



EPISODE 3

“Somebody Other Than Us is Planning Our Menus Right Now”

\$40. That's how much one Milwaukee student says she spends each week on snacks instead of eating the food in her public school cafeteria. For decades, school nutrition leaders in Milwaukee resisted what many other programs around the country were doing: transitioning away from scratch-cooked meals to serve more processed, pre-packaged food. They ultimately switched to save money. Reporter Jessica Terrell digs into the proliferation of processed foods on school menus to better understand why the same foods show up across the country.

Jessica Terrell:

After a series of high-stakes national battles over obesity and nutrition standards in the past four decades—along with significant pressure on school districts to cut costs—today, the majority of schools in the U.S. serve highly processed meals. Produced and frozen in factories, shipped across state lines, and reheated in cafeterias.

Anita Garrett:

The takeaway from school meals is that they're like prepackaged food like you're incarcerated. There are meals that's just, uh, packaged up and just sent to you any kind of way.

Terrell:

That's Anita Garrett. She's raising five grandkids who attend Milwaukee public schools. Anita grew up eating fresh-cooked meals in the district and is now part of a growing movement of people in the city—and across the country—fighting to get more schools to start cooking meals from scratch. They are facing an uphill battle.

Nearly everything that gets dished up in school cafeterias today is the product of a massive system, a system that is mired in layers of bureaucracy, and in many ways controlled by corporate interests. You're listening to *Left Over: How Politicians and Corporations are Milking the American School Lunch*. I'm Jessica Terrell. This is episode three of a six-part series about one of the country's biggest anti-hunger programs. In this episode, we're taking a close look at why schools rely so heavily on pre-packaged and highly processed foods—and why it's not that simple to dish up something different.

In September of 2022, I met up with a group of student activists in Milwaukee. It was the first meeting of the school year and the teens, mostly Black and Latino students from [underserved high schools](#), had gathered to talk about how to jumpstart the second year of their campaign to improve school lunch in the city.

Ari Antreassian:

They started last school year surveying, just trying to identify what issues that they could work on that, you know, had a large support within the school...

Terrell:

That's Ari Antreassian. A [coordinator](#) for [YES -- Youth Empowered in the Struggle](#), the youth arm of [Voces de La Frontera](#), a civil and workers' rights group. He's a slightly stout guy in his twenties. Old enough to have a thick brown beard, but young enough to have a relaxed and humorous rapport with the teens.

Antreassian:

So they did an initial survey that was sort of asking what issues students cared about in the school, in the world. In their city. And so a lot of things, different things came up, but lunch was like something that came up in almost every single one.

Terrell:

Students say the meals offered in the district are unappetizing, highly processed, and poorly prepared. The YES members want meals that are more reflective of their cultures, that are respectful of the dietary needs of Muslim students, and are cooked fresh at each school.

Antreassian:

So are there chapter reports? I don't know if anyone has an update on how many petitions we circulated this year.

Students:

We had a bunch. Me, me and Eliza was doing all day Friday while I started.

...I think we had like a hundred. I had...

...I did it all day though... from first hour to last hour ...

All I said was the school lunch food is nasty. Sign it. And they did...

Antreassian:

Yeah, there you go.

Terrell:

At the meeting, YES members started out talking about a new petition, but quickly veered off into what students ate that day, or at least what they were offered.

Students:

It was like a nasty Sloppy Joes today!

Yes. It was pork sliders. They were slimy.

Honestly...

... they were gross....

Terrell:

Their complaints sound a lot like students in Santa Ana, California, where we also reported on the state of school lunches for this series.

Josh Goddard:

Hello, Martita. How are you doing my friend?

Martita:

Good morning. Freezing. It is freezing.

Goddard:

Your hands are always so cold. This is Jessica...

Terrell:

Santa Ana Unified's central kitchen is a noisy warehouse building right under an airport flight path. Josh Goddard is [the head of the nutrition department](#). I met him at the Southern California district on a chilly February morning.

Goddard:

Anytime you wanna stop, just just ... Otherwise I will keep going.

Terrell (in recording):

So I see a bunch of trucks here backed up into, so this, this is where food is coming out or food is coming in?

Goddard:

This is food going out. So these are our drivers. They're loading up their truck, going for their second run to the schools.

