
KIDDLI-WINKS
CATERING VALUES

Toronto parents dish out a nutritious culinary credo

BY KATIE DRUMMOND



Photographs courtesy of Lulu and David Farnell

If the thought of preparing home cooked, all-natural meals for your own children on a daily basis seems overwhelming, imagine doing it for three thousand kids under the age of five. For spirited advocates David Farnell and Lulu Cohen-Farnell, it's just another day on the job as they take on the prevalent problem of poor nutrition among Toronto tots.

The Farnells are the founders of Real Food for Real Kids (RFRK), a catering and nutritional education outfit that aims to replace the standard school fare of processed, packaged foods with locally sourced, all-natural snacks and lunches. Along with a devoted team of sixteen full-time staffers and several volunteers, David and Lulu now nourish kids in seventy Toronto daycares.

It all started in 2003, when the two embarked on a frustrating daycare hunt for their son Max, now five. "When we were looking for a daycare, we searched high and low for an environment that offered nurturing caregivers, a warm space, and the same values we had at home," David, a former senior manager with a travel firm, said.

For the Farnells, whose second child – a daughter named Siena – was born in June, those values included putting all-natural, homemade food on their son's plate, and they didn't want that to change when Max headed off to school. Little did they know their search for sound nutrition would result in a re-mortgaged house, new careers, and a passionate mission to change the way kids – and their parents – think about food.

Both avid cooks, David and Lulu say they have a different outlook on eating than the approach they see in North America, where dining is often less a pleasure than a chore. Born and raised in France, Lulu credits her upbringing with instilling an appreciation for whole foods and a lifestyle where family dinners were the norm, rather than the exception.

"Every day as a child I would walk to my grandmother's house for lunch, and she would spend her days making food for her children and grandchildren," she said. "Everything was always made from scratch."

With an upbringing like hers, it was only natural that Lulu couldn't imagine feeding Max any other way. In the Farnell home, cooking is part of the routine, with curries, quinoa and home-baked treats common at the kitchen table.

Unfortunately, this approach to dining didn't mesh with the menus at city daycares.

"Max was brought up eating unprocessed, naturally seasoned, local foods," David said. "But when we started looking into daycares, we found that these places were serving bottom-of-the-barrel junk to their kids."

David and Lulu say they were disappointed when a little research uncovered that struggling daycares were cutting costs by sacrificing quality – instigating a race among caterers to squeeze the most food

out of the fewest dollars. With parents none the wiser and kids oblivious to the paltry content of daily lunches, the problem of poor daycare nutrition was only getting worse.

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Central YMCA in Toronto, the two were unwilling to compromise on their son's nutrition, and sent along homemade snacks and lunches in lieu of the chicken nuggets and powdered potatoes that were commonplace on the daycare's menus. Soon, administrators took note – and the Farnells found Max's nutritious meals in high demand.

Despite her full-time job with a Toronto design firm, Lulu volunteered to plan a snack program for the daycare. Soon, canned fruit and packaged crackers were replaced with homemade muffins and organic tortilla chips. Rave reviews followed shortly after. "After three months, parents were so thrilled that the central management asked Lulu to start serving snacks for thirteen other YMCA daycares around the city," David recalls.

It was then that Lulu and David realized they had more than just a hobby on their hands. The two re-mortgaged their house, met with consultants, and started Real Food for Real Kids. Soon, they were devoting themselves full-time to sharing their culinary values with families across the city.

Despite the budgets and business plans, the pair say they aren't motivated by money, and don't see RFRK as a typical company. "This is an extension of our life and our values," Lulu said. "It's born out of passion, not a desire for profits." That passion was obvious to daycare administrators, as more groups jumped on board and phone calls from thankful parents reassured the Farnells that their leap-of-faith was well worth the risk.

Despite their success, the two admit that trying to challenge common ideas and approaches to food can be difficult – and expensive. After losing money in their first year, the Farnells now say that catering quality means barely breaking even.

"We started off trying to compete with bigger companies, who can cater for \$2.50 per child, per day," David said. "Sure, you can feed a child for that cost, but the big question is what are you putting into those little bodies?" While RFRK now charges \$4.50 a day for two

snacks and lunch, David and Lulu are confident that the benefits to children's health, not to mention the lifelong value of teaching kids to appreciate quality food, outweigh those extra few dollars for parents.

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From grinding their own spices to rising at 3 a.m. for the daily routine of sautéing onions and preparing fresh sauces in the 9,000-square-foot RFRK kitchen, David and Lulu readily devote twenty hours a day to keeping the program up and running, and things don't seem to be slowing down.

"The program has been blowing up for about the past year," said David. "We don't advertise and we don't have a website, but word-of-mouth means we've got parents calling up from daycares across the city."

One of those parents is Susan McKeen, co-chair of Earl Haig Daycare. After she got wind that the daycare served boxed potatoes and other processed, high-fat foods, McKeen took action. "I was stunned when I found out what my son was being fed," she said. "I called Real Food for Real Kids and immediately things started moving forward to get their food into the centre."

Despite the higher cost of the program, response from parents has been positive, and McKeen said she knows David and Lulu have their hearts in the right place. "It's about our children, and these people are so passionate, and so personally interested in the kids and their wellbeing," she said. "The government might get to making changes eventually, but by doing this, we're already a step ahead."

