \$1.99 at the App Store and Android Market.

LaLa Lunchbox is a fun and easy way for kids to plan and pack lunches with their parents. It empowers kids, teaches them to make smarter food choices, and helps them learn about advance planning. \$1.99 at the App Store.

—Leah Lesser,
with special thanks to
the Belmont Public Library
for assistance with this list.



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The Belmont Food Collaborative is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization and the parent organization of the Belmont Farmers' Market

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Winner of *Boston* magazine's

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The Market is a member of the Belmont Center Business Association.

Volume 8, Issue 1

Roots & Sprouts is a publication of the Belmont Food Collaborative, Inc.
PO Box 387
Belmont, MA 02478
belmontfood@gmail.com

Editor: Jennifer Angel
Designer: Dee Ippen
Logo designer: Trey Klein
Printer: Belmont Printing Co.

Printed on recycled paper

2013 Events

Upcoming community programs presented by the Belmont Food Collaborative

Basic Cheese-Making Course

Cheese making is one of the oldest and most important culinary traditions, shared the world over. Learn how to do it yourself in a hands-on course offered this winter by instructors Lisa Fox and Joan Teebagy.

You will make three types of cheese in the class: *chevre* from goat's milk, and *ricotta* and *paneer* from cow's milk. You will learn about milk selection, curd textures and starters, and appropriate tools and techniques. You'll also take home recipes and resource lists so you can make your favorite cheeses at home.

The one-day course is offered for a fee of \$20 in either Belmont or Lexington. You must sign up ahead of time for either one. There is a limit of 10 students per class.

Lexington

Sunday, January 27th, 2:00–4:00

Church of Our Redeemer, 6 Meriam St.

Sponsored by LexFarm

Sign up at lexfarm.org/class-registration/

Belmont

Sunday, February 3rd, 2:00–4:00

The First Church in Belmont, 404 Concord Ave.

Sponsored by Belmont Food Collaborative

Sign up at belmontfood.org/projects/education/basic-cheese-making-course/

Pomona Project 2013 Plant Order

Order edible landscaping plants at wholesale prices. New this year: herbs and sweet potatoes! Check out belmontfood.org/projects/pomona-project/ for order forms and more information.

Order deadline: Saturday, February 23rd.

Berry plant pick-up in late April (herbs, figs and sweet potatoes, late May).

Food for Thought

One family eats and cooks from its weekly CSA basket

As we drove down the gravel driveway to pick up our final CSA share of the season from Belmont Acres Farm last October, I felt both sadness and relief. I was sad that this summer Saturday afternoon tradition was coming to an end, but I was also relieved to have some respite from the pressure to do something creative and delicious with all the vegetables we got every week in our bushel basket.

We decided to join the Belmont Acres CSA because we wanted to start eating vegetables grown sustainably, and we wanted to support a local

farm. Belmont Acres is situated on the same five acres where Sergi Farm operated since 1946. Mike Chase and his wife Hermik now rent the land and farm it. They grew many different crops during the 2012 season, ranging from collard greens to tomatoes to beets. While they are not certified organic, they do employ sustainable methods such as drip irrigation and fertilizing with compost.

We of course appreciated the high-quality vegetables and the way they were grown, but what we didn't expect was how profoundly our weekly share would change our cooking and eating habits. Faced with a bushel basket filled with vegetables both familiar and unfamiliar, we were challenged to come up with creative ways to use most of it within the week. It forced us to seek out recipes for things we had never prepared before, such as eggplant, turnips, shelling beans, celeriac, fennel, and okra. We had been stuck in a rut of broccoli, green beans, peas, and carrots, and the CSA promptly jolted us out of it. And we learned a very important lesson: If you don't know what to do with a vegetable, roast it. It will almost always be tasty.

The best feeling was when we pulled off a dish or a meal that used several things from the basket. For example, we made at least three big batches of fresh salsa with tomatoes, cilantro, garlic, and jalapeños from the

farm. We embraced soups as a way to use shelling beans, leeks, and greens. The best dish my husband made this season was enchiladas verdes with tomatillos, cilantro, and jalapeños from the farm. We still talk about how deliciously complex the flavors of that dish were.

We also learned how to prepare things very simply and deliciously using fresh herbs

from the farm. For example, shelling beans sauteed with olive oil and sage. Potatoes roasted with olive oil and rosemary. Tomatoes with

fresh mozzarella and basil. Salmon baked with fresh dill. And when I didn't know what to do with all the parsley we got, I made parsley-cheddar cream biscuits, which were a great accompaniment to soup.

