

KIDS WILL EAT IT!

Fresh,
Local
Food

and New Orleans
Public Schools



Results and Recommendations from Rethink's Year of Food Justice Exploration



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INTRODUCTION



Rethinkers participating in a blind taste-test at Colton. Photo by Eliot Kamenitz // Times-Picayune

Last summer the Rethinkers decided we wanted to improve our school food and cafeterias. After 6 weeks of investigation during our summer program we developed a set of recommendations that were presented to the Recovery School District (RSD) outlining ways that adults could improve the school lunch experience. During the 2008-2009 school year, the Rethinkers have continued to work toward making these recommendations a reality. Our on-going school food investigation has taken the following forms: research related to what students like to eat and what public schools in other places have done to improve their school food and food education; representation of our work nationally; and reflection on our opinions of our own school food. Four Rethinkers have written this report, each writing about a different topic: how Rethink's food work began, what we discovered during our recipe testing project and what we learned at a national conference in Portland, Oregon.

The following report is written by the Rethink students and shares the experiences of the last year. Please see the post-script for further detail about how the recipe testing project was conducted.

-Victoria Carter
June, 2009

GETTING STARTED

by Isaiah Simms

Dean Blanchard, a local shrimper who runs one of the largest seafood distributors in the United States, at our Summer, 2008 news conference.



Colin M. Lenton Photography

It all started with a Rethink student survey in 2007. Our survey had a range of questions about schools, from safety to handicapped accessibility to cafeterias. The survey went to students in many schools and gave us the data that we needed to direct our project. Cafeterias were rated as a top problem to be tackled instantly by the Rethinkers. We first made a design for the cafeteria, but then asked ourselves something: "what's a good cafeteria without fresh, local food?"

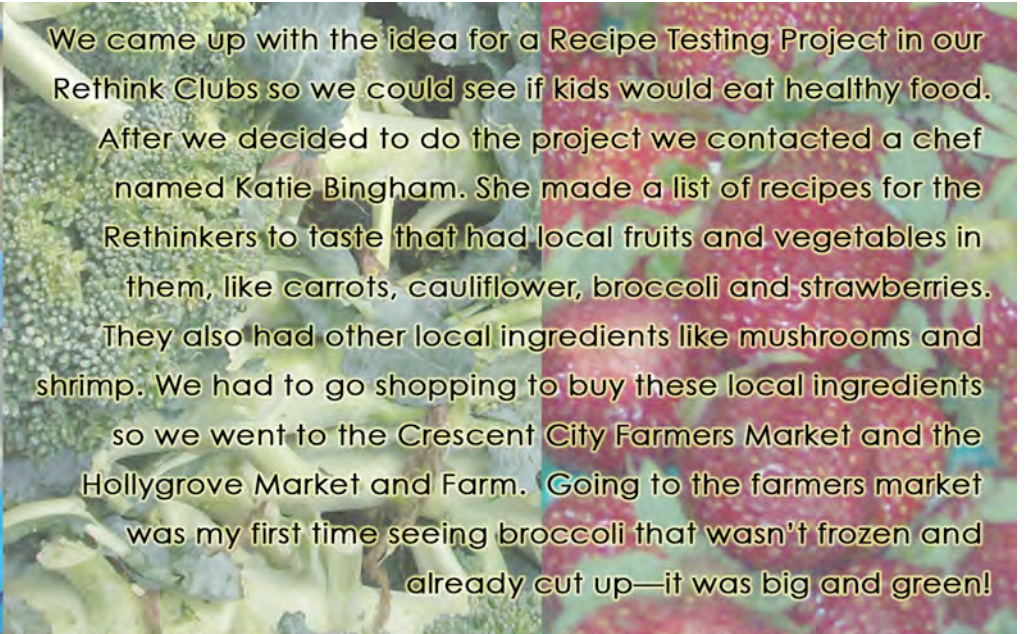
We spent last summer (2008) doing research and talking to "food experts" – shrimpers, farmers, students and principals.

