



## Vineyard-grown food feeds school kids

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Parents who have tried dozens of times to get their children to expand their diets beyond peanut butter and jelly sandwiches will be in awe of kindergarten teacher Teri Mello.

Clipping tender green pea shoots from a flat growing in her classroom at the West Tisbury School, Mello urged the youngsters to try a bite.

And did they ever. The kindergartners rushed the table and gobbled up the greens like candy, returning for seconds — and even thirds.

"I'm going to tell my mom I like them," said 6-year-old Lyla Solway.

"They taste so good, and there are salty ones, too," said Sydney Emerson, also 6. She was referring to a spicier variety Mello had served earlier, also appreciated by the children.

"You have to see it to believe it," Mello said with a smile.

These days, Martha's Vineyard is full of believers in the importance of bringing wholesome, locally grown foods into the schools for lunches and snacks.

Each of the island's six schools has a garden and a salad bar that is supplemented by greens from the garden, as well as food purchased or gleaned from Vineyard farms.

At the West Tisbury School, children had breakfast muffins made with local carrots and eggs and yogurt smoothies before taking the MCAS exams last week.

School officials dubbed the muffins "super brain food," cook Jenny Devivo said. She makes soups out of Vineyard squash and, in season, roasts local beets with garlic for the school salad bar.

Over at the Edgartown School on Tuesday, cook Stacey Gouldrup added greens from the greenhouse at Allen Farm and sprouts grown by students to a tofu salad.

In the fall, the Edgartown School serves kale salad that has been steeped in olive oil with a little salt and lemon juice, said head cook Gina deBettencourt. "The kids love it," she said.

Parents aren't the only ones impressed by the Martha's Vineyard Island Grown Schools initiative.

State public health officials recently awarded the Dukes County Health Council of Martha's Vineyard \$60,000 for the next five years to promote healthy foods in the schools and community and to create safe walking areas.

Part of the Mass in Motion campaign to lower rates of obesity and chronic illness, some of the grant money will be used to pay school cooks to host cooking classes for parents.

Healthy eating is nothing new to the island's wealthy summer residents, who want grass-fed beef and locally grown eggs from Cronig's Market after they get off the ferry or come from the airport.

But getting local residents involved — considering that they may work two to three jobs to get by during the offseason — has taken a community-wide initiative.

"It's a movement that's been building in momentum for the past 10 years," said Julie Sierputoski, who two years ago started a business called the Produce Connection that picks up food from local farms and delivers it school kitchens.

It's part of a public health initiative to combat chronic diseases such as diabetes and heart problems, Chilmark health agent Marina Lent said. A five-year-old offshoot of the Island Grown Initiative, Island Grown Schools aims to

bring more local food into school meals, tie school gardens to the curriculum and expose children to farm life through field trips, coordinator Noli Taylor said.

"We found everything can be taught in a garden," she said. "The math connections are my favorite."

Getting children to eat what they or local farmers grow is possible with some savvy marketing and peer pressure.

One tool the schools used is to sponsor taste tests of soups, dairy products and salad bar fixings, Taylor said.

"When the kids are eating around each other, they are more willing to try new things and like it," she said.

Trying to coax a kindergartner to eat a whole baked sweet potato would be a waste of time, Mello said. The trick is to serve the potato in thin rounds — and to cook it different ways.

"They're thinking, 'Which one do I like best?'" instead of whether they should try it at all, Mello said.

Coaxing, not commanding, is the name of the game, she said. When a boy tells her he doesn't like the pea shoots, Mello calmly instructs him to wash out the taste with water.

The technique seems to be working. Devivo said 75 percent of West Tisbury children are eating from the salad bar, which means they are getting at least two portions of vegetables with their lunch.

During the summer, school lunch cooks and Sierputoski freeze, can and create sauces out of food gleaned by volunteers from local farms, such as Morning Glory Farm, or purchased on the island from local growers.

"It's more work than opening a can. But they're doing it," Taylor said.

This is the second year Sierputoski has made daily deliveries of vegetables and dairy products from five participating farms to the island schools.

From September through December, she picked up kale, greens, carrots, onions, parsnips, squash and other vegetables.

This year, she convinced owners of three farms to provision the schools during the winter months with greenhouse-grown greens, yogurt and cheese.

She estimates she picks up 40 pounds of greens a week from farms that look as though they could have come from a storybook, with bobbing chickens, grazing sheep and fat cows.

"This is really gourmet greens, feta, beautiful stuff. It's not coming in from Mexico in a box," Sierputoski said.

During a run to Allen Farm in Chilmark on Tuesday, farm manager Susan Huck hands over some gallon bags of pea shoots, sunflower sprouts and lettuce.

"Next week I'm going to have a lot. Everything is just sprouting," Huck said.

At the nonprofit Farm Institute in Katama, chickens huddle outside a greenhouse where garden manager Rebecca Sanbers clips greens with scissors.

"Julie, there's leeks now," she said.

"Everything you have, we'll take," Sierputoski said.

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