

LIFESTYLES

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Chefs Dream Up Makeovers for Lunches

By MICHELLE LOCKE
For The Associated Press
Everyone has a school lunch horror story, the mystery meat “steaks,” the limp, white bread sandwiches, the dangers lurking in any dish with “surprise” in the title.

But what if people with serious kitchen cred got involved? Could those sad school lunches be turned into happy meals? To find out we invited chefs around the country to tell us what school cafeteria dishes they dreaded most as a kid. Then we asked how they’d turn those dreadful dishes into tasty treats.

Here are some of their meal makeovers.

PIZZA THE ACTION
Quite a few chefs remember getting poor pie — unpleasantly thick crusts, tasteless cheese, you name it, they ate it. Damon Hall, chef at MoMo’s, a popular hangout across from AT&T Park in San

Francisco, remembers getting pizza “served atop some sort of facsimile-type bread with a ketchup-style pizza sauce, cheese left over from the war to end all wars and square pepperoni.”

But with the wood-burning oven at MoMos, Hall can more than banish the ghosts of pizzas past with a pepperoni pie that starts with a freshly made crust and is topped with tomatoes (fresh) and cheese (also fresh), as well as oregano, red pepper flakes and other seasonings to kick up the taste.

GRILL ‘N THRILL
Danny Bortnick, executive chef at Firefly in Washington, D.C., used to take a sack lunch made by his mom with a sandwich of American cheese, butter and white bread. Not the most exciting selection. That was then. This is now. The sandwich has inspired a lunch item now on the menu at Firefly — the Cadillac Grilled.

This grilled cheese is made with Gruyere, cheddar, bechamel sauce and garlic herb butter.

SALISBURY STEAK GETS JAKE
Jason Berthold, executive chef and partner in San Francisco’s RN74 restaurant, grew up in Michigan and remembers “many terrible school lunches.”

But it was the Salisbury steak that stood out. “I wanted to like it so badly because it seemed like hamburger covered in gravy, but the taste and texture of everything was completely repulsive,” he said.

For a redo, he’d stay with the original concept, but introduce a few touches to add flavor. And he’d definitely use all fresh ingredients.

His recipe starts with fresh ground beef and adds minced shallots and garlic, a dash of Worcestershire sauce and

Dijon mustard, along with egg, fresh thyme and sage, and salt and pepper. For the gravy, he’d throw in some thinly sliced cremini mushrooms and onions with more fresh herbs and seasonings held together with good beef stock.

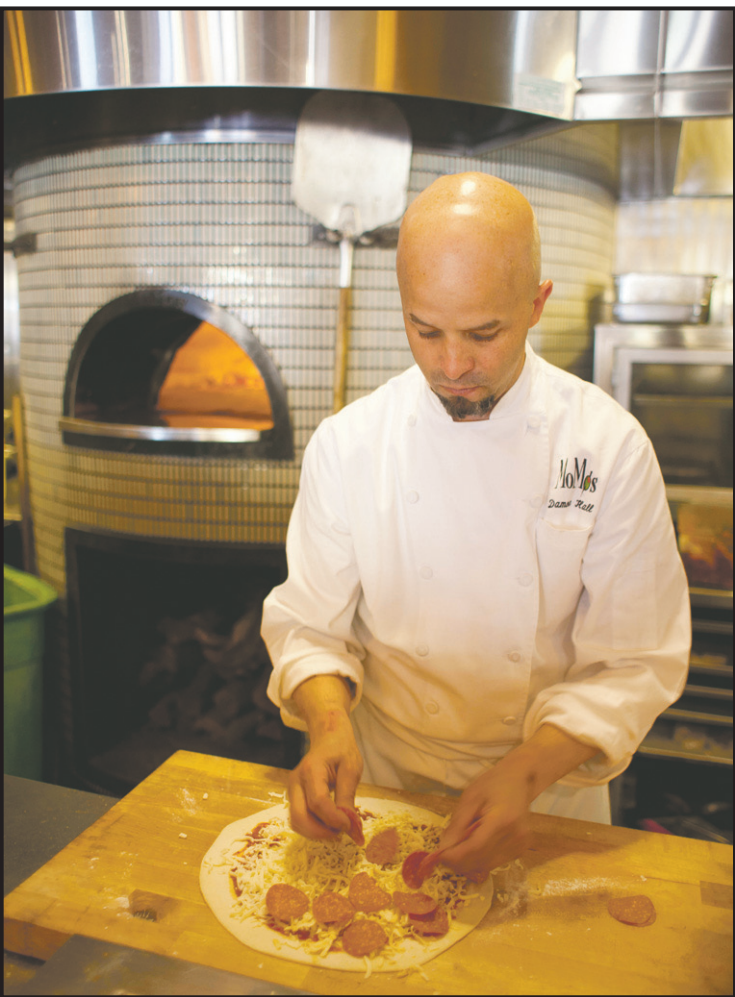
The patties would get a quick grilling over high heat to give them a layer of smoky flavor, then would finish cooking while simmering in the gravy. Add mashed potatoes or buttered noodles and — boom! — one gastronomic nightmare eradicated.

