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Project Lunch: rethinking Marin's lunchrooms

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Close your eyes. Imagine you're a student at a Marin school. It's lunchtime. You head to the cafeteria.

"The lunch buffet starts with an entrée: free-range roasted chicken, mashed potatoes and glazed organic local carrots. Next is the salad bar. It's spring, so options are plentiful. Your food is served on beautiful dishware, and silverware awaits you at the end of the buffet.

"The cashier is located at the end of the buffet, where you type in a four-digit pin number to pay for your meal. Whether you qualify for the free or reduced lunch or not, no one will ever know. You look around the cafeteria for a place to sit. Large round tables that easily facilitate conversation are scattered around the room. The room is filled with natural light and is abuzz with conversation.

"All of the school's community — students, teachers, faculty and staff — eat at the dining hall. You sit down at a table with friends and chat about the day's events. After your meal, you compost the leftover food, place your dishes in wash bins, and head out to the field."

Sound idyllic? Marin Academy High School senior Courtney Jacobson, who presented this fantasy scenario at a recent panel hosted by her school, believes this lunchtime nirvana is closer to achievable than most people think.

"A school lunch program that nourishes the health and the minds of the students, the community and the environment is an attainable goal," she said, "one that this community, right here, right now, is poised to realize."

Jacobson was one of three students who spoke at the Nov. 12 event, called "Project Lunch: School Lunch Challenge," which was organized by the group Teens Turning Green and the Marin Academy Eco Council. The event featured introductory talks from students; the "Renegade Lunch Lady," aka chef Ann Cooper, who has written numerous books on healthy school lunch advocacy, and Congresswoman Lynn Woolsey.

After the talks, a group of local chefs competed to cook meals on the budget and requirements provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Participants shared dinner after the competition, and then listened to a panel discussion. Scheduled panelists included Assemblyman Jared Huffman (D-San Rafael), Director of Marin Organic Helge Hellberg, Food Service Director of the Novato Unified School District Miguel Villarreal and others.

Judi Shils, executive director of Teens Turning Green, said the nonprofit initiated the Project Lunch program in June. "The goal is to get together and rethink the way that our children are getting fed at

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Judi Shils, executive director of Teens Turning Green, discusses the group's latest cause called Project Lunch, which is a collaboration of students, teachers, parents, food service staff and others working to make Marin's school lunches healthier. Photo by Roenau/Marinscope.

our schools," she said. The program is forming Project Lunch clubs in as many schools as possible, Shils said, to mobilize students in partnership with other students, teachers, food service staff, garden coordinators and school program directors.

Ali Chan, a San Marin High School senior who started Marin's first Project Lunch club at her school, also spoke at the event. Chan said she knew little about Marin's school lunch system just three months ago, and didn't get involved because she was an expert on nutrition or food advocacy. She got involved, she said, because she heard that San Marin's rival school across town was going to have better school lunches.

Chan started the Project Lunch Club with four goals in mind: make the food taste better so that students will eat it, make it healthier, educate the student body about what they're eating and why, and create a sense of community centered on food.

But Chan said she soon realized that making these changes would be far more complex than she thought. San Marin is part of the Novato Unified School District, which is one of four districts in Marin with a food service director. Chan started by getting in touch with Novato's food service director, Villarreal. Marin County has 19 school districts and four food service directors that each have a central kitchen to work from.

Villarreal told Chan the sad reality that he is provided with about \$1 per day per student per lunch. Staffing is low, facilities are outdated, and there are a host of constrictions on providing food for school lunches that are mandated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, he told her.

Still, Villarreal has done an impressive amount with what he has been given.

All of the 4,500 meals per day he serves in his district have some locally produced organic ingredients, he said. Villarreal works with Marin Organic's Farm to School Program, which delivers fresh produce from local farms to Novato's central kitchen. He is slowly upgrading the kitchen to accommodate a higher volume of produce with necessary equipment like an industrial-size salad washer. Villarreal said he designs his menus based on the seasonal food he knows will be coming from Marin Organic.

However, there are plenty of obstacles in the way for food service directors like Villarreal, and change, he said, "doesn't happen overnight." It takes collaboration with parents and nonprofits, and plenty of input from students like Chan.

Elena Dibble, who oversees the food service for the elementary and high school districts in San Rafael, said she provides about 3,000 lunches, 1,000 breakfasts and 700 after-school snacks to students per day. Especially with recent staff reductions and budget cuts, overcoming the obstacles Villarreal laid out has been challenging, she said.

Still, Dibble said the districts have created a food advisory committee made up of parents of elementary-level students that has been working for several months on improving school meals. The districts also have a high school food advisory group that includes local students and parents. They met for the first time on Monday.

In addition, on Monday Dibble began working with two interns from the North Bay Conservation Corps who will be helping coordinate various school lunch improvement efforts for San Rafael. Their job includes conducting an assessment of food service in San Rafael school districts. The two interns, Hetty Chin and Brianna Georgi, worked with Villarreal for a month and a half before coming to San Rafael. They will be working with Dibble until the end of May.

Dibble said her main focus for San Rafael schools so far this year has been implementing salad bars in the cafeterias and eliminating plastic-wrapped food. She recently bought a food processor for the central kitchen, and has been trying to introduce more organic produce into each meal. "One of the challenges of organic, or all produce, is that when it's ready to harvest it's ready to harvest," Dibble said. Which means menus must be created around potentially unpredictable resources.

Dibble would like to collaborate with Project Lunch, and also said she would like to incorporate Marin Organic's Farm to School Program into San Rafael's food service.

"I think because of the budget crisis that food service has really been put on the back burner," Dibble

said. "And now, even though we're still in a budget crisis, we're trying to move forward with what we can."

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