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Health Food Fails Test at School in Berkeley

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By PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN

BERKELEY, Calif., Oct. 12 - Vincent Trahan, owner of Doggie High, a hot dog joint across the street from Berkeley High School, has a theory about why a school lunch program featuring organic chicken, stir-fried tofu and pesticide-free produce wilted like two-day-old lettuce.

"It's good for them, but they're not going to eat it," Mr. Trahan said of the students who clamor for fries, hot dogs, sausages and the occasional vegan burger. "You don't see Carl's Jr. and McDonald's advertising veggie dogs."

In this politically fractious city where cuisine is king, an experiment that offered fresh, nutritious, locally grown food at Berkeley High is defunct. Parents and drafters of a Board of Education policy recognizing the sharing of food as "a fundamental experience for all peoples" are reeling and trying to figure out what went wrong.

The program began almost two years ago, when Alice Waters, the beret-wearing owner of the celebrated Chez Panisse here, went to school to cook Niman Ranch organic pork tacos with fresh tortillas.

"There is so much organic stuff in Berkeley it wasn't a novelty," said Andrew Kyle, 16, whose favorite lunch is a Three Musketeers bar and a Cherry Coke.

Lynn O'Shaughnessy, 16, said: "They made a really big deal to make it healthy. But microwave burritos are much more appealing to teenagers."

In a sphere generally dominated by the "airline food model," as Eric Weaver, a parent and lawyer, put it, the idea of serving fresh food, organic when possible, to the 3,000 teenagers seemed to dovetail with the city's self-image. The school, long plagued by budget shortfalls, was left without a cafeteria after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

In a now-cherished ritual, the students made a beeline for fast-food places of Shattuck Avenue - the gourmet ghetto for the under-18 set.

Two years ago, after local business owners complained about hundreds of students' descending in the 40-minute lunch period, Mayor Shirley Dean suggested bringing fast food to the school. The school board's Child Nutrition Advisory Committee, committed to "nutritious, fresh, tasty, locally grown food that reflects Berkeley's cultural diversity," was not amused. Thus was born the food court, tucked into the theater building. It featured organic barbecued chicken, tofu dishes and homemade pizzas from the Cheese Board cooperative, with organic fruit, organic apple juice and organic salad.

"There were chips, but they were natural New York cheddar chips," said Joy Moore, director of nutrition for Berkeley's chronic-disease prevention program. "There were

sodas, but they were natural sodas. It was ecological, community-driven. We had a lot of momentum."

Of the 3,000 students, 200 to 300 on average bought lunch at the food court. "I suspect that 50 or more were staff people," said John Selawsky, a school board member.

Why it failed is the subject of much debate. Some students and parents cited small portions and a decline in quality. Others blamed a lack of marketing and consistency.

"I doubt 90 percent of the kids knew about it," Zack Sultan, 17, said. "Many thought it was an attempt by the administration to impinge on their ability to go off campus, a tightly guarded right."

Mr. Weaver said: "It's about having the time and people to introduce kids to this stuff. Kids don't like Shakespeare, but it's good for them. It's the same with food."

Ms. Waters called the program "a compromise that fell flat."

"It's not possible," she added, "to change school food service without cleaning the slate and really educating the kids. It requires a whole different way of thinking about food. It takes commitment to feed kids in a beautiful, civilized and important way."

Efforts elsewhere may be less fraught than at Berkeley. For five years, a movement has been growing to link farmers directly with school cafeterias, said Robert Gottlieb, director of the Urban and Environmental Policy Institute at Occidental College in Los Angeles, an organizer of the first national conference on "Farm to Cafeteria: Healthy, Farms, Healthy Students" this week in Seattle.

Since 1997, the Santa Monica and Malibu Unified School District has had salad bars at its 15 schools, with ingredients from a local farmers' market. Joanne Ikeda, co-director of the Center for Weight and Health at the University of California at Berkeley, said research indicated that when introducing foods, "most parents give up too soon." For many children, Ms. Ikeda said, it takes up to 11 exposures to a food before a child embraces it.

At Berkeley, a new cafeteria will offer a second chance. "We are committed to re-establishing healthy food," said Karen Candido, director of nutrition services for the district.

Nicole Smith, 16, was philosophical, while walking back from her lunch of a bagel and cream cheese at Lox Stock & Bagel. "So many students are going on health kicks and off them," she said. "The obesity rates are going up. So eventually we'll have to eat healthier food." Peter True, 16, said a new cafeteria would not change certain givens of student life, even here. "No one can appreciate cuisine when you have 40 minutes to eat," he said.