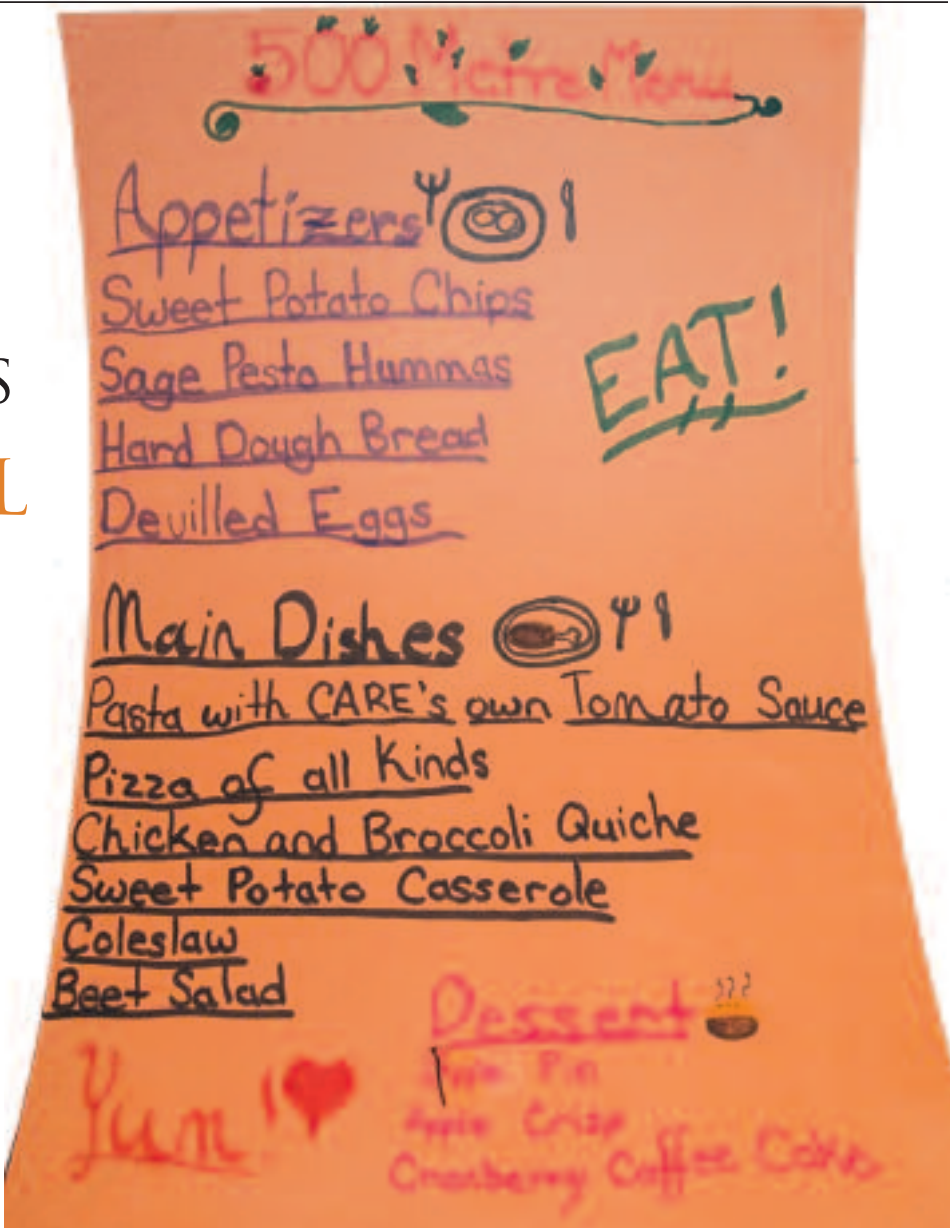


KIDDLI-WINKS

HOW LOCAL CAN YOU GO CAL?

