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Food Affair — The French Approach to Healthy Eating and Enjoyment

By Kindy R. Peaslee, RD

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The women may or may not get fat, but one thing seems clear: the French have a love-love relationship with food. Attendees of a recent educational forum got a taste of the country's culinary culture, especially in its schools—a taste that may shed light on how to improve the health of American children.

Spring had definitely sprung in France. Wide-open French-style windows let in the springtime sun, balmy breezes, the sounds of chirping birds, and the fragrant smell of lilac. Espresso coffee and delicious French pastries were served on a chateau terrace at umbrella café tables overlooking rose gardens and gurgling stone fountains. Shouldn't all continuing education experiences be held in this kind of setting?

A group of 16 chefs, educators, dietitians, and nutritionists recently came together in France's Loire Valley for the 2007 International Exchange Forum on Children, Obesity, Food Choice, and the Environment. The forum aimed to examine the ways in which the French feed their children, explore what school food should consist of, and learn how we can create an environment in our own communities that supports children's health and their ability to learn.

We all wondered whether the French approach to school food makes a difference in keeping obesity and related health issues in check among school-aged children. As healthy eating advocates, our exploration was not about copying the French; rather, it was about examining the differences in our country's approaches and discovering how we may learn from each other.

French Paradox in the School Cafeteria?

Joie de vivre is a French expression for the "joy of living," translated as a state of healthy balance of mind and body, along with the pleasure and appreciation for the seasons and things both great and small. Herve This, the acclaimed French culinary expert, translates joie de vivre into what he claims is the one small detail that gives his culinary art its meaning: love. He shared his eating philosophy in a recent interview in *Ode* magazine (November 2006) called "The Taste of Love." This wrote a book for elementary school students, not yet published in English, to get teachers and children thinking as tastefully as possible. He believes that without love in the kitchen, even the most ingenious culinary creation loses its meaning.

Recent books, such as *French Women Don't Get Fat* by Mireille Guiliano, have built on the joy of eating concept by observing the way French men and women enjoy delicious, rich food and have less coronary heart disease, lower rates of obesity, and longer lives than Americans. "Guess what? French children don't get fat either. And it's not because they're drinking red wine with their school lunch," says Shanny Peer, a forum attendee and director of policy programs at the French-American Foundation in New York City. Peer cites Greg Critser's book *Fat Land: How Americans Became the Fattest People in the World* for a brief historical perspective on the French response to concerns about childhood obesity dating back to the 1930s, when French child health educators began urging mothers to adopt the healthy norms that prevail today.

Leslie Lytle, PhD, RD, from the University of Minnesota School of Public Health, expanded on the French paradox discussion by presenting current community and family environment research in France and America. Lytle showed studies done by the International Obesity Task Force on the prevalence of childhood overweight and obesity in France. Obesity statistics are increasing slowly, with approximately 4% of French children aged 7 to 11 currently classified as obese and another 18% as overweight. As dietitians, we know that obesity rates among children are up by 60% in the United States, yet France has experienced one of the smallest increases among other countries in the prevalence of childhood obesity at only 28%.¹

Food Manufacturers in France

Our group visited a French Hypermart and met Barbara Bidan from the Fleury-Michon Group, a leading French meal solutions food company. According to Bidan, the Fleury-Michon brand wants to be known as the brand of pleasure and balance while promoting taste and health. Linda McDonald, MS, RD, publisher of the newsletter Supermarket Savvy and a forum participant, found European supermarkets fascinating. McDonald had a chance to speak with Bidan to try to make sense of the European food labels. According to McDonald, “Presently, the European Union (EU) does not require nutrition labeling on food products unless they make a nutrition claim. Some prepackaged foods also provide information about Guideline Daily Amounts (GDAs), which are similar to our percent Daily Values.”

McDonald was impressed with the array of fresh produce, fish, seafood, meats, and dairy products in the Hypermart we toured. “The yogurt aisle was huge and carried the most unique product that I saw: Danone Essensis,” she says. “The tag line for Essensis, which contains omega-6 fats, antioxidants, vitamin E, and probiotics, is ‘nourish your skin from the inside.’”

“Food manufacturers advertising their products in France are now required to add a health message such as, ‘For your health, do regular physical exercise,’” she explains. “The requirement is part of the second phase in the French government’s long-term scheme to promote healthier eating through the Programme National Nutrition Santé (PNNS).” McDonald says that to make a nutrition claim, a food must contain 15% or more of the GDA.

The French have taken a unique approach to nutrition policy and intervention that involves the food industry. “French food guidelines (PNNS) have identified nine nutrition objectives that include specific recommendations to up the consumption of fruits and vegetables, encourage whole grains, and reduce the consumption of sugary, fatty, and salty foods,” she says. McDonald points out that to do this, the food companies and supermarkets are being encouraged to prepare and sign charters outlining the changes they are willing to make to reach the PNNS goals and the marketing they will do to educate consumers. Only when this is agreed on are they allowed to use the PNNS logo on their foods and in their marketing.