Terrell:

[Santa Ana](#) and [Milwaukee](#) are both high-poverty school districts that utilize [a special provision in the National School Lunch Act](#) to offer universal free meals to all students. The menus at both districts also feature some of the same prepackaged items. Like [a grilled cheese sandwich from Integrated Food Services](#), a company contracted to take USDA commodity cheese and process it into easily servable school-lunch items. The sandwiches are billed as "Hot Off The Grill", but come individually wrapped in plastic and are reheated in a microwave. While Josh takes me around the workspace, he tells me about giving a tour to a new hire who was a graduate of the school district.

Goddard:

On his first day I was showing him around the central kitchen and he stopped and he said, do we cook anything here? And I said, "No, we don't, Jesse!" And that comment has haunted me ever since.

Terrell:

The central kitchen is mostly responsible for receiving giant shipments of frozen, prepackaged food.

Goddard:

So this facility serves two functions. It's preparing—modifying foods to be sent out for consumption by the students—but it's also serving as a central distribution center for all of our kitchens' supply needs. So everything from paper to plates to hair nets.

Terrell (in recording):

And it's big enough that someone's driving around a little, uh...

Goddard:

A forklift. Yeah. That's Arnold doing his thing on the forklift.

Terrell (in recording):

And that was a forklift of Tony's Galaxy Pizza going into the freezer, I'm guessing?

Goddard:

Tony's, Tony's days are numbered.

Terrell:

Did you say Tony's days are numbered?

Goddard:

They sure are. Yeah.

Terrell:

There's nothing particularly wrong with Tony's pizza, except that it's the kind of highly processed food that, in Episode 1, Josh talked about wanting to get off school menus. That task took on a new sense of urgency after a special school board meeting in 2021. The meeting was for parents to talk about COVID safety precautions. But a lot of the parents didn't want to talk about masks. They wanted to talk about food.

Goddard:

These parents said, "Why are you sending home hamburgers every day?" "Why are you serving corn dogs every day?" "Why are you serving frozen pizzas every day?" "Have you read the ingredients?" They had plastic wrappers with them and they were showing what was in it, you know?

Terrell (in recording):

What were you thinking or how did you feel at that moment or, or when you went home that night?

Goddard:

I felt ashamed.

Terrell:

Josh wants school meals in Santa Ana to reflect the rich and meaningful culinary traditions of the Latino families that make up the majority of students and workers in the district. He says there's no way to really do that without cooking food locally.

Goddard:

To assume we can delegate that to a manufacturer, right. And that a pizza or a perfect tamale is going to show up that exactly reflects our local identity, we're dreaming. We have to do it ourselves. So it is this idea of self-determination, right? That we have to be guided by.

Terrell:

This, of course, is not how the system works right now.

Goddard:

Look at a menu from a public school district on the East Coast. Now look at a menu from a public school district in the Midwest and in the Pacific Northwest, you're gonna find the same pizza, the same quesadilla, the same sandwich, made by either the same manufacturer or somebody that's manufactured, a very, very similar product.

Terrell:

Josh thinks people should be suspicious of the fact that school districts across the country are serving up the same food.

Goddard:

That can be an entry point towards understanding what's wrong. Somebody other than us is planning our menus right now.

Terrell:

To understand why schools in Wisconsin, and California, and New Jersey are all serving the same types of prepackaged foods, we have to look back to the 1960s.

[Archive Clip:](#)

Here are the children, tomorrow's adults. Tomorrow's doctors and nurses. Writers and lawyers. Tomorrow's spacemen.

Terrell:

That clip is from [a film from the U.S. Department of Agriculture](#) produced in 1966 to promote the National School Lunch Program. It starts out with mostly white students getting off a school bus, and then shows them enjoying what the narrator calls a nutritious "Type A" meal at the school cafeteria.

Archive Clip:

Type A, they're called. Meats and other foods rich in protein. A combination of fruits and vegetables, bread, butter, milk. Type A.

Terrell:

The film then cuts to a different school kitchen where a group of Black women are spreading mayonnaise on stacks of white bread and assembling what appears to be bologna and cheese sandwiches for bagged lunches. The difference between the two scenes—a white school where hot meals are cooked on site and a central kitchen where women of color are preparing cold sandwiches for schools that don't have proper facilities—illustrates some of the inequity baked into the program in its early days. But it also offers a glimpse into political aspects of the 1960s that pushed districts into buying premade lunch items from companies like Kellogg's, Schwan's and PepsiCo.

