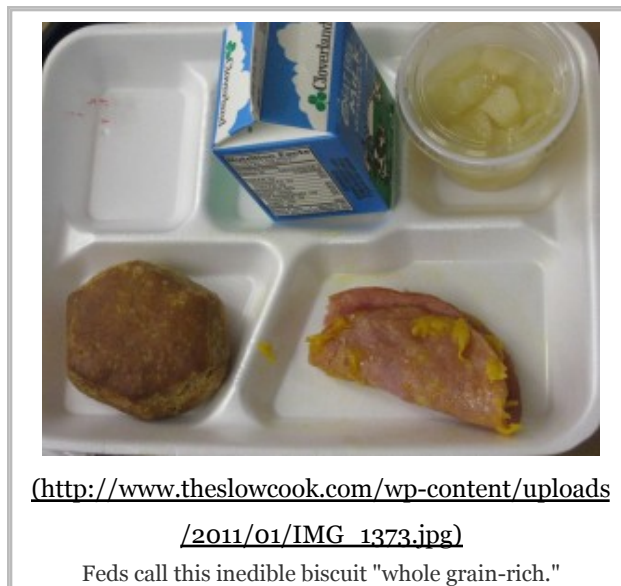


The Truth About “Whole Grains” in School Meals (<http://www.theslowcook.com/2011/01/27/the-truth-about-whole-grains-in-school-meals/>)

January 27th, 2011 by Ed Bruske · [kids](http://www.theslowcook.com/category/kids/) (<http://www.theslowcook.com/category/kids/>), [school food](http://www.theslowcook.com/category/school-food/) (<http://www.theslowcook.com/category/school-food/>)



If the U.S. Department of Agriculture has its way, kids will soon be seeing lots more whole grain food on their cafeteria trays—up to 80 percent more at breakfast under the agency’s **proposed new meal guidelines** (<http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/2011/pdf/2011-485.pdf>) [PDF].

But as my colleague [Lisa Suriano](http://www.theslowcook.com/2011/01/24/whats-really-behind-whole-grains-in-school-food/) (<http://www.theslowcook.com/2011/01/24/whats-really-behind-whole-grains-in-school-food/>) pointed out in this space recently, if you thought that meant spelt and quinoa suddenly making an appearance in the nation’s lunch rooms, you might want to re-assess. In fact, federal rules permit products containing just 51 percent “whole grain” flour to be classified as “whole grain.”

Forget the Middle Eastern tabouleh. More likely, what kids will be served is lots more dinner rolls, hamburger buns, muffins and pizza crusts with added fiber. That would be the new definition of “healthy.”

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved the 51 percent rule after the food industry petitioned

the government in 1999. The USDA has its own euphamistic turn of phrase for these fiber-boosted buns and crusts. It calls them “whole grain-rich.”

Ironically, the feds want schools to substantially boost “whole grain-rich” foods that contain 49 percent starchy white flour at the same time they propose cutting way back on “starchy vegetables” such as potatoes. Schools would be limited to only two weekly servings of things like french fries and potato wedges.

Not surprisingly, wheat is one of the most heavily subsidized crops in the U.S.—wheat farmers received more than \$2.2 billion in taxpayer funds in 2009—while potatoes aren’t. You can also add to the list of un-subsidized crops most other healthful whole grains—quinoa, barley, amaranth, to name a few—which makes them much more expensive than “whole grain-rich” products.

The only actual whole grain the USDA makes available to schools through its commodities program is brown rice, and you don’t see that on school menus very often. Of the 48 grain products on the USDA’s list of commodity school foods (http://www.fns.usda.gov/fdd/schfacts/rpts/allfacts_bytitle_grains.pdf) [PDF], 17 fall under the “white flour” category and 12 under white rice. The USDA only lists three brown rice products.

The proposed meal guidelines even make a special allowance for grain-based desserts, although elsewhere the USDA says it wants to limit sugar on school menus.

According to Lisa Suriano (<http://www.veggiecation.com/>), a nutritionist and school food educator, schools could prepare a half-cup dish of bulgur wheat for 24 cents per serving. But most schools have only \$1 or less to spend on ingredients for each lunch meal. Congress, while calling for new meal standards that are bound to jack up the price of meals, only provided 6 cents in its most recent re-authorization of the federally-subsidized meals program.

Working extra fiber into school menus is only the first hurdle. The real trick is getting kids to eat it. They happen to love potatoes and rather dislike whole grains, although these do go down easier when smothered in cheese, pizza sauce and slices of pepperoni.

In Boulder, Col., schools, cooks put tabouleh—made of bulgur wheat, parsley and tomatoes—on the salad bar on pizza days because the preferred pizza crust does not contain whole grain flour. When tomatoes and cucumbers fell out of season in the fall, they switched to an Asian bulgur salad with carrots, peas and a soy-based sauce.

“I can’t say either one has been super popular, but at least we’ve been able to introduce these items to

our students,” said chef Brandy Dreibelbis, who develops recipes for Boulders schools. “We stuck with the bulgur wheat, because of the low cost.’