We took a trip to Mississippi to visit local farmers and to Grand Isle to talk to shrimpers. We found out that our local resources weren't being used! Farmers told us that Louisiana wasn't ordering their products locally, but getting their food from out of the country instead. These products were unhealthy—for example cloned shrimp from China. The importing also had a bad effect on the world because of the fuel use and waste. Learning this pushed the Rethinkers to include local farmers and shrimpers in our fight for fresh, local foods in our schools. When we told them about our project the farmers and shrimpers told us they would support us 100% and even speak at our press conference.



Rethink's Twelve Recommendations for Public School Food and Cafeterias July, 2008

- 1) No more sporks!
- 2) Buy fresh, tasty food
- 3) Buy from local farmers, fishermen and shrimpers
- 4) Present even more local dishes on the school menu
- 5) Present tasty, healthy options for vegetarians
- 6) No more styrofoam trays!
- 7) Future school designs should include gardens
- 8) Use leftovers to make compost for school gardens
- 9) Design cafeterias that adults would like to eat in
- 10) Install sinks so we can wash hands before eating
- 11) Enough lunch time to enjoy our food and our friends
- 12) No more silent lunches!



We came up with the idea for a Recipe Testing Project in our Rethink Clubs so we could see if kids would eat healthy food. After we decided to do the project we contacted a chef named Katie Bingham. She made a list of recipes for the Rethinkers to taste that had local fruits and vegetables in them, like carrots, cauliflower, broccoli and strawberries. They also had other local ingredients like mushrooms and shrimp. We had to go shopping to buy these local ingredients so we went to the Crescent City Farmers Market and the Hollygrove Market and Farm. Going to the farmers market was my first time seeing broccoli that wasn't frozen and already cut up—it was big and green!

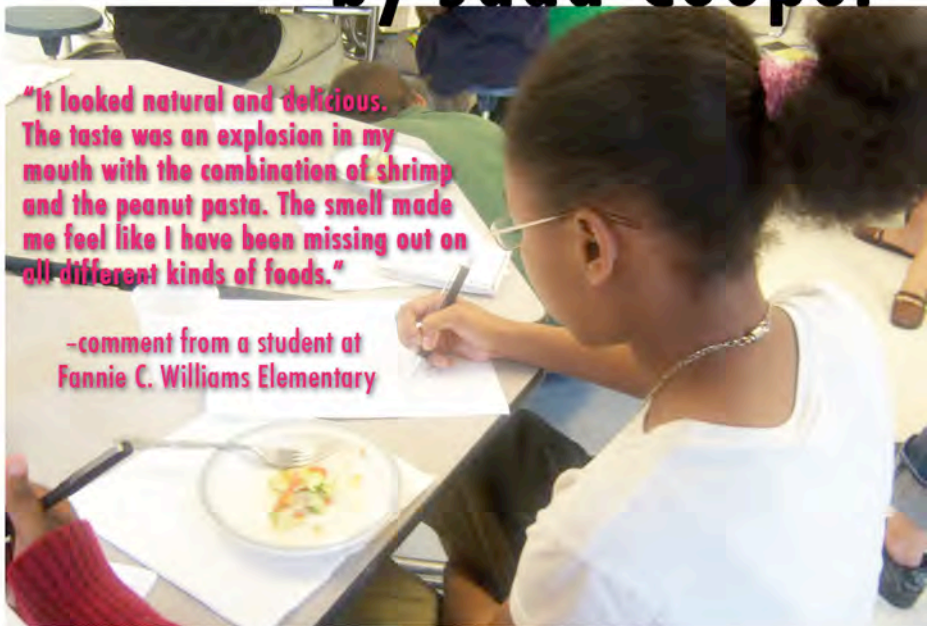
THE RETHINK RECIPE TASTING PROJECT

by Jada Cooper

There were three taste testings: one at Fannie C. Williams, another at Joseph Craig, and the final one at Colton. At Fannie C. and Craig we were broken into two groups with 10 students in each group and each group tasted 6 different recipes. Between all the kids we tasted 18 different recipes. After we tried the recipes we had to answer questions about each recipe, like:

- “Did you taste the recipe?”
- “Did you like the recipe”
- “Would you eat it again?”