Here's Jennifer Gaddis, an [associate professor](#) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and author of the book [“Labor of Lunch.”](#)

Jennifer Gaddis:

Basically at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s, there was a tremendous amount of community activism and pressure being put on USDA and Congress to just deal with the fact that they had actually been very, like, racist in their implementation of this program and start providing school meals to communities that had lacked access.

Terrell:

[The rollout of the National School Lunch program](#) was extremely uneven in the first few decades. Middle class white students in the suburbs often had great programs. The majority of the kids who were not getting a school lunch in the 1960s were low-income students of color in urban schools. After a lot of community organizing, [Congress made some changes](#) to the school lunch law to guarantee that school districts provided free or reduced-priced meals for students whose parents were under a certain income bracket. This resulted in a big expansion of the lunch program, but the change wasn't accompanied by a flood of money for districts to build kitchens. What lawmakers did do was [allow private companies to start servicing school lunch](#) programs — something that had been banned in the original legislation.

Gaddis:

Here comes all these private food manufacturers who are like, “Hey, if you don't have, you know, facilities, don't worry about it. We can help you figure out how to still actually feed all of these people in public schools who now suddenly have a legal right to free school meals.”

Terrell:

School districts bought in. Older school buildings often hadn't been built with a space for cooking in mind, and adding full-service kitchens would have required major renovations. Instead, schools were encouraged to experiment with cost-saving measures such as preparing meals in one central location, like the school in the film. Or purchasing premade meals and reheating them on site—an option that required buying a few ovens, but not building an entire kitchen.

Gaddis:

We just saw this huge takeover of the school lunch program by a lot of these for-profit manufacturers.

Terrell:

And there's some important cultural context here, too.

Gaddis:

You have to kind of also think about how the 1950s and 60s were this era where, you know, it was this huge proliferation of, like, the, the packaged food industry. And a lot of these companies had really learned how to serve a lot of people in a very small environment.

Terrell:

This was the era that also introduced the country to single-serve [airline meals](#), [TV dinners](#), and manufactured meals for [eating at home](#).

[Archive ad clip:](#)

Announcing the greatest advance in baby food in 30 years. Bird's Eye Frozen Instant Baby foods...

Gaddis:

There had been just a lot of innovations in terms of like food processing and preservation technology.

Archive clip continued:

...Bird's Eye's unique new dry freezing process...

Terrell:

And as participation grew in the National School Lunch Program, particularly in dense urban areas, so did big food companies' interest in it.

Gaddis:

They kind of saw that as an opportunity to not only have a new market that they could sell to, but also access to a new generation of consumers whose tastes they could really start to try to shape within the school cafeteria setting.

[Archive McDonald's ad:](#)

Introducing the world's newest, silliest, and hamburger-eating-est clown... Ronald McDonald! Now where is that clown...

Terrell:

The National School Lunch Program [became law in 1946](#), nine years before the first McDonald's opened. Eight years before the first Burger King.

[Archive Burger King ad:](#)

Introducing that king of fun, the one who's OK with us kids, the magic Burger King.

Terrell:

By 1977, Americans were spending [more than 17 billion dollars on fast food a year](#). American diets were changing. And so were school lunches.

Len Frederick ([TV program](#)):

Fast food companies spent last year over [one quarter of a billion dollars](#) re-educating our children to eat fast foods. And like it or not, they're changing the eating habits of our kids.

Terrell:

That's Len Frederick, a businessman who [made national headlines in the 1970s](#) for turning the school lunch program in Las Vegas into a fast food operation. A place where kids could select from combo meals modeled after McDonald's and Burger King, but with nutritionally fortified milkshakes and hamburgers and french fries.

Frederick (TV program):

You're not going to take space age teenagers and feed them a horse-and-buggy lunch.

Terrell:

Frederick spoke on [a 1977 television news program about the state of school lunch](#). Sitting across from him was Thomas Farley, [the head of the nutrition program in Milwaukee](#), where homestyle meals were cooked from scratch daily at each of the district's 145 schools. Groups of kids helped select the menu, but school lunch workers cooked only one entree a day. And the focus was on teaching kids how to eat well for the rest of their lives. Here's Farley:

Thomas Farley (TV program):

If you give them a chance, they will tell you a lot more things that they prefer rather than the stereotype which the food manufacturing companies would like to make you think they do like.

