

THE GARDEN OF EATIN'

The dirt Diva Annie Spiegelman September 16, 2006



Having been raised and hardened on the streets of NYC, the first time I actually saw real vegetable crops and fruit orchards was when I was in third grade. PS6 did its annual “field” trip to the Metropolitan Museum, where there was a photography exhibit about the American Farmlands of Oklahoma, Nebraska, South Dakota. All these glorious places I’d heard of which orbited insignificantly like distant planets around the largest of all stars, Manhattan. I knew people existed in those places, (I was educated in New York) but I didn’t know they actually grew the food that ended up on my plate. The stunning colors and aliveness in the photos made an indelible imprint on my young, impressionable mind. A bountiful fall harvest against a back drop of black, fertile soil, verdant fields and cheerfully blue skies, made me connect, possibly for the first time, as to the true origins of our food before it arrives at our busy metropolitan supermarket. To a die-hard city kid, this was a mind boggling, awesome, humbling and definitely life-transforming experience.

Wherever we’re raising children today, city, country or suburbs, we all share a moral obligation to educate future generations about where “real” food comes from, and why they would want to eat food that is nutritious. We also need to shield our children from an unconscionable and self-serving food and advertising industry that spends much of its advertising dollars manipulating and indoctrinating kids.

In the industry it is referred to as “cradle to grave advertising.” In the health care community it’s referred to as a catastrophic epidemic.

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The tragic fallout is **one in five American children are classified as overweight**. In 1960, only **four percent** of U.S. kids under the age of 11 were obese. In 2000, **15 percent** of U.S. kids under the age of 11 were considered medically obese. And the numbers continue to rise.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture, noting the overweight rates of 4 and 5 year-olds, states that prevention must begin in the pre-school years. **Susan Gilmore**, Executive Director of the **North Bay Children's Center**, a unique preschool and childcare facility, couldn't agree more. That's why she fortunately began the **Garden of Eatin'** program with a generous grant from the First 5 Marin Children & Families Commission in mid 2004. "I told a mother her five-month-old was ready to start solid foods and to bring in what she's like us to feed him," recounts Gilmore. "When she brought in chicken nuggets the next day, I decided, that's the final straw! *We have to do something about what these kids are being fed!*"

She chose ecologist, grandfather and Master Gardener **David Haskell** to be at the helm of the new garden. He gladly came on board, eager to establish an organic eating garden at a pre-school. Haskell, a handsome, outspoken ex-New Zealander, has a wealth of horticultural knowledge, which he warmly shares with each of his toddler students. "All kids have a natural interest in foods and growing foods. If you want to see delight, just watch a three-year-old pick their first strawberry or green bean from a plant they put to seed," says Haskell.



At the **Garden of Eatin'** the staff, families and children are nourished each day with fresh fruits and vegetables while simultaneously training their taste buds to the natural sweetness and delightfully good tastes of wholesome fresh food. By the time a child is five, their taste preferences are developed and those preferences persist throughout their life. If a child only knows salt, sugar and fat, then that's what the child will choose as an adult. Luckily there are real life heroes amongst us. **Gilmore, Haskell** and their

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staff have creatively combined the integration of gardening and nutrition to teach sustainable, healthy living choices that these preschoolers will carry with them for a lifetime.

At the **Garden of Eatin'** the children learn about the planting cycle, natural foods, vitamins, minerals, and how fresh food from nature is nutritionally superior to overly-processed, under nourished convenience foods. You will find **Haskell** out amongst his prolific organic harvest, surrounded by adoring children who are cheerfully snacking on delectable sugar snap peas, lemon cucumbers, cherry tomatoes, pear-apples and green beans. **The message parents and children take home is that “real” food is healthy, fresh, eaten together and connected to the wonders of the earth.**

In the Spring of 2005, the **Garden of Eatin'** program was selected from nearly 900 school garden programs nationwide to receive an assortment of educational materials from the National Gardening Association. Generous financial donations have also been provided by Carlos Santana's Milagro Foundation, Ted Turner's Captain Planet, Kaiser Permanente Health Group and The Marin County Health and Human Services Department.

Gilmore and **Haskell** hope to spread the **Garden of Eatin's** practices to other childhood education sites and thwart the rising rates of childhood diabetes. They're taking on “The McMan” and making a difference! **Haskell** advocates, “Banning direct advertising of junk food to children is a must. Incessant messages and images of trans-fat saturated meals, Coke & Pepsi and nutrition-less /calorie dense snack-food fuels this epidemic of market-driven diseases in our children.”

Gilmore adds, “The Center of Disease Control recently reported that one in three children born since 2001 will-if present trends continue-have diabetes, a debilitating disease that that last year cost the state of California 27 billion in treatment. North Bay Children's Center **Garden of Eatin'** program directly helps 200 children at an annual cost that's one-fourth the cost of treating just one child with childhood diabetes.



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