Notes From France: A School Lunch We’d All Enjoy

Jean Saunders, the school wellness director for the Healthy Schools Campaign in Chicago, ran a daily blog from France of her observations and musings during the forum. (Visit the Healthy Schools Campaign blog [here](#) to read more detailed blog entries by Saunders, Peer, and Amanda Archibald, RD.)

Peer blogs that the French education system places a priority on school lunch and its role in the school day. All school-aged children in France participate in the school lunch program, regardless of their family’s economic status. Most elementary schools devote nearly 1 1/2 hours to lunch and recess, which includes 30 to 40 minutes for the children to eat a leisurely lunch.

Peer summarizes her observations, noting that French children drink only water with their meals instead of the flavored milk offered in many American school cafeterias. School meals are typically prepared in well-equipped kitchens by trained chefs who use mostly fresh produce and many other fresh ingredients (locally procured when possible) to prepare real food from scratch. French schools spend more money per child—nearly three times as much—to pay for higher-quality meals, with costs shared by parents and local governments.

French school chefs prepare a wide variety of foods, including appetizers such as radicchio or fresh beets, mache, or asparagus with vinaigrette, and they view expanding children’s palettes as an important part of their job. France banned vending machines from schools three years ago, and Peer notes that we saw no evidence of “competitive foods” in the schools we visited.

Saunders continues in her blog by describing the following “mouthwatering” school lunch meal that we all ate at the secondary school College Milcendeau in Challans:

- salad of butter lettuce with smoked duck;
- tomato and fresh mozzarella salad;
- smoked salmon with asparagus and crème fraîche;
- roasted chicken with roasted root vegetables and roasted potatoes;
- apples with sabyon;
- fresh strawberries;
- goat cheese;
- French bread; and
- water.

Saunders further explains how the butter lettuce was grown by a local farmer, the strawberries most likely in the south of France, and the chicken (also grown locally) roasted whole. “This wonderful meal was not served in plastic airlinelike containers but on real plates with real cutlery and glassware. And the plates were warmed in a plate warmer!” says Saunders. “Needless to say, the food we ate was absolutely delicious!” Students regularly provide input on the school food program, and some changes were made after one student said, “Today, the food is not smiley enough; it’s not reaching out to us.” Saunders says, “If my son had a meal like I ate yesterday, I would no longer pack his lunch; he would eat a school lunch every day!”

Taste Education for Children

Deborah Madison, author, chef, and founder of Greens, the famous vegetarian restaurant in San Francisco (www.deborahmadison.com), provided an inspiring chef perspective and philosophy during a session on how to give children the opportunity to experience food with all their senses. She believes that when parents are good eaters, their children will also become good eaters. Madison teaches that we must show how food is part of culture and history—in other words, “taste education.” Children don’t need to be told it is a healthy meal; it just is a healthy meal. Madison says, “This is bigger than just the food itself. We need to start over from the beginning, in the garden where it all began anyway...”

Marblehead Community Charter Public School (MCCPS; www.marbleheadcharter.com) is an example of a school in Massachusetts that is “living” taste education. Tom Commeret, school principal and a forum presenter, believes “it takes a community to raise healthy kids.” Commeret and his staff of teachers see the 230 students at MCCPS as partners, testers, and advisors. He says the students love to complete surveys that ask for their thoughts on the taste, texture, and appeal of the school meals prepared by their chef, who is also director of the nutrition program. “Recognizing that children learn best in the context of community, our mission is to create partnerships among community members that assist our students in reaching their highest intellectual, social, emotional, and physical potential,” Commeret says. As an educator, he sees his role as a motivator to educate children to try alternative offerings and choose foods based on knowledge, taste, and health.

Nurturing and Respect: Ingredients in a Healthy Food Culture

Archibald, founder of Field to Plate and host of the 2007 International Exchange Forum, builds on the taste education concept by talking about the notion of respect toward food and dining in the French culture. “Respect is observed by taking time to eat and enjoy eating, separate from any other activity,” blogs Archibald. She continues by pointing out how the French also associate food (and wine) with pleasure. “Indeed, during a wine tasting, the wine steward actually asked us what we associated with a bottle of

wine,” explains Archibald. “While many adjectives and ideas were suggested, none of us suggested ‘pleasure.’”

Archibald recalls how the idea that school lunch should be eaten in a room devoid of visual inspiration was foreign to our French counterparts. She describes how the school dining room was attractively decorated and furnished. Children sat on chairs that could be adjusted to their age and height. The ceilings were fitted with acoustic tiles to reduce noise. Walls and other surfaces were decorated with attractive artwork. Napkins reflected children’s artwork. Support staff engaged in encouraging children to try new foods. Their role was to nurture children during the meal.

“Time after time, we witnessed this intersection of respect for food, respect for each other, the pleasure of the food we were eating, and the pleasure of the company of those with whom we shared the meal,” says Archibald. “When we respect the producer, the environments that we eat in, and the people with whom we eat, we will surely begin to associate food, food choice, and dining with the equal respect and pleasure that it deserves.” This is precisely the philosophy and principles her food education company, Field to Plate, is built on—“experiential learning”—in essence, to move food learning experiences from the ordinary to the extraordinary.