Terrell:

Milwaukee was among the places that pushed back on the corporate food encroachment. The district was focused on school lunch as a way to create lifelong health. Like many school districts, Milwaukee had been rife with inequity in its school lunch rollout. It took decades for all of its schools to build kitchens, and the city was determined to use them well. Here's Anita Garrett again, a grandmother in Milwaukee who has a very different memory of school lunch in the district.

Garrett:

Oh, the Salisbury steak. I could remember all of them. I remember the fish sandwich, the Salisbury steak. The lasagna. They made that homemade pizza, which I do sometimes do make that homemade pizza. All that stuff, that aroma. It was just warming.

Terrell:

By the mid-2000s, [some Milwaukee schools had moved away from scratch cooking on site](#). Even school districts that had fought for proper kitchen facilities started to notice that ordering prepackaged meals and transitioning to a central kitchen model was a lot cheaper. The death knell for the scratch cooking program came in the wake of the Great Recession, when the school district faced severe budget cuts. School leaders determined that moving to a central-kitchen model and relying more on prepackaged meals would [save \\$90 million dollars over 15 years](#). Today, Garrett says her five grandchildren won't eat what the district serves, even though it's free. She visits local food pantries almost five days a week to make sure she has enough food to cook from scratch that they can take to school.

Garrett:

We're having a problem with school lunches. We're having a problem with, um, food insecurities. Lunch here in Milwaukee needs a change. I think they need to go back to our old school – I think they need to go back to home cooked meals.

Terrell:

At the Milwaukee meeting of Youth Empowered in the Struggle, the teens sit in a circle of folding chairs in a mostly empty basement. Few of them understand the systemic issues behind why their schools rely so heavily on processed foods. They just want the school food to be better.

Antreassian:

Remember, it was like a couple weeks ago, we created a bunch of questions for the cafeteria workers that we wanted to ask them about. Yeah. Should we review some of those?

Terrell:

There's an ice breaker about the kids' favorite shoe brands. And then they start trying to outline questions for school nutrition workers who had thus far shown little sympathy for the students' complaints.

Cameron Mitchell:

Oh, how did they feel about the school vendors? Like, you know, Carla? She's a senior. She sell, like, cake pops and cookies and stuff.

Eliza Palacios:

She has her own, like, bakery. It's called Carla's Cake Pops.

Antreassian:

So how do they feel about people selling snacks in the school?

Student:

And there's this other girl who sells snacks outta her locker. She brings a bunch every day. She keeps it stocked. It's like a little shelf in it, like a store shelf.

Terrell:

The school vendors aren't technically allowed on campus, but everyone has a story about where to buy their favorite snacks. The conversation quickly turns to how much the kids spend on alternatives to the free cafeteria food. And what it means for them if they can't afford to bring their own meals.

Villanueva:

I spend a lot of money on bringing food to school cuz I'm, I'm like a really hungry person. I'm always hungry. So I think it's like \$40 a week.

Students:

40 on snacks? Geez....

...I know...

...If I would've had the choice and I had the money, I would at least bring a lotta food.

Villanueva:

I know. I think school food is rancid.

Antreassian:

What do you usually eat?

Student:

Um, I be hungry all day until I go home. But like we live by a lot of food places. I like, get food after school. And I be spending a lot of money on there. I be broke.

Terrell (in recording):

Just out of curiosity, how many of you, so, like, 11 people here right now, how many of you skip lunch like, all the time, or regularly? 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8. Okay. Almost everyone here.

Antreassian:

I think that was everyone here, Who goes to lunch every day?

Students:

Go to lunch? I don't go to lunch.

Antreassian:

You don't?

Student:

Not for the food. Yeah, my friends. That's the only reason.

Antreassian:

Alright.

Terrell:

Ironically, there's actually a lot of pressure on school nutrition leaders to appeal to students' tastes, and compete with fast food restaurants and processed foods marketed to kids.

Katie Wilson:

We're required to get that participation rate up, or we don't have a program at all because I'm based on the money I can bring in each day. I can have the best, most nutritious menu written and those kids can decide they don't wanna come through that line.

Terrell:

This is Katie Wilson, [the Executive Director](#) of the [Urban School Food Alliance](#), a national organization that gathers some of the largest school districts in the country to share best practices and address systemic problems in school nutrition.

Wilson:

They can not eat. They can bring a meal from home. Many school districts allow them to deliver in, at their schools. They can leave campus in many of the districts. So I have to somehow figure out how am I gonna get them through the line?

