



OREGON

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VOICE



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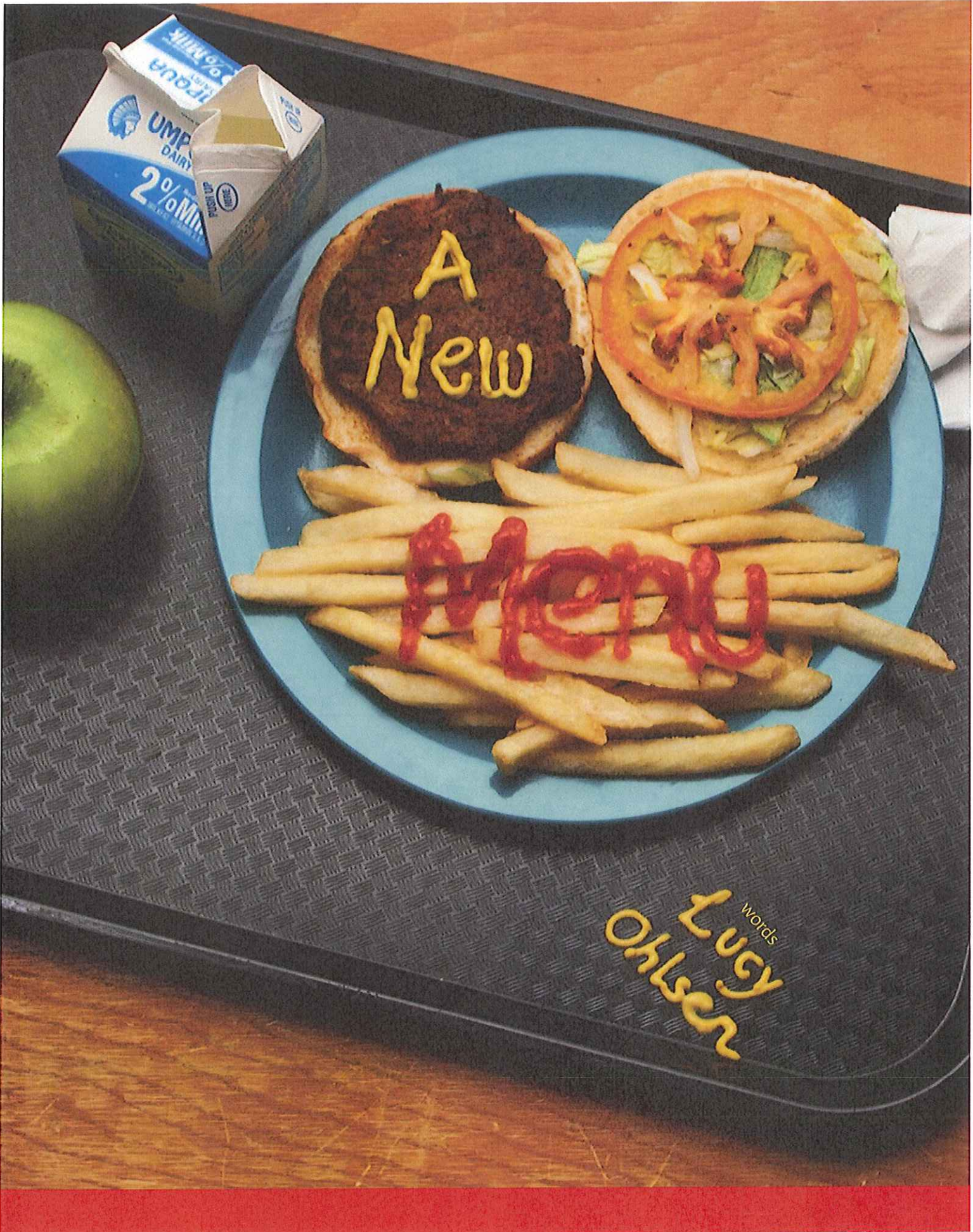


School
Lunch

DIY:
FORTS



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WITH HEALTH IN MIND, **SCHOOL CAFETERIAS** IN EUGENE AND ACROSS THE NATION ARE MOVING AWAY FROM BURGERS AND FRIES.

photo **COURTNEY HENDRICKS & MARY HALL**



Arriving bright-eyed and breathless from recess, the students at Cesar Chavez Elementary School line up for lunch. "I'm getting *nachos*," states a boisterous blond boy, clutching his reusable plastic yellow tray. Sitting on a petite chair at a miniature table, a small girl with curly brown hair munches on a tiny apple. Milk mustaches are abundant at every table. Sounds like any old school lunch scene. What's not so ordinary is that the boy's nachos are not covered in the classic neon of the canned cheese sauce, and the girl's apple is organic. Behind the scenes at Cesar Chavez is a fight to provide better food for the next generation of Eugeni-ans.

School cafeterias are notorious for producing fantastically mediocre food. To be fair, they earned this reputation. In serving food to hordes of little kids, quality seemed to fall by the wayside. With the immediate goal being getting food into every chirping little mouth with minimal complaint, and a tight budget for supplies, labor, and ingredients, cafeterias became the breeding grounds for mass-produced chicken nuggets and anything that could be frozen and prepared in gargantuan quantities. At first, no one was picky about the processed meat and canned cheese sauce. But today, with fat kids no longer just the one or two unfortunate picked-upon, traditional cafeteria food is being challenged and rethought.

Oregon has the lowest childhood obesity rate in the U.S., at 10 percent compared to the national 16 percent. Rick Sherman, director of nutrition services for the Eugene School District, is committed to keeping Oregon kids healthy. He is employed by Sodexo, a "Quality of Daily Life Solutions" company that works closely with Bill Clinton's Alliance for a Healthier Generation and Michelle Obama's Let's Move Initiative. Sodexo provides the food for the 7,000 or so school lunches that are distributed to the youth in Eugene daily. Sherman is a tall, thin, enthusiastic and kind-faced man, and he's worked with Sodexo for 30 years.

