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Chefs dream up makeovers for school lunches

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School lunch • Kitchen professionals from across the country design their version of happier and healthier lunchtime fare.

Everyone has a school-lunch horror story, involving 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.

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 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."