BY JANE WELLS

PHOTOGRAPHY
BY MICHAELA MATHIEU



“Children need rules and boundaries.” We’ve all heard it or said it and, as a daycare teacher, I certainly pronounce it more than most. I work at CARE, an after-school program in Trinity Bellwoods Park, and last fall we introduced another kind of rulebook to the children, inviting them and their families to the 500-Metre Meal: How Local Can You Gocal?, a supper to be prepared from local ingredients. I thought we could all learn something from a new set of rules, using literal boundaries to become more inventive about how – and what – we eat.

It all started with the basil. Although I am principally the drama teacher at CARE, every Thursday afternoon I take a handful of the children to the small volunteer-run greenhouse that was installed in the park last year. Beyond the basic duties of watering plants, I wanted a project for the children to initiate, one that would give our greenhouse tasks a sustained focus. In September we planted basil seeds, hoping they would grow enough by December to enable us to make a small batch of pesto.

On planting day, we mixed our own potting soil with compost, peat and vermiculite; as we sifted twigs from the compost, 8-year-old Camden looked at me enquiringly and said, “So basically I’ve got my hands in old, rotten banana skins?” Despite the chorus of “Ewww, gross!” that followed, we managed to plant the seeds, and the basil came along nicely. A colleague joked that the greenhouse pesto would constitute, instead of the 100-mile-diet, the 500-metre-diet – and so the idea for the meal was born.

Knowing we couldn’t feed the families on pesto alone, I took the children to the Trinity Bellwoods Farmers’ Market to buy ingredients for pasta sauce: tomatoes, onions, garlic and cheese. We made and froze that tomato sauce and, except for the salt, sugar and olive oil, we were able to vouch for everything being Ontario-grown. That first batch was definitely the tastiest. We made three more, but couldn’t afford the local organic tomatoes (my supervisor nearly choked when I told her that four-and-a-half pounds of tomatoes had cost us \$14). The subsequent batches were Ontario-grown – mostly hydroponic, but not organic.



By November, I realized the children and I couldn't prepare enough pasta sauce to feed everyone, so the dinner became a potluck, and the invitation to parents laid out the parameters. These were modest, suggesting that if there wasn't time to concoct a dish from seasonal Ontario ingredients, then to just go with the spirit of it: for a beverage bring apple cider rather than lemonade; shop at a local grocery rather than supermarket chains.

Nonetheless, our plans were getting more ambitious; local food needed local talent! Between cooking tomato sauce and watering basil plants, we put together a floor show, with a dance routine, a short play, magic tricks, and a breathtaking rendition of "My Favourite Things." But as our meal date of December 5th approached and I hadn't heard from parents about their contributions, I began to panic. We went into full-scale food production, making sage pesto (from the last of my garden sage), pizza sauce, sweet potato chips and, on the day of the dinner, pizza dough *and* pasta using my prize find of Red Fife flour!

Cooking locally for and with the children demanded a practical approach: we had to be economical and simple in what we made, and the pizza was the best example of this. Not knowing what foods were coming, I wanted to be sure we could feed all the kids. I knew they



would eat pizza, but not fancy, "weird" pizza. We needed basic, non-gourmet ingredients, in quantity. At Fiesta Farms I found sausage, mushrooms and canned tomatoes, all certified by Local Food Plus. Since the local artisanal cheese was pricey, my solution was Black Diamond mozzarella, which is still apparently made in Belleville. This juggling act between cost and conscience (particularly concerning greenhouse produce) happened more than once, and was instructive every time.

The evening was an unqualified success, and everyone brought a fine array of seasonal dishes: beet salad, cranberry cake, sweet potato casserole, potato pizza, and an amazing selection of Ontario cheese. The bounty of it made me laugh, as I looked at our modest little bowl of basil pesto, the basil – the seed for this bustling family event and vast table of impressive local food – grown not even five hundred metres away! □

Jane Wells is a writer, actor and teacher living in Toronto. In the spirit of going local, she is currently performing her one-woman show, "Brightness Falls," in neighbourhoods across the city.