SPIFFY SLOPPY JOES
Roger Waysok, executive chef at South Water Kitchen in Chicago, remembers the sloppy Joes served at his school. And not in a good way. The meat sandwiches came on buns that were more sponge than bread, yet they still couldn’t absorb the volume of grease that leaked out of the flavorless meat.

His version is made with ground venison and is served with maple pecan sweet potato croquettes, a huge improvement over the soggy taters served in school. The meat is cooked with caramelized onions and fresh cherries then tossed with homemade barbecue sauce. The leaner meat has less fat and more flavor, so it needs less sauce, making it less sloppy. Top with shaved red cabbage and, voila!

A GOOD EGG
Daniel Holzman, executive chef and co-owner of The Meatball Shop restaurants in New York City and coauthor of “The Meatball Shop Cookbook,” remembers being affronted by egg salad sandwiches in the lunchroom. “Soggy bread housing under-seasoned, overcooked eggs mashed with mayonnaise and old raw onions,” he said.

For his reworked version, simplicity is the key. He likes a thin slice of rustic sourdough bread brushed with olive oil and lightly toasted, or a grilled slice of good potato bread. For the salad he uses hard-boiled eggs, cooled to



CHEF DAMON Hall makes a pepperoni pizza at MoMo’s restaurant in San Francisco. (AP Photo)

room temperature and roughly diced, then mixed with a generous dollop of mayonnaise, a squeeze of lemon juice and a hearty pinch of salt. Instead of onions he uses chives, which add flavor without bite and also make the salad “look as beautiful as it tastes.”

Can today’s students expect fare this fine when they go through the cafeteria line? Probably not, though school food is getting better thanks in part to the work of culinary campaigners like California’s Alice Waters and British chef Jamie Oliver. And even lackadaisical lunches have their

advantages. MoMos’ Hall may not have warm memories of the pitiful pizzas of yesteryear, but they did have one salutary effect. “It was without a doubt,” he says, “one of the many reasons I decided to become a chef.”

Online:
<http://www.sfmomos.com>
<http://www.firefly-dc.com/index.php>
<http://michaelmina.net/restaurants/locations/rn74.php>
<http://www.southwaterkitchen.com/index.php>
<http://www.themeatballshop.com/>



IN THIS photo, chef Damon Hall makes a pepperoni pizza at MoMo’s restaurant in San Francisco. With a wood-burning oven at MoMo’s, Hall can more than banish the ghosts of pizzas past with a pepperoni pizza that starts with a freshly made crust and is topped with tomatoes, fresh, and cheese, not antique, with oregano, red pepper flakes and other seasonings to kick up the taste. (AP Photo)



THIS PHOTO shows The Steinbeck House, where author John Steinbeck grew up in Salinas, Calif. The house, which is now a restaurant, is located near the National Steinbeck Center, a museum dedicated to preserving Steinbeck’s legacy. (AP Photo)

Museum Preserves Legacy Of Grapes of Wrath Author

SALINAS, Calif. (AP) — They were the stuff of another America: Tom Joad in “The Grapes of Wrath,” George and Lenny in “Of Mice and Men,” Lee Chong, Doc and the delightfully larcenous Mack and the bums in “Cannery Row,” Danny and Pilon in “Tortilla Flat,” Adam and Cal Trask in “East of Eden.”

Whether you met these classic characters while reading the novels of John Steinbeck or you’re encountering them for the first time, they come to life at the National Steinbeck Center, a sprawling and modernistic museum and study center in Old Town Salinas. It is the largest museum dedicated to a single American writer.

The Nobel- and Pulitzer Prize-winning author, who grew up in Salinas, wrote about many things: migrant workers, labor “agitators,” World War II, the Mexican Revolution, New England, Russia, even Vietnam.

But his most endearing and enduring works centered on the people and places he knew best, from the coast and farmland of the Salinas Valley between San Francisco and Los Angeles.

The center opened in 1998 as a library and research facility and place to store and display Steinbeck memorabilia. While Steinbeck scholars can meet here to discuss his work and life, its 30,000 annual visitors also include ordinary fans and other visitors curious about his work and life. The area around Salinas is scenic and popular among tourists, with Monterey County wineries, the Pacific Coast and other attractions nearby. Big Sur, which has connections to literary figures like Henry Miller, Jack Kerouac and poet Robinson Jeffers among others, is 50 miles away.

