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OYSTERS + WINE = YES

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GROW UP

KINDER-GARDEN

At New York's Edible Schoolyards, cultivating young minds.
BY REGINA SCHRAMBLING • PHOTOGRAPHS BY NANCY BOROWICK



Alice's Wonderland. Inspired by Waters's project in Berkeley, pilot schools in Gravesend and East Harlem use vegetables as a vehicle for learning math, science, geography and more.

I have officially drunk the Kale-Aid.

In the 20 years since Alice Waters started her Edible Schoolyard Project in Berkeley, with the lofty goal of engaging students in gardening and cooking to “awaken their senses,” everything I heard or read provoked the reaction in me that I now see in so many friends: eyes rolling back, brain registering blah-blah-blah. The whole enterprise seemed so heirloom-tomato-pie in the sky, so Berkeley, so Alice, you could imagine students baking eggs in hand-cast iron ladles in wood fireplaces.

And then I went to see the Edible Schoolyard in action in East Harlem.

I was charmed but not surprised when one seventh-grader told me that “you could eat a flower,” as in nasturtiums and squash blossoms. (What else would Alice teach?) And I was both surprised and seduced when the flower girl, 12-year-old Quadier Martin, said she taught her

parents to make salad dressing using honey, mustard and a recipe from class.

Other students at the school on East 120th Street—one of the first two in New York to incorporate the Edible Schoolyard curriculum, along with a school in Gravesend, Brooklyn, with more in propagation—chimed in with comments like “when you cook vegetables, you *try* them, like kale and carrots and green onions.”

At a time when private school students take cafeteria kale—not to mention outings to Stone Barns—for granted, ESYNYC is bringing the top of the food chain to the kids who need it most: at underserved primary and middle schools in neighborhoods where diabetes and obesity have become entrenched epidemics. As at the original in Berkeley, the focus here is on low-income students, many of them immigrants.

“Kids come and they don't speak English, and

Photograph: Nancy Borowick



Photographs: Nancy Borowick

Harlem students turn their harvests into salsa one week, soup the next. Kindergartners cut with plastic knives; eighth-graders have graduated to Rikon.



the garden is a common language,” ESYNYC executive director Kate Brashares said. She recalled a young Yemeni girl “who had never been in school and cried for three days—the only time she stopped was in kitchen class.” Talk about comfort food.

Each of ESYNYC’s two schools has more than 600 students, most of whom qualify for free lunch. The basic message comprises eating well (yes, even third graders can love kale), socialization (students cook together and eat at a common table) and understanding that food choices have long-rippling consequences for public health and the natural world. A sign in the window at PS 7 depicts something of a months-long recipe: plan a meal, cultivate a plant, harvest, prepare and cook, eat, compost. On signs and before eating, one message is repeated, as a form of grace: “Thank you, gardens; thank you, cooks.”

The garden in Gravesend sprouted four years ago when a parking lot was converted into a half-acre Eden with 18 inches of topsoil removed and compost loaded on top. Today, a typical lesson has fifth-graders deciding what to plant, tending their beds from seed to salad. The garden in East Harlem is in a central courtyard with the raised beds the city now prefers to avoid contaminants in the soil. Students work together, planting seeds and pulling weeds.

I watched as a cluster of kindergartners excitedly attacked colorful planters in the courtyard garden, under signs reading “Eat well—*come bien*”

and “Thank you, worms,” to plant garlic and up-root carrots, each activity an exercise in learning, even for the youngest students: “If you have a purple carrot, hold it up. Now count how many carrots there are. Now tell me which carrot is the biggest.”

All the ways food is a vehicle for teaching English, math, science, geography and more were on display a few days later at PS 216 Arturo Toscanini in Gravesend, where students enter the schoolhouse by walking past a chicken coop where the nine birds inside include Momo, named in honor of David Chang, a huge supporter of ESYNYC. A class in a sunny green-and-orange kitchen making callaloo got not just a cooking lesson (whiteboards defined *chiffonade* and *sauté*) but an introduction to the countries where the soup originated: Trinidad, Jamaica and the Dominican Republic.

Out in the greenhouse, children sat in a circle and discussed the water cycle, how rain soaks into the earth and is breathed out by plants. In the orchard, under fig and Asian pear trees, students learn about pollinators and bacteria and fungi. The garden grows 60 types of fruits and vegetables, like long beans and collards, used in class and sold at a weekly farm stand as a way of fulfilling another ESY mission: engaging the community.

“Without education, change will not happen,” Brashares said as we sat in the garden in the sun. “These kids will always have this understanding” of a better way of eating. “By eighth grade they’re

Comfort food. “Kids come and they don’t speak English, and the garden is a common language,” said executive director Brashares. She recalled a young Yemeni girl “who had never been in school and cried for three days—the only time she stopped was in kitchen class.”



Photographs: Nancy Borowick



going to be advocates to change the food system.” Which matters not least because “there is so much pressure by fast-food advertising to counter.”

As evidence, she recalled the principal in East Harlem who recently spotted a student carrying a McDonald’s bag and “gave him the stink eye,” only to learn the boy had used the fast-food voucher his mom had given him to buy salads, which he was going to dress at home. It was one small step toward countering the problems in a poor neighborhood where diabetes and obesity are rampant and broccoli and fennel can be pricier than burgers and fries.

In the kitchen, Harlem students turn their garden harvests into salsa one week, soup the next. Working in teams of four, they chop Swiss chard and tomatoes and garlic, then step up to hot plates to cook them with teacher help, adding hard vegetables first, soft later. Kindergartners cut with plastic knives; eighth-graders have graduated to Rikon. Then they sit down and eat together, often vociferously arguing about seasoning (more salt, please?). On their way out, they take a recipe to share at home.

Of course, these two schools aren’t the only ones growing vegetables. Four hundred schools of the 1,400 in New York City public system have gardens of some sort. But Brashares says only ESYNYC brings the soil sensibility indoors, in classes that meet Common Core curriculum.

“One of the great things about New York is that the principal has autonomy, and that allows us to be integrated into the school,” says Brashares. “It’s an incredibly huge bureaucratic system, but the individuals are so fantastic.”

Unfortunately, this program is a drop in the proverbial bucket, serving less than .001 percent of public school students. And while the goal is to expand into more schools, Edible Schoolyard’s \$1.6 million budget is financed mostly by grants and private fund-raising, Brashares says. The program relies heavily on volunteers, some in the teaching kitchens and gardens, including those from *Bon Appetit*’s editorial team, parents and strangers, and a 90-year-old who comes to the Gravesend school every day to pick beans, weed and fertilize with manure he brings from a stable.

The lessons are all part of Department of Education curriculum and, as Brashares says, they are enhancements. “People ask, ‘When the community is struggling to buy books, why bring this in?’ But we’re not taking anything away. We’re just adding to the experience.”

ESYNYC.org

Regina Schrambling became a food writer after going through her own “Edible Schoolyard” program—she first tasted arugula in class at the old New York Restaurant School on 34th Street.

Systems thinking.

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