

The Screaming Avocado

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Stratford Northwestern is similar to many secondary schools. Twelve vending machines spread throughout the school and the corporate catering company's sugar laden and deep fried fare, greet the 1200 students as they pour into their home away from home for the day and say good-bye as they depart.

Lack of genuine government interest in the health and well being of Ontario's youth; a board of education and school that view students as cash cows and parents and guardians whose interest in the diets of their children is waning in exchange for ease and free time. These too are our problems.

However in one way our school is very different. An underestimation by the corporate caterer while negotiating the last contract allowed for the development of a funky, alternative eatery that would serve not only healthy fare but also set the stage to answer the question of "what students would choose". The Screaming Avocado was born.

The Avocado is an extension of the thriving innovative culinary arts program that has grown to include over 200 students per year; a large kitchen classroom; 3000 square feet of organic garden; a x square foot organic greenhouse; a five acre school farm initiative; a culinary club with national and international experiences; outreach programs to elementary students; the attention of international media; a grade 10 on-line culinary credits; support from world renowned chefs and a new farm project which will see the tending of chickens, pork and a milking cow become part of the daily activities at Stratford Northwestern..

For years kids have been discouraged from playing with their food - we encourage them to do just that. They have traditionally been told to eat what is put in front of them - we allow them to have personal tastes. They are given the opportunity to challenge their own likes and dislikes and push the envelope. To make their own minds up on personal enjoyment.

This play has changed food for kids within our school and the community at large - by taking it from something deep-fried, tired, and unhealthy that temporarily fills the dull ache.... into something fresh and exciting that makes the preparation and the eating a joy, not just fuel for life. One of the ways this is accomplished is by having students learn fundamental and advanced culinary skills and the ability to read and execute recipes.

We are not a chefs' school. Instead, we have a simple goal – to help youth connect to food and develop the ability to prepare healthy meals from scratch - to look in their fridge, pull out some

raw ingredients and prepare a meal... as opposed to grabbing a frozen, prefab, high fat, low health package from the geometrically stacked boxes and zap a meal. After just four years, I believe that is happening ... and there's also so much more that could not have been planned.

We knew that getting teenagers interested in fresh, homemade food was a lofty goal. After all, the generation that we are dealing with comes from fast food parents - the lost generation of foodies. These are the kids who learn to optimize the space of the freezer to fit in more of the boxed prefab products their parents had purchased in the frozen food section. An excellent skill if they are going into building igloos or ice hotels but not one that will result in a healthy Canadian population.

Today's youth is learning that food is something that is thrown in the oven and eaten in minutes with no regard for taste, fresh ingredients, or nutrition.....ease is the key. They are missing the kitchen role model. The apron strings to hang from.... sitting on the counter and rolling dough...the sense of satisfaction of preparing a recipe with mom or dad...Nanna or pappu and enjoying the fruits of their labour. They instead experience the line-ups at big box stores waiting to try the new time saving item that can be prepared in 5 minutes.

Our challenge is breaking this circle. We see our students as the mega weapon in the battle. They are the cross generational tool of change. Their assignments are to bring the recipes home and to prepare them for their families. To prepare healthy meals and enlighten their parents, grandparents and in the future their kids to fresh yummy food.

The Screaming Avocado Café was the next step in the progression and provided an avenue to recoup some of the costs associated with running a fully hands on program. With the food service contract up for renewal, we were able to negotiate a free market economy on the sale of food within the school. Hoping we would be opening a little coffee shop selling baked goods, there was much shock when a full scale café opened down the hall.

The Screamer, as affectionally refereed by our clientele, offers only healthy fare to the student and staff population. We link all of our specials to soups or salads and milk, juice or water, our fruit and fruit salad is sold at cost. We don't sell pop, junk food, chips or prepackaged products. We prepare our own breads and when time permits roll our pasta dough. We feed roughly 200 patrons every lunch hour and are putting serious pressure on the traditional fry, greasy burger and junk food being offered down the hall at the cafeteria. Our black board menu offers daily gourmet specials which range from the more commonplace pasta, sandwiches, and pizzas to the more riskyrabbit braised in white wine with olives, confit of duck, Moroccan lamb couscous, sushi, crispy frog legs, calamari.....

If food is the soul, the atmosphere is the body.....the funky inviting environment and loud music; the retro seats and second hand store lamps; the location in the school where the stale industrial gray walls were replaced with red pepper, Sweet Pea and Burnt Caramel paint; the place where teachers sit with ease at a table next to students as patrons. This atmosphere allows for the slow enjoyment of a meal...a sit down with friends to debrief and chat.....to slow down, relax and

enjoy yummy, healthy food whether from the café or from home. The Screaming Avocado is educating just by being.

Fifty yards down the hall, in an enclosed courtyard surrounded by windows, our Seeds of Change organic garden is flourishing. With the removal of five silver maples in the shroud of secrecy late one evening; community support; many student hours and the help from a local organic farmer, the once unused space is now home to a vibrant garden classroom with nineteen different heirloom vegetables. Students are afforded the seed to table experience too many of us lack. They plant, tend, weed and harvest. They wander from class, basket and knife in hand to pick the ingredients for a Screaming special, returning with their bounty and mud covered hands ready to prepare the dish. There is true satisfaction in watching the circle become complete.

