

Healthy Cooking in Schools

With obesity and associated health problems growing at alarming rates among North Americans, especially among children and youth, attention is being drawn to food and meal options available in school cafeterias. Traditional cafeteria fare of burgers, fries, pizza and pop is being questioned by health experts and single out as a major contributor to the unhealthy and sedentary lifestyles adopted by many teens.

While efforts to change the system are often met with resistance, some schools are making genuine attempts to offer healthy alternatives to the greasy, artery-clogging food items currently on the menu. At Stratford Northwestern Secondary School in Stratford, Ontario, the Screaming Avocado Café offers fresh, nutritious meals to its 1,200 students at an affordable cost—a healthy, gourmet meal can cost as little as four dollars. The Café is part of the school's culinary arts program and was set up in 2003 by Paul Finkelstein, a young and enthusiastic former chef. The program's students prepare the meals using fresh ingredients, bake their own bread, and even grow some of the food in an organic garden. The course is open to grade 10, 11 and 12 students, who prepare the meals from scratch during a three-hour class in the morning while developing strong culinary skills. They get credit for their work while gaining an appreciation for good, nutritious food and its importance for a healthy lifestyle.

While the Screaming Avocado stands in competition with the school's traditional cafeteria, it has by all accounts been a great success, with many students welcoming its presence as a purveyor of

healthy and tasty offerings such as Moroccan lamb couscous, vegetarian chilli with cornbread, sushi, Thai noodle salad, coconut curry and falafel in a pita. The Café, which is located in a renovated classroom, serves around 125 people every lunch hour and offers soups, salads, fruit, juices and milk as accompaniments to its healthy meals. Finkelstein's initiative has been so successful that the federal government asked him and his students to represent Canada at the 2005 Expo in Japan, where they cooked fresh meals in the Canadian Pavilion. The Ministry of Health and the Avon-Maitland District School Board have also taken notice and offered support to enable Finkelstein's students to prepare meals for elementary students five days a week.

The Screaming Avocado is an admirable and essential project but one that is all too rare in a society that relies increasingly on processed, pre-packaged and fast food to meet its dietary needs. The good news, however, is that Finkelstein's program is one that could be adapted and implemented almost anywhere. All that is needed is a little bit of skill and a lot of enthusiasm.

For more information, visit

[www.amdsb.ca/StratfordNorthwesternSS/
Screaming_Avocado](http://www.amdsb.ca/StratfordNorthwesternSS/Screaming_Avocado)

Sources:

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Chocolate Baci Cookies

These cookies taste amazing, and look rather fancy. The great thing is they're easy to make, if a bit time-intensive. The Nutella can be swapped for cream cheese icing, then topped with a toasted walnut for something a little different, or even a maraschino cherry for a more playful look.

1/2 cup margarine
2/3 cup white sugar
1 large egg yolk
2 tbsp milk
1 tsp vanilla
1 cup flour
1/3 cup cocoa
1/2 tsp salt
1/2 cup Nutella chocolate-hazelnut spread
36 whole hazelnuts

Using an electric mixer, cream together the softened margarine and sugar.

Beat in the egg, milk and vanilla, stirring until completely smooth.

Gently stir in the dry ingredients. The batter will take a while to come together - just keep mixing slowly and steadily, and it will form into a large ball.

Form the cookie dough into a ball and refrigerate for at least one hour.

Once the dough is properly chilled, roll out small balls - about a teaspoon's worth of dough per cookie.

Place the dough balls on a cookie sheet, and bake the cookies for 7-8 minutes at 350°F.

As soon as you pull the cookies out of the oven, make a deep dent in the top of each one with a thimble.

Move the cookies to a rack to cool completely.

To complete the Baci cookies, spoon a small amount of Nutella into the indentations, and top with a single hazelnut.