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Redefining School Lunches - Tasty, Healthy, Affordable

By Sophie Braccini



from left to right, Jesse Epstein, Sara Lehman and Sommar Veverka Picture courtesy of Children's Choice and Echo Communications

Right after the winter break, Los Perales Elementary will be the first Moraga public school to start offering the Children's Choice option to its students at lunch time. They will be following in the footsteps of several Lamorinda elementary schools that are already working with the Danville-based catering company.

"For Sleepy Hollow it all started five years ago with a conversation among moms during a field trip," remembers Michelle Lehman, a mother of Sleepy Hollow students. "We were expressing our frustration about the poor quality of the food offered at school, so we started to look for alternatives." After considering parent-made food and checking local vendors, the mothers decided to try Children's Choice.

"What we liked about them is that they were open to work with us and hear our demands," says Lehman. "We wanted more local and organic products, we wanted to see more recyclable packaging and utensils and the company worked in that direction with us," she explains.

A healthy meal is not very useful if the kids won't eat it. Children's Choice organizes regular testing of their new recipes in schools. "We have two levels of customers," says Sophie Johnson, Lead School Liaison for Children's Choice, "first the children who need to love our meals, then the parents who want quality, affordability and easy operations."

Lehman's children agree with her that the program is well received by students, and list favorites such as chicken nuggets, a chicken teriyaki rice bowl, and sushi, a recent addition to the menu. For Lehman, one of the benefits of the system is the web site where the parents choose the main dishes for the kids' lunch. In addition, says Lehman, "The kids have a variety of snacks, local seasonal fruits and vegetables to choose from at every meal; that encourages them to make their own choices and try new things."

Fresh, seasonal and organic can be expensive, but Children's Choice prices are not unreasonable. "It costs \$4.25 per meal," says Lehman, "and we have stopped using our lunches as a fund raiser for the school; there are other ways to raise money." She reports that about half of Sleepy Hollow's students use the program.

Johnson explains that the company can keep prices low due to the very high volume of produce they purchase. "We prepare thousands of meals every day," she says, "and that creates a big economy of scale."

Additionally, Children's Choice is a Certified Green Business and provides only recyclable trays and containers. "Most everything is compostable," says Johnson, "and we partner with schools and waste authorities to continue our drive towards a waste-free school lunch."

Children's Choice, now in its 6th year, continues to grow and has opened kitchens in San Jose and Los Angeles, serving 122 schools state wide. "We have been with them since they were quite small," says Lehman, "and what is nice is that size has not affected their customer focus and the quality of their products." Lehman still serves on the Board of Sleepy Hollow's Parents' Club and continues to scan periodically the offers of school lunches in the area. "So far, they continue to be the best around," Lehman concludes.

For more information about Children's Choice go to www.choicelunch.com.

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