YOU CAN'T SWING A SOBA NOODLE THESE DAYS without hitting an article touting the benefits of breakfast or the importance of family dinners. Sadly, lunch gets short shrift. Yet this unassuming midday meal sustains kids' energy and provides much-needed downtime. As the school year—aka brown-bagging season—begins, why not learn a few lessons from folks who make lunch everyone's favorite subject?

“Food and nutrition are central to everything—central to learning and central to community,” says Beth Pellegrino, Westtown School’s Director of Food Services. Every week, Pellegrino and her staff, half of whom are students, cook and serve 700 lunches.

Dishes are creative yet familiar. There’s Taco Tuesdays featuring grass-fed beef, and yes, there are chicken fingers but they’re all-natural ones. Each day, the menu features a do-it-yourself panini station, two entrées (one is always vegetarian) and a salad bar loaded with seasonal offerings and the hummus du jour. In the kitchen bake shop, many hands produce toothsome focaccia, cookies and other baked goods from scratch.

Westtown School’s dining room sources over a third of its ingredients locally, much of it grown on Westtown land by Pete’s Produce. What’s even more impressive is that Westtown students farm as well, coaxing 7,000 pounds of produce per year from their on-campus plot. (Working the land is in Westtown’s DNA: years ago, the school boasted dairy cows, an apple orchard and working farm.)

Under the guidance of farmer Tim Mountz, students save seeds, plant and harvest. As they weed and pick potato bugs, they come to understand cycles of nature as well as issues of equity and justice in our food system. “Living with the landscape” as Mountz puts it, yields simple pleasures. What kid—or grown-up for that matter—doesn’t love the feeling of sipping water from a hose or seeing the breakfast radishes she grew on the salad bar? Mountz smiles as he recalls the day students dashed from the rows of vegetables to the outdoor pizza oven, throwing anything they picked on top of the pies.

While most of us don’t grow the ingredients for our lunches, we can still take a few pages from Westtown’s book. Chapter 1: Be patient. Since it’s unlikely your kids will trade potato chips for kale chips overnight, live by Pellegrino’s mantra: make small, incremental changes over time. Chapter 2: Cook from scratch and whenever possible, leave food in its natural state. Chapter 3 (this is required reading): Get your kids involved. Ask them to decide on menus, shop for ingredients and then let them dice, slice, bake and whisk to their hearts’ content.

From left: Students and faculty dining at Westtown; Beth Pellegrino, Dir. of Food Svcs.; sign in Westtown dining room; students at DIY crepe station
**Westtown Foccacia Bread**

Christine Foster, baker at Westtown School, shared this recipe. She owned the farm that became Wyebrook.

2 C. hot water

1/4 C. oatmeal (old-fashioned or quick-cook)

1/2 C. whole wheat flour

1 Tb. active dry yeast

1/4 tsp. molasses

1 Tb. olive oil

3/4-4 C. bread or all-purpose flour

2 tsp. salt

For the topping:

3 Tb. extra virgin olive oil

1 Tb. dried oregano

1 Tb. dried basil

1 tsp. (or to taste) coarse salt

Preheat oven to 375°. Combine hot water with oatmeal, whole wheat flour, yeast, molasses and olive oil in the bowl of a mixer. Let sit for about 10 minutes, until mixture is foamy on top.

Stir in the bread flour and salt and knead on low until dough pulls away from sides of the bowl. If mixture is wet, add more flour. Overall, mixer should knead dough for about 10 minutes.

Remove the dough and form into a smooth ball. Place in a bowl and cover with a towel. Allow to rise for 15 minutes.

Generously oil a jelly roll pan (about 10.5”x15.5”x1”) and stretch dough to fit into pan evenly. Make indentations all over the top of the dough with your fingers. Drizzle 3 Tb. oil all over dough and sprinkle all the seasonings on top.

Bake for about 24 minutes. Once done, remove from pan and allow to cool on a bread rack.

Makes 6 servings.

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**Oven Baked Kale Chips**

Recipe courtesy of Westtown School.

1 bunch kale

1 Tb. olive oil

Salt to taste

Parchment paper

Sous chef James Gaynor created this recipe.

Preheat oven to 350°. Strip, rinse and tear kale into bite-size pieces, place in a large bowl, and massage olive oil into kale.

Place parchment paper on top of a baking sheet. Spread with kale pieces. Sprinkle with salt. Bake for about 10 minutes, until nice and crispy.

Makes 5 side dish servings.

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**Spelt Salad with Maple Vinaigrette**

An ancient grain that’s been gaining in popularity, spelt is high in protein and fiber. Since spelt is a species of wheat, it contains gluten. To go gluten-free, Westtown nutritionist, Elle Clark, suggests replacing the spelt with lentils.

