

you can lead a kid to miso...

IN HIS WHITE TOQUE AND CHEF'S COAT, BILL IDELL, NO2, IS RACING through the controlled chaos of the kitchen. Steam from the giant, sizzling wok of pad Thai thickens the air. Over the clatter of washing pots, he directs his servers on plating the hand-wrapped fresh Vietnamese spring rolls, Chinese dumplings, edamame and soy dipping sauce. The miso soup is ready to be dished up. In the back of his mind, he wonders if his customers will appreciate the chicken breast with lemongrass and Thai basil roasted in banana leaves and accompanied by a mango salad. ■ But he has no time to second guess the menu. His patrons will be here any moment for the lunch seating, all 230 of them. And he has only until recess to win them over.

BY JULIE FLAHERTY | PHOTOS BY MELODY KO



Clockwise, a student shares a skill; applauding the buffet; fresh ingredients. Opposite, carved vegetables add to the decor.



Idell is making lunch at the Marblehead Community Charter Public School (MCCPS) a learning experience. As director of nutrition services, he has to use every culinary trick from his 18 years in the restaurant world and every marketing strategy he took away from the Friedman School's Nutrition Communication program to keep the students coming back.

"I've worked in fine dining where people are paying \$28 a plate, and without a doubt, students are the toughest clientele I have ever had to deal with," he says.

This is not a typical lunch day. The Taste of Asia event is one of Idell's semi-monthly buffets designed to surreptitiously educate the fourth- through eighth-graders about good, healthful food. It takes a month of planning, a score of volunteers and grant money from

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Healthy Choices and Whole Foods Market.

"Part of what I'm trying to do is help kids gain respect for food, understand there is a connection with food to the environment, an historical connection, a cultural connection," Idell says. "All of that put together, I feel, will make kids at least say, 'There is some significance here, so I'll taste this plate of weird things wrapped in banana leaves.'"

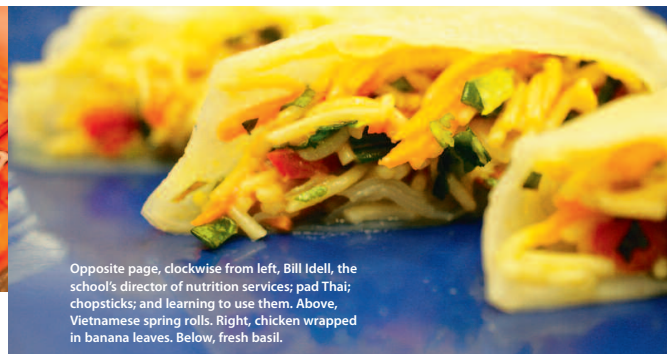
CAFETERIAS AS BATTLEFIELDS

The reality is that school cafeterias have become nutritional battlegrounds. Nationwide, more than 15 percent of children ages 6 to 19 are obese, a percentage that has increased dramatically in the last two decades. Prompted by the weight problems, a new federal law requires that every school district in

the country that participates in the federal school lunch program must have a "local wellness policy" in place by this fall. A bipartisan group in Congress recently introduced legislation that would require high nutritional standards for all foods sold on school premises, and in Massachusetts, a House bill is being debated that would ban the sale of junk food and soda in public schools.

One of Idell's solutions is to introduce students to healthful foods from different cultures through his Around the World with Five Cuisines Food Education Program. He started last year with France, and this year has moved on to Mexico, the Middle East, Asia and Italy.

Cooking and serving the food is just a piece of his plan. "It needs to be marketed, and it needs to be kept extremely positive and simplified, too," he says. A couple days before each buffet, he presents a slide show to the entire student body, talking about how the cuisine developed and describing the ingredients. After the meal, he has the stu-



Opposite page, clockwise from left, Bill Idell, the school's director of nutrition services; pad Thai; chopsticks; and learning to use them. Above, Vietnamese spring rolls. Right, chicken wrapped in banana leaves. Below, fresh basil.



dents complete surveys, rating the new foods from "awesome" to "bad" or "didn't try."

For the first several buffets, he didn't even mention that the foods were, for the most part, very healthy.

"As soon as people hear that it's good for you, forget about it," he says. For the Taste of Asia presentation, he felt the students were ready for some nutritional basics. But he kept it simple, paring it to two points: Eat as many fresh fruits and vegetables as possible and eat a wide variety of foods.

"Even bringing up the [food] pyramid and serving sizes—it just opens up a door to confusion," he says.

Like any good marketer, he begins with focus groups. His weekly cooking class, which students sign up for as an enrichment course, is the perfect place for him to try out recipes and adapt them for the students' palates. Mushrooms, for example, are "too squirmly and brown." Shellfish is usually a no-go. And for the pad Thai, he was careful to leave out the fish sauce, which just plain smells.

Then comes the parent outreach. He sends an e-mail in advance of each buffet event, explaining his goals and asking for volunteers to help in the kitchen.

"The parents who do come, they see the food and they see us breaking our backs to do this," Idell says. "They say, 'I've got more faith in school lunch now.' It's built a lot of good will. Next year I want to raise the prices. I think parents now will understand why."

As the students make their way toward the cafeteria, parent volunteers Laura Plunkett and Susan Colehower are dispensing scores of cups of green tea chai. Their children have talked about Mr. Idell's visits to their sixth-grade class, where each has been

assigned to study the culture of a different country through its music, art and food.

"Bill's working with the kids to help them find recipes," Plunkett says. "My daughter, Molly, has Sweden, so we're going to make Swedish meatballs."

