

Cooking Up A Revolution

At age 64, celebrated chef Alice Waters has a new mission: educating the nation's youth about food

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Celebrated chef Alice Waters started a food revolution more than 35 years ago with the opening of her Berkeley, Calif., restaurant, Chez Panisse. She began serving up organic and locally grown food and put what came to be known as California cuisine on the culinary map.

Now, at age 64, she is determined to plant the seeds of a different kind of food revolution -- one that involves children.

The Edible Schoolyard, an educational program started by Ms. Waters in the mid-1990s, seeks to change how kids think about food, learning and life. The prototype, developed at the Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School in Berkeley, features a one-acre organic garden, where students plant and harvest food, and tend a small flock of chickens. In addition, in a kitchen classroom adjacent to the garden, the children create recipes, cook the food, set tables, share meals and conversation, clean up and ready the compost.

Ms. Waters would like to see Edible Schoolyard sites throughout the country and have "edible education" (as she terms it) integrated into a national school curriculum. To that end, she now spends the bulk of her days as the program's ambassador -- traveling, speaking and raising money.

To learn more about Ms. Waters's work -- and the challenges involved in following a new path in later life -- we recently spoke with her at Chez Panisse, days before she traveled to Ireland to speak to groups there about edible education. Here are excerpts from our discussion:

The Genesis of the Idea

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL: *How did you come up with the idea for the Edible Schoolyard?*

MS. WATERS: It was an evolution. I saw from the experience of running this restaurant that we could support the people who were taking care of the land. We bought our food with intention. We had built a community of people we cared about -- and who cared about us -- around a restaurant. It was a very positive thing that had happened without my really thinking about it at the beginning.

When I had a kid I started thinking about her future and realized that we couldn't be an island unto ourselves. We had this little perfect world of food and community, where the values that I think are so important were shared. I thought, "We have to educate the population of this country."

Way back when, I taught school. I have always believed in public education, it being the one place where you can touch every single child. So if there's something that you would like to tell every single child or communicate, what better place than the public schools?

WSJ: *Why a program with food as a teaching tool?*

MS. WATERS: Eating opens up your senses. You're touching, tasting, smelling and looking. It opens up your mind; not just to the food, but to everything -- to the world out there, and to nature. I am a Montessori teacher, and it's really a Montessori philosophy: the education of the senses. I really believe that through this interactive pedagogy -- this hands-on experience in the garden and kitchen -- kids learn because it's fun.

WSJ: *What do you hope to accomplish with the Edible Schoolyard?*

MS. WATERS: You learn from the cycle of nature -- the planting of seeds, the blossoming, and the dying and going back into the earth. It's very important that we digest that. Kids like being outside. They've been deprived of an experience with nature. And they love to eat.

Eighty-five percent of the kids in this country don't eat with their families. How do you take care of the kids? I could hardly take care of myself and my kid, except that I had a restaurant so she could come here and I could sit down with her at dinner. I think of all the families that don't have that.

Why aren't we teaching our kids to get along with one another, or what it is to be married to someone and what it is to take care of children? You learn all of those things you need to learn at the table -- that sharing, that caring, that comes with the food.

WSJ: *What is it about doing this at 64 that makes it easier, harder or, perhaps, more rewarding?*

MS. WATERS: I am an elder statesman. I have a platform. I've been doing this restaurant for 36 years. I've been doing the program in the school for 12 years. That can be meaningful to certain people. A lot of my friends now are chief executive officers of businesses and engaged in politics. There's access to the powers that be. We need that in order to make this kind of change. So I'm taking advantage of it. I'm helping in any way I can by opening up the biggest doors I can open up.

A White House Garden

WSJ: *You approached Bill Clinton when he was president. What did you want?*

MS. WATERS: We want a garden on the White House lawn. We want somebody to symbolically show that we want to become stewards of the land.

This country was based on a nation of farmers. We have abandoned them, and we need to come back and support them because they're the people who are really nurturing us.

We can rebuild the economy in this way -- the way that Chez Panisse did. We have our own system. We gave our money directly to those people who are taking care of the land, and they gave us the most beautiful food. The reputation of this restaurant comes from that experience, that economic interchange.

WSJ: *You were far ahead of your time in your thinking about food in the early 1970s when you opened Chez Panisse. How has your thinking about food changed over the years?*

MS. WATERS: It really hasn't changed. I go back and think about what I wanted at the beginning, and it's the same thing that I want now.

WSJ: *Which is?*

MS. WATERS: I want to live in a way that is stimulating and connected to a big picture of how we can share this world. It's the way that I felt when I went to France for the first time. I said, "I want to live like this." It wasn't really about the food. Food opened the door. Food wasn't anything that people were talking about all day long in France. It's just that they enjoyed their time around the table with their family. They liked going shopping and getting their hot baguette in the morning. They understood something about moderation, about balance. It affects everything that is going on in the world.

Back to the Future

WSJ: How are you involved with the Edible Schoolyard?

MS. WATERS: We're looking for places to make models around the country. That's the big work that I'm engaged with. So I always go back and touch that experience of the kids as often as I can. Sometimes I'm [at the middle school in Berkeley] a lot during the week, but I'm not teaching there. I'm not on the front lines. I'm visiting and talking with people about it because I want edible education to become the No. 1 priority in the country. I want to feed every single child in the public school system in America.

I'm always surprised when I go [to the school] and see kids who are having a great time -- who want to sit around a table, have a conversation, pass the food, wash dishes and sweep a floor, work in the garden and compost. It's magic. This isn't an idea that I dreamed up. This is the way people have been thinking about food since the beginning of time. I'm just trying to get back [to a time] before the globalization of food interrupted our world.

WSJ: There's a lot of ego involved with being a chef. Do you think ego becomes less important as you get older?

MS. WATERS: A lot less important. I don't want this to be my own work. I was doing my own work in my 30s and 40s. I can only do so much. But if I work with a lot of other people, we can make something that's greater than the sum of the parts.

WSJ: Do you feel a sense of urgency about passing along the so-called torch to the younger generation?

MS. WATERS: Absolutely -- and of my time here on the planet. I am very hopeful about this younger generation.

WSJ: The Edible Schoolyard has all the makings of a never-ending project. How will you know when your work on it is done?

MS. WATERS: When the president of the U.S. says, "We want to put a program into the public school system -- in every public school in America -- that feeds all of our children, is the No. 1 priority, and edible education is embedded within it." [That's when] I will see that I have planted the seeds of something that can be accomplished.