Terrell:

The proliferation of fast food restaurants in the United States, the increase in marketing of junk food to children in the 80s and 90s ... Katie says those also contributed a lot to the reliance on pre-packaged and processed foods in school cafeterias.

Wilson:

I go to the grocery store and I'm appalled at what people put in their carts, but it's part of the marketing as well. Where are they marketed? To children. Do we really need a breakfast cereal with marshmallows and candy in it? To children? Where are all the cartoon characters on all the products that are marketed to children? And if you look at the label, y'know a lot of those products, you ought to be appalled at what, as a society, we're saying to our children: this is okay to eat. It's not.

Terrell:

Technically, any food that's not raw is a processed food. When you make a recipe in your kitchen, you are making a processed food. But what Katie Wilson and others are talking about is what's better known as highly processed food. [Food that has actually been designed in many instances to be addictive to consumers](#). That has added sugars and fats or fillers to make it cheap. Additives to make sure it lasts an unnaturally long time.

Just like they sold districts in the 60s and 70s on relying on them to solve the lack of school kitchen facilities, private food companies today offer themselves as the best way to draw students to the school lunch line. Len Frederick, [the Las Vegas director in the 70s, said he would go to manufacturing](#)

[companies](#) and ask them to modify existing fast food products to meet school nutrition standards. Like adding more iron to french fries. And this is essentially what food manufacturers do today. Need a whole grain lunch? Here's a pizza with whole grain flour. Here's how Josh Goddard—and other nutrition directors I talked to around the country—say meal planning works in many districts.

Josh Goddard:

Menu planning is manufacturers—brokers—showing up at our door with samples. And saying here's a frozen pizza, here's a frozen burrito. You test it and you tell us which ones you want and in which quantities.

Terrell:

[The federal government imposes strict USDA guidelines](#) on the ingredients schools have to serve in order to get reimbursed for a meal. Each meal also needs to have prescribed ounces of protein, whole grains, dairy. When a school district's meal program gets audited, if the USDA tests a meal and it has even a tiny bit more or less than the required amounts of vegetables or fruit or protein, the district won't get reimbursed for any of the meals that day. Here's Katie Wilson again.

Wilson:

You can't afford not to get your reimbursement rate for that day. So, really, over the decades, this has forced us into these systems of buying the processed, prepackaged food that guarantees us that paperwork that meets exactly what it's supposed to meet. That takes away from scratch, cooking, homemade, buying local.

Terrell:

Meanwhile, school nutrition programs are totally mired in red tape. There are local, state, and federal procurement rules that govern everything a school district purchases for its lunch program. Changing what's on a menu is not as simple as just finding a distributor and ordering a new kind of protein. Every purchase has to comply with a lengthy list of rules. Sometimes it can take up to a year to put a new item on a menu.

Wilson:

We are drowning in paperwork. And we keep hearing, oh, we're gonna reduce paperwork. [It's the paperwork reduction act](#). We have not seen a reduction in school meals. We need to sit down with the decision makers and the stakeholders, and we need to decide how this is gonna work in America so that we can uplift our local farmers, uplift our minority processing plants and help everybody get involved in the system of feeding their community and not penalize the school district if they don't have exactly the one ounce that they're supposed to have in that protein item that day.

Terrell:

In 2013, the Obama Administration [rolled out](#) a lot of new [controversial nutritional requirements](#). The changes were billed as a major overhaul of school meals in the United States. But even though the

federal government had dramatically changed nutrition standards for school meals, it hadn't done anything to address how reliant school districts were on highly processed foods.

That year, I reported on a taste-testing event for students at Santa Ana Unified, where teens got to vote on meals they wanted served in the cafeteria. [The event's goal was to get students more enthusiastic](#) about this big transition to healthier school meals. I didn't understand at the time that although the school district leaders were touting the changes as a major transformation of the school lunch program, everything being served was essentially just a different type of prepackaged food. Whole grain pan dulce, carnitas, quesadillas, bright red whole grain "volcano mini tacos." It was an overhaul of what food manufacturers provided the district. Not a massive change in the system itself. Jennifer Gaddis clearly sees private companies angling to be the solution to regulatory woes and financial constraints in the school lunch program.

Gaddis:

It's 100% still happening.

Terrell:

She says she was talking to a colleague who is working on setting climate goals and getting schools to transition to serving more plant-based meals.