For the salad:

4 C. spelt

1 C. chopped butternut squash, peeled and cut into 1/2”-1” cubes

1 Tb. olive oil

Preheat oven to 450°. Toss butternut squash with olive oil, salt and pepper and roast until soft, about 20 minutes.

In a large bowl, combine onion, arugula, goat cheese, walnuts and figs. Add spelt and squash once they’ve cooled. In a separate bowl, whisk together vinaigrette ingredients.

Pour vinaigrette over spelt salad, mix well and top with extra goat cheese for a garnish.

Makes 8-10 side dish servings.

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**Curry Stew**

Sous chef James Gaynor created this recipe.

Even before the USDA came out with its standards for school meals, parents and dining room directors ran up against this hard truth: you can give a child a healthy lunch, but you can’t make him eat. You can, however, increase the odds.

1. **Pack for success.** Salads crammed into a small container or layered in a cute Mason jar are hard to eat. Match the food with the serving piece and include the right utensils. Keep hot foods hot (over 140°) and cold foods cold (below 40°).

2. **Say no to soggy.** Toast bread to keep it crisp. Dry lettuce and raw vegetables for dipping. Put salad dressing in the bottom of the container and layer salad ingredients on top. Better yet, pack dressing separately.

3. **Love your leftovers.** If you child ate seconds of the healthy dinner you cooked last night, chances are she’ll be happy to see it in her lunchbox.

4. **Give kids what they want—within reason!** There are a whole range of healthy foods, so serve ones your kids like, not just ones you wish they would. That said, introduce new foods at least 3 or 4 times before giving up on them.

5. **Talk.** Ask your child about what she ate and what she didn’t. Sometimes the reason a child skips parts of her lunch has nothing to do with food. If her lunch time is early—some schools start serving lunch at 10 am!—she may not be hungry. If her lunch period is short, she may feel rushed.

Tips for Healthy Lunches:

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**Salt and pepper to taste**

1/2 red onion, cut into small dice

4 C. arugula, packed

1/2 C. crumbled goat cheese

plus extra for garnish

1/2 C. roasted walnuts, chopped

1/2 C. figs, chopped

**For the maple vinaigrette:**

1/4 C. olive oil

1/4 C. balsamic vinegar

1 Tb. lemon juice

1 Tb. Dijon mustard

1 clove garlic, minced

1 Tb. maple syrup

Preheat oven to 450°.

Cook spelt according to package directions. (Many cooks recommend soaking spelt overnight.)

Toss butternut squash with olive oil, salt and pepper and roast until soft, about 20 minutes.

In a large bowl, combine onion, arugula, goat cheese, walnuts and figs. Add spelt and squash once they’ve cooled. In a separate bowl, whisk together vinaigrette ingredients.

Pour vinaigrette over spelt salad, mix well and top with extra goat cheese for a garnish.

Makes 8-10 side dish servings.
You can adjust the level of spiciness and “soupiness,” and you can substitute with vegetables you have on hand.

1 Tb. vegetable oil
1 C., 1” diced onions
1 thumb-sized chunk fresh ginger, peeled and minced
4 cloves garlic, minced
1 Tb. red curry paste (less or more depending on desired spice level)
1 Tb. lime juice
2–3, 13.5-oz. cans coconut milk (depending on how “soupy” you like your stew)
1 Tb. brown sugar
1 Tb. gluten-free soy sauce
2 C., ½” sliced carrots
1 C., 1” diced red pepper
1 C., 1” diced green peppers
1 C. fresh basil, shredded
1 C. drained diced pineapple
1 block extra firm tofu, patted dry and cut into ½” cubes
Salt, pepper and curry powder to taste
Sliced scallions and chopped fresh cilantro for garnish

Heat olive oil in a large pot over medium-high heat. Add onions, ginger and garlic. Cook until onions release their liquid, about 5 minutes. Stir in curry paste and lime juice until well blended.

Add all the coconut milk, brown sugar and soy sauce and stir over medium heat. Add carrots and continue cooking over medium heat for 20 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add red and green peppers, basil, pineapple and tofu. Reduce heat to low and stew for another 15 minutes. Taste and season with salt, pepper and curry powder. Start with 1 Tb. curry powder.

Simmer until the mixture reaches a stew-like consistency. Garnish with scallions and cilantro.

Makes 6–8 servings.

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**Easy Gazpacho**

1 piece of white bread, crusts removed
Salt, to taste

Remove crusts from bread and tear into a few pieces. Place bread in a blender with a pinch of salt, garlic cloves and 1 Tb. red wine vinegar. Let sit for a few minutes so bread has time to absorb vinegar.

