



A fresh voice for better school lunches

Local leader in natural meats and cheeses wants to change nutrition education

BY LOIS HEYMAN • STAFF WRITER • MARCH 17, 2009

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BRIDGEWATER — Can you imagine a meat company promoting a diet with less meat in it? Isn't that like the old gimmick of Macy's sending customers to Gimbel's? It worked for Macy's, but Applegate Farms in Bridgewater isn't sending people to a competing meat company. Its mission is nothing less than changing the way Americans eat meat.

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Operating on the belief healthy eating habits must be developed from a young age, the natural and organic meat and cheese company, headquartered on Route 202, has partnered with Philadelphia's Food Trust to sponsor the Kindergarten Initiative at Van Derveer Elementary School in Somerville.

The program supplies healthy snacks in the classroom and takes the children on field trips to farms, where they can learn exactly where fresh food comes from.

Applegate Farms' management hopes its example will encourage other companies to adopt other Central Jersey schools, where students might never have eaten fresh baby greens or slices of

organic apples.

"You can't believe how exciting it is to hear the students chant "apples" when their snack from the farm arrives," Van Derveer teacher Nancy Kishbaugh says. "Imagine, 5- and 6-year-olds cheering for apples instead of cookies."

MYSTERY MEAT MEMORIES

This week, Applegate Farms is kicking off a nationwide multimedia contest, "Fresh Voices for Fresh Choices," in tandem with the Healthy Schools Campaign, to answer the question, "What is your most vivid memory of school food?"

Participants of all ages have the chance to win prizes by submitting writing, artwork, photos or videos by May 1.

Through these school-lunch memories, Applegate Farms and the Chicago-based campaign aim to spotlight the lack of nutrition in most school-lunch menus and get people to support the reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act, a federal bill that will determine how school food policy is reshaped.

"We're actually a pro-vegetarian meat company," Applegate founder and CEO Stephen McDonnell says. "We don't think meat has to be at the center of every meal. People should eat less meat but enjoy it more. That's the essence of what good food enjoyment is supposed to be. I would rather have a customer tell me he only

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Stephen McDonnell is the CEO of Applegate Farms, a Bridgewater-based company aimed at producing healthier food for kids.

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Stephen McDonnell of Applegate Farms talks about "Fresh Voices for Fresh Choices," a campaign that hopes to revolutionize the food served in schools.

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McDonnell knows of what he speaks; now 54, he became a vegetarian in college, but returned to meat-eating after realizing [bacon](#) and roast beef put too much sparkle in his diet to do away with it completely. His personal quest to create a revolution in natural food marketing is documented in a whimsical series of small paintings that adorn Applegate Farms' offices.

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Painted by his three teenage daughters and his wife, Jill, each is captioned with a fact about McDonnell's life, and together they form McDonnell's biography, folk-art style. The canvases outline his childhood ("Stephen eats roast beef every Sunday"), his conversion to vegetarianism ("Stephen eats granola at Hampshire") and back again ("Stephen loves meat").

SIGNATURE HOT DOG

"Of course, as soon as you declare yourself, medical issues crop up," McDonnell says, and so his high cholesterol reinforced his desire to run a business that could supply food for a healthy diet with moderate amounts of safe, high-quality meat.

He bought the Jugtown Mountain Smokehouse in Flemington, which already was smoking nitrite-free bacon, and with the former owner's son, Chris Ely, built a company with national distribution that raises animals humanely and without antibiotics or growth hormones.

They developed a nitrite-free, organic hot dog, a signature product McDonnell sees as a key player in helping families transition to a healthier way of eating.

"These are for people like me, who want to feel that if they eat meat, it isn't filled with ingredients that are bad for them. They're for the Wal-Mart shopper who's struggling and whose child was just diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes but wants to eat [hot dogs](#)," McDonnell says.

For that parent, buying a package (but not two) of Applegate Farms' organic, antibiotic-free hot dogs might be the only way of getting a tasty, but healthy protein into her child, McDonnell says. The last painting, depicting thank-you letters pouring in from grateful moms, shows he's on the right track.

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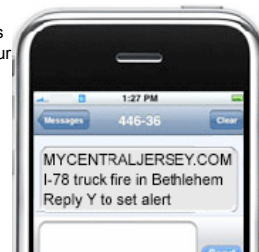
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Additional health concerns will launch two new Applegate products, antibiotic-free chicken patties and gluten-free breaded chicken nuggets, into grocers' freezer cases in May.

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The chicken in these — like the animals that provide the rest of the company's line of ham, turkey, sausages, bacon and salami — are raised exclusively on vegetarian feed, free of antibiotics and chemical preservatives, in a network of 300 small family farms. Applegate Farms' yogurt cheese is made without gluten or lactose and contains active probiotic cultures.

Responding to an increasing population with celiac disease fits in with McDonnell's commitment to serve those who are passionate about eating despite food allergies.

"We listen to what they say they need. An estimated one in seven people is considered gluten-sensitive, even if they don't test positive for

the disease," he says. "We have worked very hard to create a gluten-free option that is just as delicious as our other products. We're very picky about taste, and the rice and corn crust on these nuggets tastes just as good as the ones with gluten."

More information on Applegate Farms' products, how to enter the "Fresh Voices for Fresh Choices: Memories of School Food" contest or how to sign a petition in support of the Child Nutrition Act is available by visiting www.applegatefarms.com.

Lois Heyman: 908-512-2731; lheyman@MyCentralJersey.com. Visit *The Food Chain* blog at <http://blogs.mycentraljersey.com/foodchain>.

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