Gaddis:

And we were talking the other day about how it was so frustrating because [Impossible Foods showed up at the SNA conference](#) in California and was like, "Plant based foods? We are the solution for you!"

Terrell:

SNA is the [School Nutrition Association](#).

Gaddis:

If you go to the different food shows where people are kind of testing out new products, they'll even have sample cycle menus using a bunch of their products where if you were really new to school nutrition and didn't understand how to do these things yourself, it might be really tempting to just take one of these menus and be like, "Well, at least I'll be in compliance if I do this. I know I'll be serving things that are legally okay." And so, Impossible Foods presents themselves as this savior of, like, "This is how the plant-based money can be spent on our products. Schools—you should buy our products," instead of doing something that might actually be like scratch cooking or using things that aren't a meat imitation product.

Terrell:

While changes to nutrition standards in the last two decades have made food more nutritious, they might also be backfiring.

Betti Wiggins:

Kids are trained to eat what they see on TV.

Terrell:

Betti Wiggins [is the head of nutrition at the Houston Independent School District.](#)

Wiggins:

And if we've got tasteless food in the cafeteria, they're not going to eat it. They're gonna wait till they get home to go down to the corner store, get beef jerky or whatever else they can find on the shelf and eat, or what they can do, what they can bring into the school in their lunches.

Terrell:

And if kids don't eat in school, then kids who don't have a lot of money are going to eat cheap food. Food that has a lot of flavor but not a lot of nutrients. And then, Betti says, that will keep training their palate to like unhealthy food.

Among her colleagues in school nutrition, Betti has a reputation for being a very progressive and forward-thinking leader. She's in her early 70s, has short black hair speckled with gray, and a calm and confident demeanor. Betti has decades of experience running major programs. Lately, she says she's almost had to give up on convincing high school students to eat in the cafeteria because there's so much commercial competition.

Wiggins:

I gotta deal with Uber Eats coming up in my school. I gotta deal with DoorDash, and I even have to deal with principals that have run their own little fundraising shops who do not have to meet the standards that I have to meet. School lunch is not on a level playing field and, you know, to me people are just paying lip service to it. Yes. Get the competitive foods outta our school. Yes. Give us some nutrition standards that are reasonable.

Terrell:

Betti says she tries to improve how things taste by serving as many fresh fruits and vegetables as possible. But she doesn't have the trained staff or facilities to cook protein from scratch. So she depends on what companies offer.

Wiggins:

And I asked manufacturers, "Why do you do this? Why do you take your good name? You know, the food doesn't taste good. You have a hard time preparing it." But they, but what, what am I gonna do? I gotta buy two ounces of protein. Pre-cooked protein. So I'm not talking about fresh chickens and hamburger—something that you can do from scratch and you can change the flavor and the taste profile. I'm talking about pre-cooked items that I buy.

Terrell:

Betti tries to focus on [what's called speed-scratch cooking](#). Emphasizing fresh fruits and vegetables, taking frozen proteins that aren't already made into things like mini volcano tacos and making entrees out of them.

Wiggins:

The best thing that happened is the emphasis on fresh fruits and vegetables. And I'm looking at plant-based as well, cuz I think it might taste better.

Terrell:

And she focuses on nutrition education. She recently hired a four-person advertising team to help her promote school lunch to kids. They also help with broader efforts to teach kids about good food -- rather than just trying to get them to swallow what her team dishes up.

Wiggins:

And that's the reason I really want my kids to have more than a consumer relationship to food. So if I can't catch them at the school counters, I've taught them enough that when they go out, home, and they go into the community, they can impact what their families are eating.

Terrell:

Betti says she's too nervous to try to transition fully to scratch cooking. There are too many safety risks involved in cooking raw meat. Too much training that would need to be done to pull such an endeavor off. Back at Santa Ana Unified, Josh Goddard is firmly convinced that cooking meals from raw ingredients is the best way for his district to move forward. Josh takes me to a corner of the central kitchen where things are set up to do more than just combine frozen ingredients.

Goddard:

So these [large Revent ovens](#), we're gonna be using this technology to help us produce some larger scale, scratch cooking. And go see what chef Jennifer's working on over here.

Jessica Terrell:

Jennifer Minichiello, [a newly hired chef](#), was standing at a counter chopping vegetables. She wore a black chef's coat and white apron, her blonde hair tucked up in a plastic hair net, a dark face mask covering her smile. She doesn't have much room to work, just a few metal islands on wheels, pushed together in a corner of the central kitchen—around the corner from where women on assembly lines were measuring out portions of frozen corn.

