



# AN Organic change

BY MAJKA BURHARDT

Why some school districts, hospitals, corporations, and even airlines are realizing the benefit of providing healthier food

PHOTO: LEFT, COURTESY OF MARIN FOOD SYSTEMS PROJECT; RIGHT, BURKE/TRIOLO PRODUCTIONS/GETTY IMAGES

I never eat airplane food. Instead, I stock up on snacks at the local natural foods store to tide me over until I reach my destination. When I'm too rushed to go shopping first, I subsist mostly on water and dream of my favorite quinoa salad.

I know I'm not the only one with this kind of dream—and these days, that dream isn't out of reach. Passengers on Song Airlines, Delta's low-fare air service, can now savor organic salads and yogurt while airborne. **And fresh organic food is beginning to curry favor in mainstream institutions on the ground as well.** Schools, hospitals, corporations, and restaurants nationwide are all exploring organic options. **Many would say it's about time.** ▶



Eating enthusiasm: (Left) Students at Caruso Middle School in Chicago use Stonyfield Farm–provided funds to promote healthy vending machines that offer yogurt, energy bars, pita chips, and more. (Right) A healthy cafeteria tray from the Farm to School program.

More than 40 percent of the U.S. population uses organic products, according to the Organic Trade Association (OTA), and 73 percent of shoppers say their primary grocery store carries them. “If people like the taste of organic products, they’re starting to look for that same taste experience outside the home,” says Holly Givens, the OTA’s communications director. “We’ve heard about more convenience stores carrying organic products and baseball stadiums looking into it.” Over the next few years, Givens says she wouldn’t be surprised if we see a lot more organic products in unexpected places.

Achieving change in large institutions certainly is not without challenges. After all, the mass-produced fare traditionally served up in hospitals and school cafeterias is far from healthy or haute cuisine, and budgets are often a factor. But, as evidenced by the popularity of the recent anti-fast-food documentary *Super Size Me*—as well as initiatives banning soft-drink sales and more in school districts from Seattle to Philadelphia—there’s widespread interest in turning this tide. After all, if anyone should be eating nutritious food, shouldn’t it be young children and sick people?

Across the country, enlightened parents, administrators, and managers are

working to bring healthier, fresher, more sustainable food to the people. Read on for inspiring tales from the front lines of the organic revolution.

### Schools

Gary Hirshberg, president of Stonyfield Farm and father of three, was appalled when his then 13-year-old son came home one day and told him what he’d had for lunch: “Pizza, Skittles, and chocolate milk.” Although served mostly organic food at home, his kids were surrounded by junk food at school. Soon after, Hirshberg devised Stonyfield Farm’s Healthy Vending Machine.

With 32 machines now in Massachusetts, Illinois, Washington, Rhode Island, and California schools, students can choose natural and organic food items ranging from yogurt and energy bars to pita chips and fruit leather. Each school’s students taste-test products to customize the contents and use Stonyfield-provided funds to create T-shirts and posters promoting the healthy eats.

Run as a nonprofit, the program provides the machines for free and asks vendors to discount items; profits go directly to the schools. Although they typically bring in about half the revenue of a tradi-

tional soft-drink machine, the healthy machines are outperforming expectations. There’s currently a 940-plus school waiting list for Stonyfield’s machines, and even the U.S. Department of Agriculture has expressed interest in getting one for its national headquarters.

Bringing healthy food into school cafeterias is an even bigger project, but several districts nationwide, particularly in California, are making progress. Perhaps best known is Berkeley’s School Lunch Initiative, serving the district’s nearly 9,000 students. Inspired by Chez Panisse founder Alice Waters’ decade-old Edible Schoolyard program, the newly adopted initiative not only provides healthy lunches but is also developing a curriculum that demonstrates food’s critical role in everything from history to science. Berkeley hopes schools nationwide will adopt the new curriculum. (One promising sign: This summer, students in Washington, D.C., helped plant an Edible Schoolyard on the National Mall.)