We used the last question to pick which recipes would make it to our Top Ten. During the Recipe Testing we couldn't talk about the food we were eating because if we did, we might change our friends' opinions. At Colton we tested the top 13 recipes again with 30 kids to find out which were the favorites.



“It looked natural and delicious. The taste was an explosion in my mouth with the combination of shrimp and the peanut pasta. The smell made me feel like I have been missing out on all different kinds of foods.”

-comment from a student at Fannie C. Williams Elementary

Recipe	Would eat it again
Fruit Smoothie	88%
Chicken Pot Pie	87%
Zucchini Bread	83%
Cucumber and Tomato Salad	80%
Sweet Potato Biscuit	64%
Vegetable Strata	61%
Banana Bread	60%
Peanut Pasta and Shrimp	57%
Cauliflower Rice	56%
Beet and Strawberry Salad	55%

We found out that kids really will eat healthy food because they know where it's coming from! The food we tested was different than the food we have in school cafeterias—it had more flavor and we could identify what was in it. I felt happy to try something new and joyful to be able to participate in an event that will share me and my classmates' opinion with the RSD. Everyone seemed excited to try to help put local food in the schools!

The beets and strawberries tasted great. They made me think of a fruit tree. The food is splendid—I would very much eat it again.”
-comments about the strawberry and beet salad



REFLECTIONS FROM PORTLAND, OREGON

by Lucy Tucker

Rethink got an amazing opportunity this year. We were invited to Portland, Oregon, to address an audience of 600 people at the opening plenary of the 4th National Farm to Cafeteria Conference! We were the first Middle School students to ever open up this conference so we felt very honored to do it. We delivered our speeches and ended with a question and answer session. The audience loved it and it was a really great experience. They gave us a standing ovation!

While it was great to talk about our ideas, we really wanted to see them in action so we went to a school cafeteria in Portland. Our experiences at Abernethy Elementary School really opened my eyes. Seeing an elementary school with lockers and a garden outside was definitely new to me. We headed over to the cafeteria and looked at the menu. We could eat local free-range organic chicken and couscous with peas or—notice the option—fresh pizza with local organic cheese and spinach from the school garden outside. You could either have cheese, spinach, or beet pizza (the beet pizza was already gone when we got there). Who knew elementary students would eat spinach or beet pizza? But that's not all: they had real trays. You know, the ones you put in a dishwasher? Those tend to be rare in New Orleans. As if that wasn't enough they had real forks and spoons—not sporks!