"Then we have to make 50 samples—did you see that?" Colehower asks. "My son picked Indonesian fried beef, this really complicated thing, and we have to serve it to 50 people." Despite the labor, she attests, "We're psyched."

FOOD IN THE CLASSROOM

Thomas Commeret, the head of school, is impressed with the way Idell brought nutrition into the social studies curriculum. "Normally, if there's any kind of integration, it's with science," he says. "You do health, you do calories, you do the food pyramid. He brought his perspective of 'Why not integrate teaching culture with cuisine?'"

He looks around at the students, some of whom are even eating their greens, the stir-fried choy sum. "When [Idell] first started, I said I don't know if some of these kids are going to go for this," he says. "But they like the experience."

Today's buffet "experience" includes an Emeril-style cooking demonstration by the owner of Sticky Rice, a local Thai restaurant. The fortune cookies are stuffed with inside jokes about the school. During the slide show, the students laugh at the head of a faculty member superimposed onto a farmer in a rice field.

Commeret says he took a risk hiring a chef with no school lunch experience to run the nutrition program. "But he had a particular spark about him, and we said let's give this guy a shot," he says.

Preparing lunch at a middle school was never on Idell's list of dream jobs, although he knew at a young age that he wanted to cook. After high school, he enrolled at Johnson & Wales University College of Culinary Arts. From there he embarked on a varied cooking career: a catering company in New Jersey. A restaurant in Berkeley, California's respected "gourmet ghetto." A James Beard award-

winning restaurant in Santa Fe. An opera-themed restaurant where waiters would sing arias at the ring of a bell. A catering company for music video and movie crews in Manhattan. Along the way, he found time to earn his undergraduate degree in nutrition science at Oregon State University. But something was missing.

"It becomes very repetitious," Idell says. "Even when you're working in a higher-end place, it's kind of a grind. Don't get me wrong, I love it. But I had a curiosity for food that went beyond just cooking it."

After looking at several graduate programs that seemed to focus on either bench-top science or dietetics, he was intrigued by the Nutrition Communication program at the Friedman School. "I thought studying nutrition communication would give me the opportunity to do what I wanted to do, which was use both my science and my culinary backgrounds," he says.

CHEF, NUTRITIONIST, ACCOUNTANT

A few months out of Tufts, he came across the MCCPS job posting. He's the first to admit that he knew "nothing" about school lunches, other than their dismal reputation. Thankfully, his kitchen manager, Susan Magnet, who had been in the position five years, knew all the ins and outs and brought him up to speed on all the requirements of the National School Lunch Program. And there are many, from documenting reimbursements for free and reduced-price lunches to ensuring portions are in four-ounce



which Idell stocks with cold foods like homemade hummus, tabouli, relishes, Thai noodle salad, fresh fruits, good quality half-sour pickles and tomato, mozzarella and fresh basil salad.

The students mostly shunned the salad bar when it was first introduced. It turned out that from a short distance, the bar looked like a bunch of identically unappealing green cylinders; students couldn't tell what was in them unless they were almost full. That's when Idell realized that just as adults appreciate candlelight and fine china, students respond to a good presentation. He swapped out the bins for bell-shaped melamine bowls and trays with polka dots and funky colors like lime green and raspberry.

"It didn't matter what was in there. The kids right away said 'Cool bowls, Mr. Idell,'" he says. "Now there is always a log jam there."

Idell would like his ideas to reach a wider audience. This spring, he traveled to the Loire Valley region of France to share details of his food education program with French and U.S. leaders from dietetics, the food industry, food service and research. The conference, hosted by the food and nutrition education company Field to Plate, allowed participants to compare the two countries' often-different approaches to school lunch and nutrition education. Last summer, he gave a presentation on his buffet program to the U.S. Department of Education. He has also consulted with the Somerville, Mass., school system.

But Idell admits his program is not 100 percent transferable. Not every school administration or every group of parents would buy into Idell's schemes. As a charter school, MCCPS has a good deal of autonomy, and its small size makes it easier to adapt to new procedures. What other school would not only vote to get rid of its wasteful

foam plates (33,000 a year) and replace them with reusable plastic ones, but would have students who would volunteer to wash them each day?

"You don't find that kind of support in every school," Idell says.

Idell doesn't blame school food service directors for being slow to change. "People don't understand how much work it is. I have to have a written recipe for everything I serve that has two or more ingredients. As a chef, it's a disincentive. Why constantly try to introduce new foods to the kids when all it means is more and more work?"

Schools across the country are under pressure to end candy and bake sales and remove soda machines that dispense high-calorie soft drinks. The problem is that cash-strapped school systems have come to depend on the proceeds of those sales to meet their budgets.

MCCPS has never had a soda machine, and its snack bar is stocked with healthier options like baked chips, granola bars and a line of soft drinks made from fruit juice and sparkling water that Idell tracked down.

That said, Idell disagrees with those health advocates who want to purge all goodies from school menus. "It almost seems like they want kids to be eating brown rice and seaweed," Idell says. "There's nothing wrong with serving chocolate cake at lunch. You are going to lose kids on that message and any other message you want to deliver, too, because there is going to be a shield up already."

Working at a school can be even more frenetic than the high-octane restaurant world. Last night at 9:30, he was at an Asian supermarket shopping for edamame. Tomorrow, the Massachusetts Department of Education will be here to audit his books. Sure, there are days, when he's taking out the garbage or figuring out what to do with the government cheese, that he misses the glamor of the restaurant business.

"But I've resigned myself from doing high-end, beautiful food every night of the week," he says. "There was a part of me that wasn't being fulfilled doing just that." ■