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Lunch break



SAY CHEESE Chef Joshua Grabowsky poses with Max, the inspiration for Max's Organic Planet.

A suburban chef plans to give kids midday meal options that even a mom would eat.

By Margaret Littman

For many of us, school lunch was a thing of dread. The cafeteria was a petri dish of social conflicts that doubled in size daily. The lunch lady had eyes in the back of her head and caught every misdeed. And the food itself, well, often more of it ended up in the trash can than in our stomachs.

Joshua Grabowsky began dreading school lunches for his son before he was even born. "After Max was conceived, I was already stressing about school lunches and what he was going to eat when he went to school," admits Grabowsky, a personal chef and CEO of busypeople inc., a suburban organic catering firm.

Now that Max is four and Grabowsky and his wife, Nancy, have another son, eight-month-old Izaiah Blue, Grabowsky is turning his long-lived school-lunch fear into a business that will help both parents and kids banish the concept of cafeteria mystery meat from their collective memories. Max's Organic Planet, which he'll run from within busypeople, is an effort to provide healthy, organic lunches to public and private schools in the city and on the North Shore.

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Schools often sign yearlong contracts for their food-service needs, so Grabowsky is gearing up for the 2007–08 school year, gauging interest and offering pilot programs and weeklong taste tests, so that school administrators, parents and students will sign on for organic eats in September. One such test at Lake Forest Montessori resulted in kids eating double their average amount of food, he says.

"The difference was that the middle-elementary kids, who despised the traditional lunch and brought their own bagged lunches, caught wind of the organic offerings and starting eating like a pack of hyenas," Grabowsky says. While the program can be adapted for kids ranging in age from 2 to 18 years old, Grabowsky thinks these middle schoolers may be the best audience for Max's Organic Planet. "These kids are more picky than the five-and-unders, and they love to learn about food." His response to picky eaters is what he calls the "three-ingredient rule," simplifying dishes so they have as few ingredients as possible.

"People try to hide [vegetables] and make weird-looking concoctions. No way!

Kids like to be able to recognize each ingredient on its own. If they have to ask 'What's in that?', forget about it."

Grabowsky's goal is to contract with schools for hot lunch every day, but the company is offering alternatives for communities that need more flexible plans. Those include a Monday, Wednesday, Friday plan; TGIOP (Thank God It's Organic Friday); and Organic Week, providing one week of organic meals per month.

Cost varies based on the schools' needs. Larger schools will be able to negotiate volume discounts, but lunches will average between \$3 and \$6 per student per day. Healthy cooking and gardening classes, as well as yoga and meditation, are add-ons to help give kids an integrated approach to healthy eating.

Down the road, Grabowsky hopes kids will grow most of the vegetables used in the lunches through the gardening classes. When schools sign on for a yearlong program, 20 weeks of cooking classes (one every other week during the school year) are included at no extra cost.

Grabowsky has no fears of kids being served healthier lunches opting to trade them with others who brown-bag junk food. Meals will include chicken tenders baked (not fried) with olive oil, pasta with meat sauce (made from grass-fed sirloin) and salad with raspberry vinaigrette. Every menu includes a protein, starch, vegetable and fruit.

"We're trying to provide foods that are normal foods, that they're used to," he says, "But set the tone for the next ten years."

For more info on *busypeople inc.*, visit www.busypeopleinc.com.

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