It's hard to imagine going to an elementary school without the pungent aroma of chicken nugget

grease and canned vegetables rotting on Styrofoam trays in the trashcan. Some of my more treasured elementary school cafeteria memories revolve around pizza Fridays (with a helping of ranch dressing to dip the pizza in) and chocolate milk chugging contests. I couldn't quite wrap my head around the idea that lunches could actually become popular without offering junk foods as coercion to get kids to eat them.

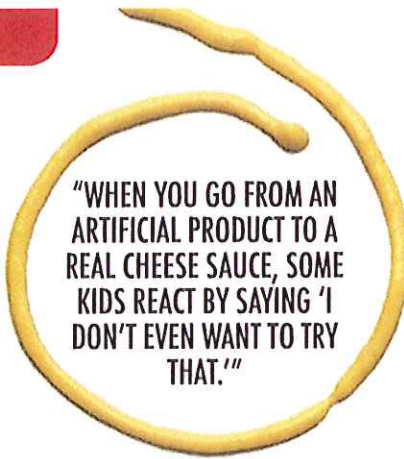
According to Nicole Zammit, the Registered Dietitian for 4J, it's not that hard to offer kids food that is nutritious and popular, and also abides by USDA regulations. "The real challenge," she says, "is providing the menu we do while staying with an extremely tight budget with huge increases in food prices and labor."

The menu today isn't full of exotic tempeh dishes or soba noodles. Sherman admits, "If we let them, kids would choose pizza every day." Instead, he and Zammit pay attention to what kids are asking for, and try to incorporate their wishes into a more balanced eating regime.

One example is a reform of nachos.



Instead of offering the unhealthy, neon yellow cheese sauce, Zammit and Sherman have been working on coming up with a made-from-scratch recipe that includes only about six ingredients as opposed to the long list on the can. The creation of the new recipe involved student focus groups that tested the cheese sauce and got to vote on its quality. "Kids are used to texture, color, and mouth feel. When you go from an artificial product to a real cheese sauce, some kids react by saying 'I don't even want to try that,'" said Zammit. "Especially in the high schools, it's difficult to get students to accept that kind of dramatic change." The cheese sauce is still fairly new, but the wanted consistency has finally been reached, and it is being offered at the schools.



Each fall, Zammit and Sherman do a promotion called "vote and be heard" to get students' ideas and preferences. "Chicken nuggets and pizza are always favorites," Zammit said, "but we've been able to incorporate some other favorites into the mix as well." Some less stereotypical and healthier favorites are baked potatoes and taco bars. Zammit says she has no guilt about the potentially unhealthy taco bars, because she can "hide" chopped veggies in with the cooked ground beef, and the topping offerings include veggies. Some other popular foods are chicken noodle soup and breakfast for lunch (even though the kids aren't usually allowed to have syrup). Instead of the pizza Fridays I remember from elementary school, Zammit has come up with different "exciting" days like "vegetarian Fridays." When they do serve pizza, they emphasize that the focus is not on the pizza but on serving a "good mix of healthy meals" that meet federal and state requirements.

All this talk about health and sneaking veggies left me feeling a little sorry for the elementary schoolers of today. Lunchtime was only below recess in my fun-ranking scale of elementary school activities. I chose to tour Cesar Chavez elementary to see if the changes in the menu had changed the general happy feel I assign with my conception of a cafeteria.

The day I visited Cesar Chavez, there were five options available for the kids to choose: nachos (with the new cheese sauce), a chicken patty on a whole grain bun, a hearty garden salad, sweet and sour popcorn chicken on pineapple rice, or a tuna sandwich. The nachos I found pretty supreme.

I was also impressed by the "rainbow offering bar," which featured organic apples, orange slices, beans, corn, and pears. None of it looked like the standard iceberg lettuce or canned fruit in sweetened juice I remember from the cafeteria. The little tykes that filed past the sneeze guard didn't seem any less excited about the relatively healthy options being forced upon them.

Cesar Chavez also features a school garden, which Rick Sherman is very involved with. This year he's become a certified Master Gardener, and has even managed to harvest some of the lettuce from the garden and use it in the cafeteria. The schools receive money for growing the lettuce, just as if the cafeteria was buying it from any other source.

Sherman is also trying to establish criteria in order to distinguish certain cafeterias as "green cafeterias." Right now, there are only criteria for "green schools." "Cafeterias typically are one of the largest potential producers of trash," Sherman said. "I want to try and establish a zero waste (or as close as possible) program." These criteria would include things like low-temperature dishwashers, re-useable plasticware, a school garden, a composting procedure, and "recycling, of course."

At Cesar Chavez, the kids all line up at the recycling/composting station when they're finished eating. It's pretty adorable, all of these little teeny boppers scraping their scraps

in the correct bins and placing their plastic trays in a neat little stack. Cesar Chavez has a gigantic compost bin, and all of the food goes through the proper composting stages, eventually arriving in the school garden.

Since I wasn't particularly fit as a preteen, I suppose it is not fit to advocate the diet I followed in those years, eating mainly the cafeteria offerings that included cheese and butter and went well with ranch dressing. It's probably a good thing to never even expose a vulnerable young child to the lardy deliciousness of ranch dressing. Though bans and extensive regulations on food are daunting and a little unnerving to advocates of liberal parenting, the cafeterias in Eugene are using the current regulations to change their offerings in a largely appealing way. ♪

An Eye for a Nye

The **Science Guy** drops knowledge at the Willamette University commencement.

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art **MEAGHAN LARKIN**