Field to Plate’s International Exchange Forums

“People don’t have a palate anymore,” says Archibald. “How do you get someone to eat a ripe peach when they have a high fructose corn syrup palate? It’s the choice of eating a ‘bland’ carrot or a ‘sensational’ packaged food item. The food industry has convinced people they don’t have time to eat and driven them to purchase convenience food.”

Archibald believes dietitians have a huge role to play to help change people’s palates. Her vision in creating the exchange forums is to bring together food professionals, educators, and health professionals to create an intimate cultural and gastronomical experience for participants. Kelly Streit, MS, RD, operation manager for Field to Plate, has been to France twice and agrees the forums are a special time. Streit, who runs her own nutrition practice in Oregon, says, “I have observed how the international experience enriches the participants’ work and personal lives by the knowledge, enthusiasm, and passion that is shared together as a group throughout the week.” (The next Field to Plate International Exchange Forum on Honoring the Age of Dignity will be held October 28 to November 3 in Provence, France. Field to Plate has a full slate of continuing education programs coming up for dietitians in 2007 to 2008. Look for the 2008 International Forum to possibly be held in Rome.)

A vivid memory I have from this trip is the image of a small family kitchen garden at nearly every house in the French countryside. Perhaps this is my takeaway message from the forum—noticing the connection in America between childhood obesity and a lack of family gardens.

Of course, it is easy to want to package one week in France and “Americanize” it. We start dreaming of national policy change and better research showing positive health outcomes for our children, but the reality is that none of us—in France or the United States—knows the perfect way to address childhood obesity.

Although we may still have kids in our schools staring at uneaten peas, there is hope for moving forward in taste education and school lunch, according to Kate Adamick, JD, president of New York City-based Food Systems Solutions and a session speaker. Adamick reminds us that kids love real food and they love to learn with food. With this in mind, let’s unite with her vision for school children to smell real food cooking in their school cafeteria and enthusiastically ask, “Hey, what’s for lunch?”

After my French adventure, as an RD, I now find it impossible to speak of the science of nutrition without the notion of culinary “love” mixed with pleasure in eating. It has been said you can’t visit France in the spring without falling in love. Well, hopefully, all of us at the exchange forum brought home a little more love to the kitchens of our homes and schools.

And as the French say when all is said and done and the experience speaks for itself—voilà!

— *Kindy R. Peaslee, RD, is the founder of Kindy Creek Promotions, an upstate New York-based marketing firm specializing in the promotion of natural and organic food and beverage products. She can be reached at kindy@kindycreek.com. Look for her recipe Web site for parents: www.healthy-kid-recipes.com.*

Reference

1. Parizkova J, Hills A. *Childhood Obesity: Prevention and Treatment*. Boca Raton, Fla.: CRC Press; 2000.

Eating at Domaine de Beauvois Chateau in Luynes, France

Menu Samplings

- Cream of cauliflower, confit of duck with herbs and oyster mushrooms
- Supreme of farmhouse chicken stuffed with mushrooms, tomatoes, and basil
- Thin apple tart with warm Saint Maure cheese and fine spices
- Marbre of rabbit with asparagus and sage
- Tournedos of salmon baked with bacon, chive butter
- Orange crème brûlée on Breton shortbread, exotic fruit coulis, and Bailey's ice cream

School Lunch Goals at Vertou School in Ville de Vertou, France

- Respect the rhythm of children, their needs, and their autonomy

Actions: Staff training to accompany the children, creating a fun environment around mealtime

- Making sure to put in place hygiene and dietary requirements

Actions: Staff training to food and environment hygiene

- Put in place a nutritional education approach

Actions: Recruiting a dietitian to put in place nutrition activities in schools

- Developing the family participation

Actions: Meetings, open parent day, and newsletters

- Creating an attractive tariff to accommodate most people (people in financial difficulties)

Actions: Use of family quotient, funding by taxation to cover part of the total cost of the meals

French Web Resources

- Articles by Herve This (go to the Science and Cuisine section) - www.pierre-gagnaire.com

- [Chateau de la Verie in Challans, France](#)

- [Domaine de Beauvois in Luynes, France](#)
- [France's National Nutritional Education Program](#)
- [The French Childhood Obesity Program](#)
- Ministry of Health: All About Health Policy and Programme National Nutrition Santé (PNNS) — www.sante.gouv.fr
- Ministry of Education: Children's Food/Nutrition — www.education.gouv.fr
- National Institute for Health Prevention and Education: PNNS Tools — www.manger-bouger.fr

Other Web Resources

- [Family Cook Productions](#)
- Field to Plate, for updates on future continuing education programs and forums for food and health professionals — www.fieldtoplate.com
- [Healthy Schools Campaign Blog](#)
- [The Rodale Institute's Kid's Regen](#)
- [Spatulatta — Cooking for Kids](#)
- Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture, a nonprofit farm, educational center, and restaurant in Westchester County, N.Y. — www.stonebarnscenter.org
- [Supermarket Savvy](#)

Book Resources

- *Fat Land: How Americans Became the Fattest People in the World* by Greg Critser (Houghton Mifflin, 2003)
- *French Women Don't Get Fat: The Secret of Eating for Pleasure* by Mireille Guiliano (Knoph, 2004)