Even those who don’t know much about Steinbeck’s work will come away from a visit to the center with a sense of his life and times. Curators have blended the work of artists, photographers and historians to bring back the atmosphere of the places he described, set

mostly between the World Wars.

Here are the migrant labor camps; the louse-ridden bunkhouses of the migrant “bindle-stiffs” (as hobos were called); Lee Chong’s grocery; and the entrance to the Bear Flag Restaurant, which was the name of “Cannery Row”’s “stern and stately whorehouse,” which Steinbeck described as a clean, one-price joint presided over by its formidable yet soft-touch madam, Dora Flood.

Here is Ed Ricketts, “Doc” in “Cannery Row,” the eccentric operator of a marine biological lab, who was a character in the book but also a real person and close friend of Steinbeck’s.

Some incidents in his writings were also based on real events, such as the failed 1916 attempt to refrigerate lettuce in rail cars to bring the produce to Eastern markets, depicted in “East of Eden.”

And Steinbeck’s mastery of the vernacular, an ability to write the way people then talked, in a beautifully unrefined manner, can be traced not just to his observations of speech but to input from a mentor, Tom Collins, an anthropologist who researched speech patterns and customs, according to museum archivist Herb Behrens.

Steinbeck’s family had been ranchers in the Salinas-King City area, said Behrens, and many of the characters in works such as “The Red Pony” and “The Long Valley” almost certainly reflected people the writer knew as a child.

This sometimes got in him in the doghouse locally, since the not-always-favorable depictions often could be identified by townspeople.

But it wasn’t just locals who were riled by his work. At times some of his books were burned as un-American and subversive. Steinbeck was derided by angry growers and others as a “traitor to his class.” But he was not the ideologue he was accused of being.

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Grilling Greens — A New Way With Kale for Summer

J.M. HIRSCH
AP Food Editor

When I created this recipe, I was aiming for something akin to a saute. What I got was so much better.

When you saute kale, it acts like spinach. That is, it wilts, releases a lot moisture and becomes very tender. Prepared this way, it’s delicious in stir-fries, tossed with pasta or seasoned and used as a bed for roasted or grilled meats.

But on a recent way-too-hot day, the idea of standing at the stove just didn’t appeal. And since I already had the grill going, I figured I could get the same effect if I seasoned the kale, dumped it on a baking sheet and set it over the grill for a few minutes.

Except that the intense heat of the grill never gave the kale a chance to wilt. In just minutes, the greens went from fresh to toasted and lightly crisped. It also happened to be delicious and paired particularly well with the sausages I also was grilling that evening.

And you don’t need to like the seasoning blend I created to use this technique. Flavor the kale however you see fit (some red pepper flakes would be a fine addition). But however you season the kale, watch it carefully. Every grill heats differently, and kale is so delicate it can go from perfect to perfectly burnt rather quickly.

One note about grilling with a baking sheet. The intense heat of the grill is likely to warp inexpensive baking sheets. If you don’t have a heavy duty baking sheet, I suggest using a disposable foil one, which most grocers sell in a variety of sizes.



THE GREENS of kale went from fresh to toasted and lightly crisped, after being set on a grill for a few minutes as shown here in Concord, N.H. (AP Photo)

GARLICKY GRILLED KALE

Start to finish: 15 minutes

Servings: 4

1 tablespoon garlic powder
1 tablespoon smoked paprika
1/2 tablespoon ground cumin
1/2 tablespoon kosher salt
1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper

1 large bunch kale
2 tablespoons olive oil

Heat a grill to medium-high.



GARLICKY GRILLED kale served with a burger and fresh tomatoes makes a perfect summer meal as shown in Concord, NH. (AP Photo)

Line a heavy baking sheet with foil, or use a disposable foil baking sheet. Coat the foil or baking sheet with cooking spray.

In a small bowl, mix together the garlic powder, smoked paprika, cumin, salt and pepper. Set aside.

Trim off and discard the thick stems from the kale. Coarsely chop the kale leaves, aiming for pieces about 2 to 3 inches.

Place the chopped kale in a large bowl, then drizzle it with the oil. Use your hands to toss the kale to coat evenly with the oil. Sprinkle half of the seasoning mixture over the kale, then toss again. Sprinkle the remaining seasoning and toss again.

Spread the kale in an even layer on the prepared baking sheet.

Place the baking sheet directly on the grill and cook with the grill covered for 7 minutes, or until the kale is crisp and begins to brown. Serve immediately.

Nutrition information per serving (values are rounded to the nearest whole number): 130 calories; 70 calories from fat (54 percent of total calories); 8 g fat (1 g saturated); 0 g trans fats; 0 mg cholesterol; 13 g carbohydrate; 4 g protein; 3 g fiber; 770 mg sodium.