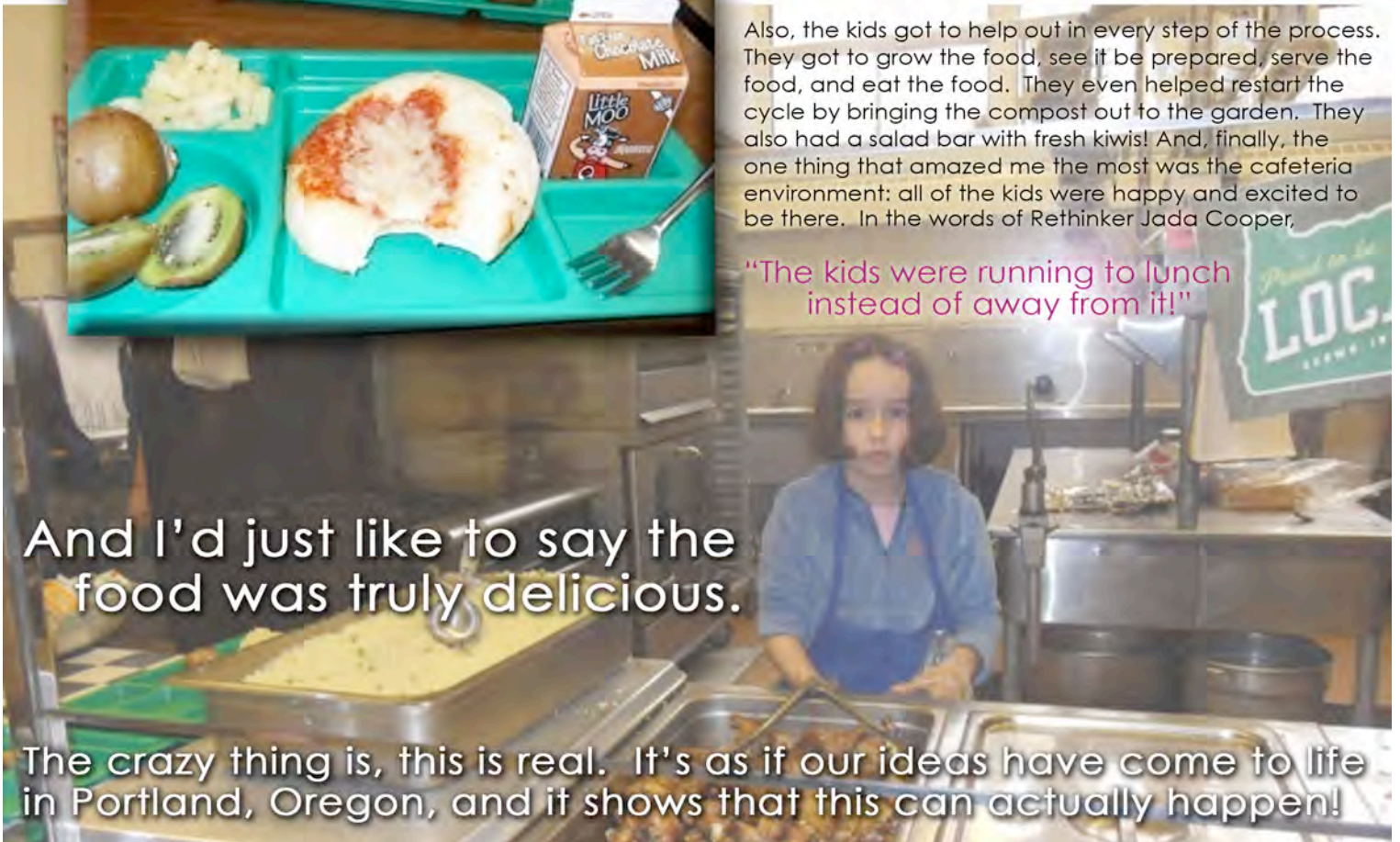


Also, the kids got to help out in every step of the process. They got to grow the food, see it be prepared, serve the food, and eat the food. They even helped restart the cycle by bringing the compost out to the garden. They also had a salad bar with fresh kiwis! And, finally, the one thing that amazed me the most was the cafeteria environment: all of the kids were happy and excited to be there. In the words of Rethinker Jada Cooper,

"The kids were running to lunch instead of away from it!"

And I'd just like to say the food was truly delicious.

The crazy thing is, this is real. It's as if our ideas have come to life in Portland, Oregon, and it shows that this can actually happen!



The Rethinkers believe in the importance of learning about food—where it comes from, how what you eat affects your health and how much work it takes to grow food! That is why the Rethinkers are recommending that food education become a part of every students' educational experience.

WHY FOOD EDUCATION MATTERS



"I think that all of this is possible in Portland because of the food education. If kids get to garden and see what happens between planting a seed and having food on their plate, they understand the quality and value of good, healthy food. For example, when we took a field trip to an urban farm designed to teach kids about urban farming, we realized that experiencing food education in a real farm teaches students more than a textbook does. Portland uses food education and I think we should too."