Add half of the following vegetables: carrots, zucchini, peppers and scallions. Pour in 1 C. tomato juice and blend until almost smooth. Pour into a large bowl and add the remaining vegetables including cucumbers. Stir in the rest of the tomato juice.

Season with additional red wine vinegar, balsamic vinegar and salt. Stir in olive oil. Chill for at least 2 hours. Taste and adjust seasonings.

When ready to serve, top with sour cream or yogurt and basil.

Makes 8–10 servings.

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**Granola Bars**

This recipe is my friend Doreen’s adaptation of a popular, five-star Ina Garten recipe. I love it because it tastes like dessert but does not send me hurtling toward a sugar crash. Cooking tip: use a pair of scissors to cut apricots into small pieces.

2 C. old-fashioned oatmeal
1 C. sliced almonds
1 C. organic unsweetened shredded coconut, loosely packed
½ C. chopped raw cashews
3 Tb. unsalted butter
2½ C. honey
¼ C. brown sugar, lightly packed
1½ tsp. vanilla
¼ tsp. salt
½ C. chopped dried bing cherries
½ C. chopped dried apricots
½ C. dried cranberries

Preheat oven to 350°. Butter the bottom and halfway up sides of a 9 x 13” baking dish and line bottom and sides with parchment paper.

Mix oatmeal, almonds, coconut and cashews together. Spread on a rimmed baking sheet and bake for 10 minutes, stirring once after 5 minutes, until lightly browned. Place in a large bowl.

Reduce oven temperature to 300°.

Bring butter, honey, brown sugar, vanilla and salt to a boil and cook for 1 minute, stirring constantly. Pour over oatmeal mixture and mix well to moisten. Stir in cherries, apricots and cranberries.
Spoon into baking dish. Place a piece of parchment paper on top and using your hands, press down on the mixture so that it is tightly packed. Discard top parchment paper. Bake for 20 minutes until edges turn golden.

Cool for 2–3 hours in dish. When completely cool, use a pizza cutter or sharp edged spatula to cut into squares.

Makes 12–16 bars.

Turkey-Mango Rollups
Quick and easy. Make sure to dry the spinach leaves well.

¼ C. mayonnaise
1 tsp. sweet curry powder or more to taste
4, 8” whole wheat flour tortillas
12 slices smoked turkey
1½–2 C. baby spinach leaves
1 mango, cut into thin slices or small dice

Mix mayonnaise and curry powder together. Let sit for a few minutes to allow flavors to develop. Spread 1 Tb. curry mayonnaise on each tortilla. Layer 3 slices turkey, ½ C. spinach and mango onto each. Roll tightly and slice in half.

Makes 4 wraps.

Chicken, Rice and Edamame “Stoup”
Since Kathy Brennan (no relation) and Caroline Campion released their cookbook Keepers in 2013, I’ve given it to many friends, and everyone loves their chicken and rice with ginger scallion sauce. Here’s my simplified, edamame-enhanced version.

For the chicken and rice:
6 C. water
1 Tb. kosher salt
4 scallions, divided into white parts (cut into 1–2” pieces) and green parts (sliced into ¼” pieces)
1 lb. chicken breast tenders
2” piece ginger, unpeeled, cut into large chunks and smashed
2 C. rice
1½–2 C. frozen edamame, thawed and drained
Chicken broth, optional

For the sauce:
2 bunches scallions (white and green parts), finely chopped
1 C. peeled minced ginger*
1 tsp. salt
2½ C. olive oil

*I keep Penzeys’ dried minced ginger in my pantry in case I run out of fresh—or get too lazy to chop.

To make the chicken and rice:
Place water, salt, chicken, ginger and white parts of scallions in a large pot. Bring to a boil. Cover and reduce to a simmer. Cook until chicken is just cooked through, 8–10 minutes. Remove chicken and use two forks to shred it. Set aside.

Bring broth to a boil. Add rice. Reduce to a simmer and cook uncovered for 10 minutes. (Rice won’t be fully cooked at this point.) Remove ginger. You can leave white parts of scallions in if you wish.

Add chicken, edamame and green parts of scallion. Cook until rice is tender, 5–10 more minutes. If you think you would prefer a souppier consistency, add chicken broth 1 C. at a time.

To make the sauce:
Combine scallions, ginger, salt and olive oil. Allow to sit for at least a half hour at room temperature.

To serve:
Scoop chicken and rice into bowls and stir in a spoonful or two of sauce. Offer extra sauce on the side.

Makes 8–10 generous servings.

Laura traces her love of all things culinary to the first time she leafed through her mother’s Betty Crocker’s Cooky Book—which still occupies a place of honor among her 600+ cookbooks. A passionate supporter of local food, she co-founded a farmers market, judges area food contests, and anticipates restaurant openings with the excitement most people would reserve for winning a Mega Millions jackpot.

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