While most parents and daycare caregivers support their initiatives, the Farnells do encounter values that clash with their own. "We've only lost one client, and it was over ideas, not money," David said. "The caregivers were eating MacDonald's three days a week, and they didn't see why serving kids that food was a problem, if they ate it themselves."

Though the daycare in question has reverted to canned pasta and packaged cookies, the Farnells know that the hard facts about children's nutrition are on their side.

With Statistics Canada reporting that over 25 percent of Canadian kids are overweight and that most daycare-aged children consume 77 percent more than their recommended limit of sodium each day, David and Lulu are adamant about the importance of widespread change – and they say it needs to start at home.

Both agree that parents play the most important role in how children approach food. The Farnells say they've seen firsthand how the attitude of adults can make or break the success of the program. "Kids are very curious, they love to try new things," Lulu said. "But are parents supporting that thirst, and are they encouraging the kids to try new foods?"

"In many cases, you see overworked parents who let their kids do the driving and avoid conflict," David added. "But don't make it about conflict – just serve dinner, and kids can eat it, and if they don't you'll

have one hungry child on your hands the next morning!"

Though they still serve Max the same nutritious foods, the Farnells admit they've had to find a new balance as their son gets older. "He does go to [elementary] school now and sees kids with Jell-O and sweet, packaged foods, and of course he takes some of this or wants a bite of that," Lulu said.

Here is a favourite recipe from the Real Food for Real Kids kitchen.

CHUNKY CHICKPEA CHOWDER

Serves 4

- 1/4 cup white miso
- 1/2 cup water (preferably filtered)
- 2 tbsp grapeseed oil or extra virgin olive oil
- 2 medium onions, halved and thinly sliced
- 2 tsp ground coriander
- 1/2 tsp turmeric
- 1/4 tsp ground cinnamon
- 3 cups thinly sliced green cabbage
- 1 large green pepper, diced
- 1 large red pepper, diced
- 3 ripe tomatoes, chopped
- 1 can (15 to 19 oz) chickpeas, drained and rinsed, or 2 cups cooked chick peas
- 1/4 cup raisins or currants
- 1 tbsp lemon juice
- Sea salt or kosher salt, to taste

In small bowl, whisk together the miso and water; set aside. In large, deep sauté pan or skillet, heat oil over medium heat. Add onions and cook, stirring occasionally, until softened, about 5 minutes. Stir in coriander, turmeric and cinnamon. Cook for 1 minute. Add cabbage and cook, stirring occasionally, until cabbage begins to soften, about 5 minutes.

Stir in miso and water mixture, green pepper, red pepper, tomatoes, chickpeas and raisins. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium-low, cover and simmer until vegetables are tender, about 15 minutes. Stir in lemon juice, and salt (if required) to taste. Serve over whole wheat couscous, brown rice or quinoa with a side of broccoli.



Lulu Cohen-Farnell, pictured here with her son Maxime and his lifelong friend Juliette at the YMCA daycare centre.

The parents have addressed his curiosity by offering Max healthier versions of processed items to compare with what he tries at school.

“We want to take a balanced approach, and we would never want Max to become obsessed with foods he thinks he can’t have,” said Lulu. “We did buy some of those foods for him to try, and he prefers what we make.”

It seems that other Toronto kids and parents share Max’s preference. Despite ongoing requests to start the service in more daycares as well as local schools, Lulu and David have decided to cap RFRK enrollment – for now. “We only have so much capacity given our facilities and the high cost of the foods we’re bringing in, and we would never cut quality to serve more kids,” said David.

The cost of providing healthful lunches and snacks is exacerbated by the Farnells’ commitment to sourcing a hefty proportion of their ingredients from local organic or transitional farms (those that are in the process of transitioning to organic production, but are not yet certified as organic). All of the meats, poultry and fish used in the RFRK kitchen are hormone- and antibiotic-free and ethically raised. All meals and snacks are free of trans fats.

Though they hope to expand to elementary and secondary schools eventually, both insist that lunches be served family-style, rather than as individually packaged meals typical in many schools. “At daycares, we see a real difference in communal dining, with kids eating together,” said David. “You see them trying foods parents would never imagine they’d eat – peer pressure working in your favour.”

Until they find the means to grow, Lulu and David continue to develop their in-school education program, which includes a lending li-

brary of books, parent-and-children seminars and daytrips, and kits for caregivers, in the hopes that kids will be exposed to the value of real foods on a daily basis.

And what are the dishes that Lulu and David cook up to feed hungry stomachs and encourage healthy eating? Lulu, who works with cooks to develop recipes that accommodate a range of diets, from vegan to gluten-free, says that everything from pasta primavera to Indian dahl has graced the plates of lucky tots this year.

With an approach to healthy living that emphasizes not just nutrition, but the importance of local foods and the pleasures of familial dining, David and Lulu say they hope RFRK constitutes only one part of a larger movement toward changes in North American lifestyles.

“We linked the business to our own personal philosophies of how to live healthfully and sustainably on the Earth,” David said. “We’re catering values, and we hope people recognize that some values in our culture do need to change, and that change has to come from them.” □

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