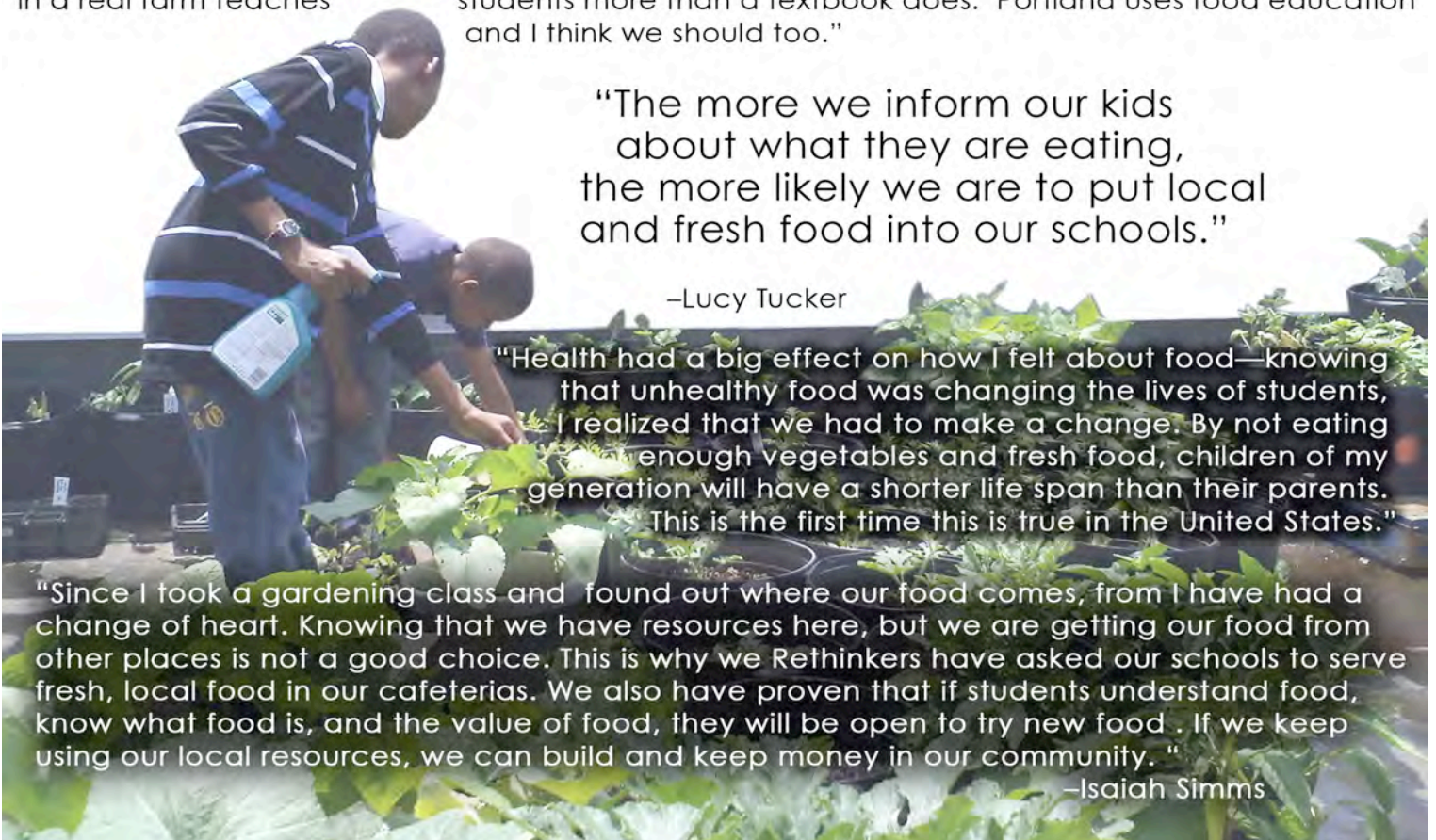
"The more we inform our kids about what they are eating, the more likely we are to put local and fresh food into our schools."

