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# The Oregonian FoodDay

## Taking a fresh approach to day care meals that kids will actually eat

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By Leslie Cole, The Oregonian



Charlie Newcomb munches fresh salad at Maryam Darabi's home-based preschool, where students regularly eat a multicourse Persian lunch.

**ChildRoots** At ChildRoots, a Southeast Portland child care center, owner Christina Unga decided to make healthful eating a pillar of the curriculum. **Watch video** at the link below:

<http://video-embed.oregonlive.com/services/player/bcpid619299305001?bctid=1039279010001>

It's just shy of noon at ChildRoots day care center, where six barely 1-year-olds sit Buddha-like at a low table. Lunch today -- bowls of steamed grains, black beans and dark purple beets minced into slivers -- looks like it escaped from the nearest college co-op, but the little eaters dive in. Some push fistfuls of black beans into mouths sprouting new molars. Tiny fingers pinch beet shards. A wobbly young lad gums a wedge of fresh orange. The lesson, framed with encouraging chatter from their teachers, is the same in each of the center's 10 classrooms: Food is a

kaleidoscope of textures, colors and tastes. Eating is pleasurable, and what you put into your mouth matters.

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At a growing number of child care centers, building healthful eating habits is as important as learning to make friends, share toys and count to 10. Some commit to scratch-cooked meals with ingredients from local farms, while others plant gardens. When Christina Unga opened ChildRoots in the Kerns neighborhood four years ago, she decided to make healthful eating a pillar of the curriculum, building menus around simply prepared whole foods and creating a culture of exploration and choice. "Food," Unga says, "is one of the pieces that bring people here. It's important."

"I think the (food) industry is approaching food by hiding it, to trick kids into eating healthy," says Unga, a veteran teacher. "Our approach is to show them whole foods so they know that eating them is delicious."

The idea is not to hide healthful ingredients like beans and grains in other dishes but to highlight them. It's called Take 5, where daily menus offer five food groups, and children take as much or as little as they want. Lunch, served in classrooms family-style, with teachers joining in, might be bowls of cooked white beans, polenta, steamed carrots and strawberries; another day it's red beans, brown rice drizzled with olive oil, roasted cauliflower and apples.

There's no coercion, no minimum required bites; instead, teachers prompt and ask questions, saying things like, "I notice that there is still milk and carrots -- are you interested in either of these things? Have the pears made it down to you? Do you plan to try the corn first or the tofu fritters?"

"The kids learn right from the start to pass bowls, help themselves," says Lisa McKerlick, whose son Will, 4, started at the center when he was 1. "The very little ones don't have sippy cups. They drink from recycled glass baby food jars. Most of us think, 'that'll never work,' but it does."

## **Unfamiliar fare**

Over at Maryam Preschool, the meal looks different, but the goal is similar: shaping young palates and modeling a healthful approach to food. A dozen-plus 2 1/2- to 5-year-olds sit down each day to a multicourse Persian lunch -- typically fish, lamb or chicken, herb-scented rice, vegetables and always fresh fruit. "This is the way I show my culture," says Maryam Darabi, who opened her school in her Lake Oswego home 21 years ago. "When the kids like the food and eat the food, they become familiar with other kinds of vegetables and fruit." Some parents are hesitant at first, she says, wondering if their picky eaters will fit in. "I ask my parents to give me at least two to three weeks. After a week, they become a fan of the food, just because they're sitting and eating together."

Recent research backs up what these child care providers are saying: Healthy eaters are both born and made, starting from even before infancy.

"Taste is innate, but we know that learning and environment can influence taste," says Nancy Findholdt, associate professor at Oregon Health & Science University's School of Nursing in La Grande. Findholdt's research focuses on obesity prevention and environmental influences on children. "If kids are exposed to a wide variety of flavors -- even if fetuses are exposed to certain flavors in the amniotic fluid -- they can appreciate those flavors once they begin to eat solid food. That lends evidence to how important it is to start very early in exposing them to healthful foods."

### **Parents' backup plan**

McKerlick, a nurse, says that though she doesn't typically cook this way at home for her preschooler, by now his lunches of legumes and grains, with fruit as a treat, are entirely unremarkable. "It's become so normal to us," she says. "I ask him, so what did you have today. He'll say, 'Couscous, peaches, quinoa.' They send us menus but at this point I don't even look at them. I never have to question it."

Besides that, the school's meal program provides well-meaning but busy parents a backup plan. "If I feed him something horrible the night before," McKerlick says, "I know he's going to get the right food there."

Although she's heard parents complain that their kids aren't eating as much as they should, most parents fall somewhere between content and grateful for the food served at the center.

Kari McGee, a mother of two, has seen both sides. Her second-grade son "has always been an adventurous eater" and remains so, she says, because the ChildRoots experience reinforced it. Her 4-year-old daughter is much more typical. "Vegetables for her are hard. But I know she eats more vegetables at school because they're doing it as a group. That doesn't always translate at home, but over time I think that will stay with her."

As for the kids who'd rather not eat what's offered, Unga says staffers encourage, not cajole. "We try for that peer-to-peer education. We do ask that every child come to the table, for the experience. Even if a child was to choose not to eat anything, they can talk about the colors, flavors, textures, where does it come from, how does it differ from yesterday's meal, how does it taste today?"

### **Shaping eating habits**

Child care centers embracing food education is good news, say experts. The preschool and toddler years present a powerful opportunity for shaping eating habits.

"Based on research, it's a really good time to introduce foods -- when children are ready and willing, and they also have a lot of peer support, says Lynn Brann, a Syracuse University dietitian whose research focuses on feeding practices of family home day care providers. "Even though we think of peer pressure as happening later on, if a young child has other examples, it makes them more daring and apt to go out on a limb."

The more times a child tries a new food, the better -- not just 3 or 4, Brann says, but as many as 10.

Ellis Casabar, the chef at Children's Relief Nursery, has seen it firsthand. When he joined the Portland therapeutic day care center a year and a half ago, he brought with him the idea of scratch-cooked meals. The children at the center, ranging from 18 months to 4 years, now breakfast on Cream of Wheat with fresh apples; lunch might be a barbecued chicken breast with roasted zucchini, yellow squash and red peppers. But when he started serving fresh vegetables a year and a half ago, they weren't so sure. "The kids at first were, 'Ooh, it's green. I don't want to eat that. Now it's become where I can't make enough of certain vegetables. They like broccoli a lot, and they used to hate it.

"Sometimes I'll do a sauté with other vegetables, aromatics or garlic or sesame oil. Of course, they're going to have their likes and dislikes, but if you introduce it to them enough, they will learn to eat it."

### **Cost of quality food**

Back at ChildRoots, Unga shows a visitor into the kitchen, where crates of green beans and gallons of organic milk crowd the refrigerator. Polenta, rice and dried beans line the shelves. The only nod to processed food is a bag of organic cereal, brought out sometimes as part of the morning snack. For the daily lunch, the full-time chef uses little more than an oven for roasting vegetables, an industrial-size rice cooker, some knives and a few deep stock pots for cooking beans. Asked whether providing young children with gold-standard food costs more, Unga emphatically says no.

"We are a certified eco-friendly child center, and our rates reflect our commitment to that. But our rates aren't any higher than the fair-market rate. (FOODday confirmed that they are comparable to downtown Portland child care centers.) That's the irony that the world needs to understand. If schools spent less on packaged processed foods and just spent money on a bag of organic beans and local fruits and vegetables ... it doesn't cost any more. I think they'd be surprised."

Though it probably wouldn't be any more surprising than, say, a toddler who gobbles up beets.

-- **Leslie Cole**  
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