Across the bay in Marin County, more than 6,800 public school students are now eating organic, thanks to Marin Organic and partner organization Marin Food Systems Project. Acting as liaison between local organic farmers and schools, Marin ▶



## Find out how to bring organics to your school

For more information, check out:

- » Stonyfield Farm’s Healthy Vending Machine: [www.stonyfield.com/menuforchange](http://www.stonyfield.com/menuforchange)
- » Farm to School program: [www.farmtoschool.org](http://www.farmtoschool.org)
- » Rethinking School Lunch: [www.ecoliteracy.org/programs/rsl.html](http://www.ecoliteracy.org/programs/rsl.html)
- » Edible Schoolyard: [www.edibleschoolyard.org/howto.html](http://www.edibleschoolyard.org/howto.html)

—M.B.



Healthy hospital food? The next hurdle.

Organic arranges for schools to receive “gleaned” produce (fruits and vegetables that would otherwise rot in the field because of slight cosmetic blemishes) for free; schools purchase the remaining 40 percent to 60 percent. “Before the program launched late last year, 30 percent of the students purchased school lunches,” says Helge

Hellberg, Marin Organic’s executive director. “That number has already increased, generating more revenue for the schools.”

Further south in the lower-income area of Compton, Tracie Thomas has also seen a spike in her students’ interest in fresh produce. During the past two years, the assistant director of nutrition services for the Compton Unified School District has introduced salad bars at 24 elementary schools. She estimates that about half the students—who normally have little access to fresh produce—are now eating fruits and vegetables from the salad bars. Students at one school even launched a petition in fall 2004 when they thought their salad bar had been taken away. (It was just on temporary hold.)

The Compton program serves as a model for the nationwide Farm to School program, a partly government-funded group that helps link schools to local, sustainable, and organic farms. The program—which also helps teachers integrate food and farming topics into lesson plans—is more than 400 school districts strong, and growing.

By college level, it’s generally the students themselves who are demanding change. Yale University’s Sustainable Food Project was spearheaded in 2001 by Waters, whose daughter, Fanny, was a freshman at the time. Today, produce from the student-run organic garden is sold at a local farmers’ market, and organic milk, fruit, and grass-fed beef are offered campuswide. Princeton University, Reed College in Oregon, and Colorado College also serve organic foods, and students at the University of Wisconsin at Madison recently forced a switch to 100 percent organic beef burgers.

## Hospitals

After educational institutions, U.S. hospitals buy the greatest amount of catered food: about \$3.3 billion worth in 2004. Unfortunately, our health care institutions often serve food that’s unappetizing, minimally nutritious, or both. The irony does not escape Sara Gragnolati. As director of marketing for ADInfinitem, a New York-based group that’s part of the Alliance for Healthy Hospital Food, Gragnolati is spearheading a study of the state of the nation’s hospital food. After ▶

## A chef brings organics to summer camp

The Painted Turtle, a Hole in the Wall Gang Camp (founded by Paul Newman), is a special place for children with life-threatening diseases. Opened in 2004 in Lake Hughes, California, the camp’s mission is to inspire these children to reach beyond illness to become their greater selves, by allowing them to have an authentic camp experience while supporting their medical needs.

I spent that first summer season as the executive chef, creating the daily meal program and serving healthy, organic, and great-tasting dishes that children love and expect to eat in a camp setting. Working with the camp’s medical director, Wendy Cook, I lowered the fats and sugars of traditional favorites and created tempting menus for children who required special diets. All this was done with organic ingredients.

I am proud that the Painted Turtle is probably the only camp in the world that served **organic, homemade cream puffs**. Also popular were **organic spaghetti**, hot dogs with oven fries, **garlic broccoli**, **chili and corn bread**, **watermelon**, and the weekly **banana-split bar**. It was the largest amount of food I have ever cooked, day after day. I loved the chance to bring comforting organic food to these children who wanted so much to be healthy. Since that inaugural summer, the Painted Turtle has established a menu with healthy culinary standards that will function for many years. To learn more, visit [www.thepaintedturtle.org](http://www.thepaintedturtle.org).