Our students become the teachers as elementary students come for hands on tours of the Seeds of Change garden. Wandering through the space picking samples, learning about the different vegetables and organic farming, many get their first real connection to where food comes from. Their overflowing basket of goodies are then brought into the Avocado and sampled to experience the freshness and flavour.

This year we were finally successful in bringing the greenhouse into our circle. Again with the help of a local organic farmer the horticulture students are producing seedlings and greens for the Avocado to be used in our lunches. In the future our newly acquired two acres of organic land will soon be set-up as a community garden and the possibility of Barn Project which will see the tending of chickens, pork and a milking cow become part of the daily activities at Stratford Northwestern are all exciting opportunities for the students of our community to connect to the earth.

Along with the ability to grow, cook and appreciate food, our students learn that food is power and an integral part of community. They explore the politics of bottled water and the evil effects of pop companies on the body and in communities globally. They hold fundraisers for local and global causes; donate to community events; have volunteered at the New York City Food Bank for the day while on a culinary journey; and provide meals to community families who have suffered losses. The students experience the power of food and learn about the haves and have nots. Within our own school community, the Screaming Avocado Café has a lunch program that feeds any students in the school who are malnourished or underfed in their home environment.

The program and the Screaming Avocado would not have a life if it were not for the dedication of the students who volunteer daily. Whether it's to ensure the two hundred lunch enthusiasts make it through in due course; that the bi-weekly dinners run smoothly; that weekend long caterings for the Lung Association are successful or the coffee is always available for the Canadian Cancer Society overnight Relay for Life, the students are enthusiastically present. This we believe is due to the ownership of the program instilled in them. We facilitate, guide and foster their experience with experimentation, humour and at times much needed sarcasm but in

the end this is their space and their program.

It is this maturity, dedication and ownership that instills in us the confidence to open up the world. Through the Culinary Club, an off-shoot of the program, our gang have ventured to New York City; participated in Slow Food exchanges to British Columbia, Japan and last winter Deline, NWT. While on these trips they eagerly challenge their tastebuds and represent Canadian youth with dignity. We are also very fortunate that our school board is very progressive and risk takers. There is much support for these journeys and all innovative programs that foster student learning.

All this being said, the Screaming Avocado still has to compete against the twelve vending machines and the corporate catering company's sugar laden and deep fried fare that tempts the students daily. Provincial governments and school boards have the responsibility to ensure the health and well being of all students in their care. By not only allowing but encouraging the purchase of nutritionally poor snacks and beverages to their financial gain, the system that we entrust our children with for half their waking hours is falling short of their role as guardians.

The prohibition on vending machines from elementary schools did not remove all junk from the reach of our young and influential students. The sale of pop and chips still continues without the machines. Fundraising by parent councils involving the sale of nutritionally poor and high fat fast food from McDonalds, Burger King, Wendy's, KFC and others is a weekly occurrence in elementary schools across Ontario. Students are rewarded for the sale of the most magazine subscriptions with a five pound chocolate bar, door to door sales of junkfood continue and the use of pop on the ring toss at family fun night fund-raises leads to very sick images of kindergarten kids walking away with two liter bottles of pop they can barely carry.

If school administrators are asked why the need for so much fundraising, they blame continuing decreases in funding to school boards from the provincial government. The absence of regulations with teeth allows school boards to impose their own policies regarding healthy schools and fundraising methods. And if I am mistaken on this, then there is a blatant lack of enforcement.

Parents and guardians are not free from blame. Too many of our youth are allowed to sit in their rooms MSN'ing or gaming as the birds chirp outside and the grass grows free from the stomping of feet enjoying a breath of fresh air. All this, as the parents sit in front of the tv, not rushing to prepare a meal, comforted by the prefab wonder that will be ready to eat after 10 minutes in the microwave. Thirty years ago Hamburger Helper was viewed as a convenience food and not touched by many families. Today it is also ignored by many because there are too many steps involved - it's too much like cooking. These same caregivers need to take a proactive role in the daily nutritional lives of their children and the system they entrust them with. Change will only occur by speaking up and demanding a healthier school environment to the schools, school boards and government.

Farmers and chefs too need to become actively involved. Our proposed Chef to School campaign would see chefs volunteer time in the schools in their communities helping with lunch programs and or offering simple cooking classes. By walking in arm in arm with a local farmer and a basket of fresh vegetables they collectively will help connect elementary students to the raw ingredients that many miss at home.

To make a significant change in Canadian eating habits there has to be a strong focus on youth, and on their abilities to influence not only their peers but all generations. In order to accomplish this, Provincial governments need to uphold their responsibilities to students, parents and schools. By first banning the sale of nutritionally poor food and committing more funding to school boards, the need to flog junk food will diminish and the arguments against the banning of the machines and the fryers will become silent.