



Chef Bobo Changes Menus -- and Palates -- at Calhoun

(Winter 2003)

One day in September 2002, nine-year-old Lynnette Dent came home from school and, before throwing off knapsack or grabbing a snack, she made her newest demands known. "Mom, can you make me cauliflower soup?" asked this typically fussy eater. There was a moment's pause -- a mixture of surprise and fear (make cauliflower soup?) -- before mother Valerie figured out she better take quick advantage of her daughter's newly refined palate. More astonishing still, Lynnette had taken it upon herself to ask for the recipe at lunch that day from Chef Bobo, Calhoun's new executive chef and Food Service Director.

That's not the only anecdote that is trailing Calhoun's new lunch program. From the first day of school, when students and faculty were advised that the new chefs had all been trained at the French Culinary Institute, there have been standing ovations, countless calls for recipes, and long lines -- particularly for Chef Bobo's incredible soups.

Calhoun's soup line is unlike any other... but then, so are the soups! Valerie Dent, is one of the many parents who volunteers to help serve lunch to the younger children.

It's not just the culinary talent, however, that makes Calhoun's lunch service so unusual (although we don't know of any other school --private or public -- that can boast chefs with such credentials). What makes the program so unique is the attention being paid to fresh ingredients and nutritious, balanced meal planning --without increasing the budget for ingredients or staff. All foods are made from scratch, including morning croissants. Pasta sauce and chicken soup are cooked the way they should be--slowly, overnight.

Of course, there were the initial glitches (running out of food, because more students and faculty were choosing to eat in); the naysayers à la Woody Allen ("there's nothing to eat, and the portions are so small!"); and the expected withdrawal symptoms when Chef Bobo cringed at requests for ketchup (these are, after all, graduates of the FRENCH Culinary Institute). But over time, the staff has made adjustments to quantities and the selections. And the chefs have added an organic ketchup to the condiment collection. In fact, each day, Chef Bobo sits down with his staff -- sous chef Ric Keely, and chefs Chris Canty, Melissa Rodriguez and Tomek Koszylko -- to figure out which dishes were well received, which failed, and what new items might be introduced.

Mid-way through the fall, the staff introduced a sandwich bar and an extended salad bar. These stand-bys come in handy for students who can't bring themselves to taste some of the more sophisticated hot entrees -- like crusted baked cod, lamb stew, sweet & sour fish, tofu wraps, or grilled portabella mushroom and provolone on focaccia. With passing time, however, students have become more adventurous in their meal choices. "They've started to trust us now," says Chef Bobo. To help give them a little push in that direction, Chef Bobo and staff encourage students to "just take a little taste,"

offering small plastic cups similar to those used in ice cream parlors. Additionally, at least a half dozen Lower School moms come in at lunchtime on a daily basis to help serve and encourage the younger children to taste new foods and eat healthily. "It was a challenge at first to get the kids to try something new; they were so used to bagels and pasta," acknowledges Lynnette's mom, Valerie. "But now the kids are asking for seconds -- especially for the soups." Calhoun students and faculty are relishing such exotic fare as pureed carrot & butternut squash soup, miso soup, tortilla soup, split pea, chicken & Popeye soup (w/spinach). The proof of their changing palettes is reflected in the food Chef Bobo orders every day. "We've had to increase vegetable orders from one to five cases, or we run out," he notes with pride.

In addition to Calhoun's lunch program, Chef Bobo has gotten involved in almost every aspect of school life. He frequently gives demonstrations to science, language and social studies classes in the Lower and Middle School divisions, he had his staff prepare a "Tanzanian" menu to complement the Harvest Festival community service project, and he is the instructor for a new Upper School cooking club.

"This is an opportunity to work with kids who are used to eating fast food, and getting them accustomed to eating food that is natural and cooked the way it's supposed to be prepared," says the chef. "Teaching them about nutrition and how to prepare food is a life skill; you can really have an impact on someone's life." Chef Bobo is especially laudatory about the parents committee that was the impetus "for raising the level of the lunch program." Ultimately, he hopes that Calhoun can become an example to other schools.