—Donna Prizgintas



The chef at work.



Organics to the people: (Left) Preston Maring, MD, with wee shoppers at Kaiser Permanente's Oakland farmers' market. (Right) Even corporate dining rooms are serving local and organic fare.

analyzing recipes for the healthiest option on 28 hospital menus, she reports, “The mean fiber content was 1 gram, which won’t help a lot toward the RDA of 25 grams. And several of the meals had a full supply of the recommended daily sodium intake.” She adds, “Hospitals should take the lead for healthy food.”

Some are trying. The Cleveland Clinic in Ohio recently booted a Pizza Hut from its premises. In Iowa, Bartels Lutheran Retirement Community buys antibiotic- and hormone-free beef, and it spent 14 percent of its 2003 food budget locally.

Kaiser Permanente, the largest U.S. nonprofit health organization, started hosting farmers’ markets in 2003 as a way to bring fresh produce to staff, patients, visitors, and community members. Preston Maring, MD, associate physician-in-chief at Kaiser Permanente’s Oakland Medical Center, helped launch the first market—now a year-round, 100 percent organic Friday event. He also e-mails a weekly healthy recipe to nearly 5,000 people. Offering anecdotal evidence as to the market’s impact on his hospital, he says, “Some people have noticed employee morale has improved since the markets began, and we suspect the recent decline in sick leave on Fridays has a direct correlation.” Laughing, he adds, “Colleagues stop me in the hallway to talk about roasted asparagus with feta.” He also reports that many patients try to schedule appointments on market days.

Although the Oakland market’s produce hasn’t yet made it into the hospital’s kitchens, an onsite market does supply the salad bar at the Kaiser Permanente in Portland, Oregon. The health organization has put together a steering committee to look at the issue programwide; in the meantime, it hosts 22 markets nationwide, and plans to open more this year.

What’s the next step? Maring would like to see farmers’ markets spread wherever people gather and work. “We need to bring markets to where the workers are,” he says. “Why not a market onsite at a factory during shift changes?”

### Corporations

It’s hard to imagine a meal at the typical corporate dining hall inspiring fan mail. But it’s not uncommon for clients of Bon Appétit Management Company, a Palo Alto-based food service provider that’s committed to using local, sustainable ingredients. At TBWA\Chiat\Day advertising agency in Los Angeles, an employee recovering from a cold wrote to Bon Appétit chef Lisa Kurth, “The soup was amazing. Not just because it really did make me feel better (just like Grandma’s), but it tasted fantastic. With every bite you had me carefully studying the flavors and trying to figure out what was in it.”

Founded in 1987 by a devotee of Italy’s Slow Food movement, Bon Appétit runs more than 190 cafés across the country; clients include Cisco Systems,

Yahoo!, Oracle, Nordstrom, Adidas America, the Seattle Art Museum, the Getty Center, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, American University, and the catering operations at SBC Park, home to the San Francisco Giants. Companywide initiatives include buying ingredients directly from farmers within a 150-mile radius; purchasing seafood according to Seafood Watch guidelines; buying only antibiotic-free chicken; and training all chefs and cooks to understand why local and organic food benefits human and planetary health.

### Bringing the change to you

Few of us are fortunate enough to labor for employers with the foresight—and deep pockets—to sponsor such nutritious, delicious fare. But more and more, you’ll find fresh, organic food in surprising places: from catered vegetarian menus at weddings to Coleman all-natural beef at Good Times Burgers & Frozen Custard, a Colorado-based fast-food chain. Want to be pleasantly surprised more often? Start writing letters to your local school boards, hospitals, and government representatives—and then give a nudge to your favorite restaurants and food service companies. Heck, you can even try your boss. ■

Turn to page 56 to find recipes for chef Donna Prizgintas’ favorite late-summer dishes, made with fresh, organic produce.