—Lucy Tucker

"Health had a big effect on how I felt about food—knowing that unhealthy food was changing the lives of students, I realized that we had to make a change. By not eating enough vegetables and fresh food, children of my generation will have a shorter life span than their parents. This is the first time this is true in the United States."

"Since I took a gardening class and found out where our food comes from, from I have had a change of heart. Knowing that we have resources here, but we are getting our food from other places is not a good choice. This is why we Rethinkers have asked our schools to serve fresh, local food in our cafeterias. We also have proven that if students understand food, know what food is, and the value of food, they will be open to try new food. If we keep using our local resources, we can build and keep money in our community."

—Isaiah Simms



POST SCRIPT

“Children are not born with a preference for french fries rather than green beans. As demonstrated over and over again in behavioral research, eating is a behavior that is learned through exposure and repetition.”

-from Action Schools!¹

The recipe testing project took place during three sessions at three different locations:

ROUND 1

-Fannie C. Williams Elementary School: 20 students, 12 recipes

-Joseph A. Craig Elementary School : 12 students, 6 recipes

Total: 18 recipes

ROUND 2:

-Studio at Colton: 30 students from schools throughout New Orleans

Top 13 recipes

During the first round of testing all students evaluated the recipes using written forms. They answered if they tried the recipe, liked the recipe and whether they would eat it again. They also wrote descriptions of the food and suggestions for improvement.

Results were based upon students' willingness to try the new foods again. It has been proven that, “with repeated exposure, many new foods that children initially rejected are accepted. However, acceptance does not come immediately but may take up to 8 to 10 exposures and must involve tasting the food.”² Based on this evidence we determined that students' openness to trying new food again could result in acceptance over time, even if they did not initially report liking the food.

Of these 18 recipes, the 13 highest ranked were tested again with a larger audience. 30 students answered the same questions by raising their hands while blindfolded, rather than through written evaluation. The results from this testing were averaged with the first round results to produce our final scores:

Recipe	Round 1	Final	Average
Fruit Smoothie	100%	75%	88%
Chicken Pot Pie	100%	73%	87%
Zucchini Bread	79%	86%	83%
Cucumber and Tomato Salad	92%	67%	80%
Sweet Potato Biscuit	90%	37%	64%
Vegetable Strata	91%	30%	61%
Banana Bread	71%	48%	60%
Peanut Pasta and Shrimp	67%	46%	57%
Cauliflower Rice	92%	19%	56%
Beet and Strawberry Salad	90%	19%	55%

Rethink staff anticipated the drop in acceptance rates from the first round of recipe testing to the second. It has been shown that food education and frequent exposure to new foods increases acceptance and palatability of healthy food among children.³ We believe it was not only the exposure to delicious, fresh foods but also the discussions and learning we engaged in with the Rethink students that led to high levels of acceptance of new, healthy foods. It is because of these results, and the enthusiasm students within Rethink show for learning about and trying new foods, that we advocate for an expansion of food education throughout New Orleans public schools.

Children are required by law to attend school during the day to support their intellectual growth, and it is only right that we would give them food that supports their physical growth and health as well. It is of utmost importance to remember that children will grow accustomed to what they are exposed to, and it is up to adults to ensure that they are exposed to foods that will ensure their long-term health.

If you are interested in collaborating with the Rethinkers on food education or farm-to-cafeteria projects, please get in touch!

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¹ Day ME, Strange KS, McKay HA, Naylor PJ, Action schools! BC--Healthy Eating: effects of a whole-school model to modifying eating behaviours of elementary school children. *Canadian Journal Of Public Health*. 2008. 99(4), pp. 328-31.

² Food Choice, Acceptance and Consumption, Ed. H.L. Meiselman, H.J.H. MacFie, Springer 1996.

³ Day ME, Strange KS, McKay HA, Naylor PJ, Action schools! BC--Healthy Eating: effects of a whole-school model to modifying eating behaviours of elementary school children. *Canadian Journal Of Public Health*. 2008. 99(4), pp. 328-31.