Minichello:

So we're testing out three different types of fajita mixes that we could possibly use. So these that came in frozen from commodities, and these are the ones we'll be buying probably next year. That's our hope. Because we can get 'em at a cheaper price.

Terrell:

Santa Ana wants to start using more local produce as part of its push to bring back scratch cooking. So chef Jennifer is cutting up vegetables and freezing them to see what they taste like when processed on site.

Minichello:

So it's not just which one is the best flavor, but then which one's gonna hold up the best. Also, once we go down the line and add it to the actual dish that it's supposed to be added to.

Terrell:

Before the scratch cooking program, Josh tried something else.

Goddard:

We had a chef look at a frozen pizza to see if he could make the frozen pizza any better. Oh, maybe it's the settings on the oven, you know, or the way it was defrosted. No chance. It was sad. By the end of the day we were all in tears because we're like, what are we doing here? We, we can't—once something is manufactured, we can't un-manufacture it.

Terrell:

So Josh and his team decided that the only way to get the school lunch they wanted was to figure out a way to cook it themselves. Today, [they're using a state-of-the-art kitchen at a newly constructed high school to prove the value of cooking food on site](#), and of serving dishes that mean something to students in the majority-Latino district. They started in 2021 with two days of scratch cooking a week.

Goddard:

We're bringing in raw beef, raw pork, raw vegetables, everything raw. And we're making birria on Thursdays. We're making carnitas on Fridays. We're doing fresh rice, fresh beans, all from scratch.

Terrell:

The process to make those two dishes is laborious. It takes three days to make the birria, a traditional Mexican beef stew. So far, he seems to have the support of workers. This is Gloria Torres, a [nutrition supervisor](#) at the high school rolling out scratch cooking.

Gloria Torres:

So the kids love it because, I mean, you know, it has more nutrients and everything is fresh, so they love the food that we serve.

Terrell:

At the lunch line reviews are mostly positive, though still a bit mixed. One student says she prefers to skip lunch. It doesn't taste as good as what she gets at home. Another student has pretty rave reviews.

Student:

I just had some birria up here. It's pretty good. At least. At least, the only thing good in this cafeteria, honestly. Only the birria is bomb as hell. Yeah. Out of everything, this is my favorite lunch out of every day.

Terrell:

As he builds a new food culture and improves cooking practices, Josh is visiting nearby farms to try to source local ingredients. He's also hiring new chefs, sampling new recipes. Trying to figure out how to create a school lunch program that will keep students happy, offer more nutritious meals, reflect local values, and source food in a more sustainable way.

The national school lunch program is not really set up to support meal programs like this one. Most of the schools in Santa Ana [don't have good kitchen facilities](#). Or the funding for labor-intensive cooking. Or the money to pay for fresh higher quality ingredients.

Goddard:

Everybody is anxious about whether or not we can pull this off, cuz at the end of the day, every quarter, when we look at our budget, we're crossing our fingers that we've theoretically mapped all this out. The budget is going to get tight. We're gonna have to fake it for a little while. And just hope that by the time we get there, the numbers all work out.

Terrell:

Josh says in the process of putting birria on the menu, he's been most moved by the conversations that have taken place in the school kitchen. There have been friendly arguments over whether the beans are authentically Mexican or if the recipe is more Tex-Mex. The women cooking the meals have shared memories of cooking similar meals at home, talked about whose family recipe is the best and what region of Mexico is most reflected in the dish. There's power in food that can help form -- and later conjure -- memories. It's hard to put a price tag on that, but that's exactly what Josh has to do. He has to keep retooling his budget week after week, and hope that this kind of cooking will draw enough students to the cafeteria for the program to break even.

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This episode of Left Over was edited by Monica Lopez and Juleyka Lantigua, who is the executive producer. Our sound designer is Erica Huang. Our fact checker is Kate Gallagher. Our associate producer is Anne Lim. This episode was reported and produced by me, Jessica Terrell. Paulina Velasco is our managing producer. Kori Doran designed our cover art. Emma Forbes is our digital designer. Additional

recording in Houston was provided by Sara Willa Ernst. Our theme music was composed and performed by Blue Dot Sessions. I'm Jessica Terrell. Thank you for listening.

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