Obviously, the eating was good, but an additional benefit for our daughters came from the weekly visits to the farm. Just gaining a sense that vegetables come from the ground and not from the grocery store is huge. As they watched us wash actual dirt off the vegetables, they learned that vegetables are plants that get their nutrients from the soil and carbon from the air. We would occasionally get a little critter, too, which led to a discussion of how animals depend on plants for shelter and food.

The contents of our basket changed each week as vegetables came and went and as the weather dictated. We never knew what we were getting until the day before. Early in the summer, our basket included lettuces, peas, radishes, garlic, and potatoes. Later in the summer we got lots of tomatoes, squashes, beans, collard greens, kale, chard, and eggplant. Oh, the eggplant. It is not humanly possible to eat all the eggplant we got. But we certainly did our best to eat everything, and in the meantime, expanded our palates and our daughters' appreciation of real food. We look forward to repeating the experiment next summer.

—Sarah Jensen

Just gaining a sense that vegetables come from the ground and not from the grocery store is huge

(continued from page 1)

One size does not fit all

The biggest problem with the new lunches is the smaller portions—in particular, for meat and grains. A Kansas high school produced a YouTube video last September (“We Are Hungry”) protesting the size restrictions. And Browne reports that Belmont High School serving staff have echoed the complaint. While portion control is an effort to address child obesity, the same portion does not address the different needs of a small freshman and a large senior athlete. For the high school breakfast, a popular 4.5 oz. bagel has morphed into a 2 oz. whole-grain one—not a popular change.

In response to complaints about portions, regulations have recently been relaxed, allowing for more protein and higher caloric intake.

A learning curve

School lunch changes have led to a 10% drop in lunch participation at the high school. With an open campus, high schoolers can go off campus for lunch. In contrast, elementary school students are captive, and participation is high. Further, the younger students are at a more formative age. Browne sees the change as a learning curve: Healthier lunch choices will hopefully take hold with younger children and follow them to high school.

However, Browne points out that while healthy meal choices and education over time is a good thing, obesity does not start at school: “We’re not making anyone fat,” he adds, noting there’s not enough time to eat at school for that.

Tweaking the program

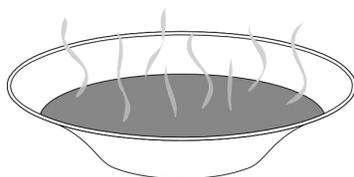
Browne says they are still tweaking the new program. For example, they are currently experimenting with legumes as a protein alternative. Burbank School was recently awarded a grant to improve health through providing more nutritious foods and more opportunity for physical activity. One of their undertakings is “Taste-test Tuesdays.” Students have an option to try new foods and then vote on whether they would like the food as a regular cafeteria offering. Recent taste-tested foods included sweet potatoes, butternut squash, and coleslaw kale with brown rice. True to the adage, “don’t knock it until you try it,” the kale and rice received a positive rating!

—Sara Cummins

Butternut Squash Soup

When you crave a hearty soup this winter, try this recipe from Vicki Lee’s Bakeshop—a full-service bakeshop, café, and catering company in Cushing Square. Vicki Lee’s uses locally sourced produce, seafood, and meats, and serves Farm-to-Table dinners during the peak growing months.

1½ pounds butternut squash, peeled, seeded, cut into 1-inch dice
1 large yellow onion, 1-inch dice
2 large carrots, peeled, 1-inch dice
1 large stalk celery, 1-inch dice
2 quarts vegetable stock
2 tablespoons canola oil
Salt and pepper to taste
½ cup heavy cream
1 teaspoon grated nutmeg
2 teaspoons cinnamon
1 cup brown sugar
2 tablespoons toasted, sliced almonds



Preheat oven to 375° and toss diced butternut squash in one tablespoon of the canola oil, and season with salt and pepper. Lay squash on a baking sheet and roast for 20 minutes or until the edges are browned and it is fork tender.

While the squash is roasting, heat a stockpot over medium heat and sauté the onions, carrots, and celery in the remaining canola oil. Sauté for about 10 minutes until vegetables are soft, and season with salt and pepper. Add roasted squash to the vegetables and add the vegetable stock.

Bring soup to a simmer and cook for 30 minutes. Remove from heat. Working in batches, puree the soup in a blender until smooth. Return the pureed soup to the stockpot and bring back to simmer.

Add the heavy cream, nutmeg, cinnamon, and brown sugar. Stir to combine and check seasonings, adjusting if necessary. To serve, ladle into soup bowls and sprinkle some toasted almonds in the center of each bowl.

Serves 8

—www.vickilees.com