“My hope is that someday we will be able to introduce a quinoa dish to the kids,” Dreibelbis added. “I think we could be a little more creative with this ingredient, plus the healthy benefits are amazing. But unfortunately it comes down to the cost and quinoa is still slightly more expensive than bulgur.”

Dreibelbis said she recently tested several commercial brands of whole grain bread sticks, but even they come with sticker shock.

“I’m sure that the students would love these with their pasta, but once again it comes down to cost,” she said. “These breadsticks would add an additional eight to 12 cents per meal. When you have such a limited amount to spend, even eight cents adds up quickly.”

Ann Cooper, who runs food services for Boulder schools, said they stopped serving whole wheat pasta because the kids didn’t like it. But if the USDA rules go into effect as written, the regular pasta will no longer be permitted.

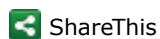
“I’m trying to figure out the pasta piece,” Cooper said.

Here in D.C., I recently noticed a “whole grain-rich” biscuit being served for breakfast at my daughter’s elementary school alongside something called “turkey cheese melt.”

(<http://betterdcschoolfood.blogspot.com/2011/01/whats-for-breakfast-turkey-cheese-melt.html>)

The processed turkey slices speckled with melted cheddar were merely unappetizing. The kids picked off the cheese with their fingers to get at the meat. The biscuit...Well, it was hardly recognizable. I happen to love a fluffy white biscuit. What would a traditional southern breakfast be without one? This thing was simply inedible. It looked like an old horse turd.

Some food traditions are better left unchanged—even at school.



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[Ugly but Good: Easy Beef Short Ribs \(http://www.theslowcook.com/2011/01/25/ugly-but-good-easy-beef-short-ribs/\)](http://www.theslowcook.com/2011/01/25/ugly-but-good-easy-beef-short-ribs/)

January 25th, 2011 by Ed Bruske · **[Blog \(http://www.theslowcook.com/category/blog/\)](http://www.theslowcook.com/category/blog/)**, **[Recipes \(http://www.theslowcook.com/category/recipes/\)](http://www.theslowcook.com/category/recipes/)**, **[dinner \(http://www.theslowcook.com/category/dinner/\)](http://www.theslowcook.com/category/dinner/)**

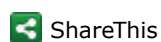


A new item showed up recently in the meat selections at our local dairy: beef short ribs. Since our dairy delivers milk, cheese and meat to our home, we considered this a great development. We love beef short ribs, especially this time of year when braising meat for a long time in the oven is one of our favorite pastimes.

But these short ribs touched off an immediate debate between my wife and I. She thought they weren't thick enough and were cut too small. I was happy just to have a grassfed short rib so easily available when finding short ribs in the store can often be such a hassle. Well, these small-size short ribs swelled into little monsters once I started browning them at the bottom of a heavy braising pot. Still, we often wonder if our dairy spends much time thinking about how their meat products stack up to customers' expectations.

We have a short rib recipe we love seasoned with garam masala. We first saw it in the Union Square Cafe and have been devoted to it ever since. But it does involve a couple of bottles of wine and a long reduction. I wanted something easier. So I turned to the method we use for our braised oxtails—brown the meat, then some aromatic vegetables, add wine and brown stock—and the short ribs came out just fine.

So just follow the recipe [I wrote up here \(http://www.theslowcook.com/2010/12/21/two-day-oxtails/\)](http://www.theslowcook.com/2010/12/21/two-day-oxtails/). While the ribs are cooking in the oven, you can steam some parsnips and turnips on the stove. Mash them fine with some cream and you have a fine side dish to drench with the pot liquor.



What's Really Behind Whole Grains in School Food (<http://www.theslowcook.com/2011/01/24/whats-really-behind-whole-grains-in-school-food/>)

January 24th, 2011 by Ed Bruske · [school food \(<http://www.theslowcook.com/category/school-food/>\)](http://www.theslowcook.com/category/school-food/)



Guest Post

By Lisa Suriano

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has proposed [new school meal guidelines \(<http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/2011/pdf/2011-485.pdf>\)](http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/2011/pdf/2011-485.pdf) [PDF] that call for substantially more whole grains. But if you thought that meant kids would start seeing bulgur and spelt on their cafeteria trays, think again. What it really means are the same old dinner rolls, pizza crusts and bread sticks—only with extra whole wheat flour mixed in.

The federal government allows products that are at least 51 percent “whole grain” to be labeled as such. The only actual grain the USDA sells to schools through its commodity program is brown rice.

The proposed rule change would require that all grain products on school menus qualify as “whole grain-rich” within two years. Schools would have to offer students up to two grain servings for breakfast every day. Currently, schools have a choice of offering a grain or a meat or meat substitute, such as yogurt or cheese.

On the surface, the new rule sounds like positive change. The USDA says it wants to make school food healthier by cutting back on processed foods and introducing more fiber into kids’ diets. In reality, the “whole grain” foods served in school are not always what they seem.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration, in response to a petition filed by the food industry in 1999,

ruled that foods containing 51 percent whole grains could be labeled “whole grain.” As one of the crops heavily subsidized by the federal government, wheat is much cheaper than healthy grains such as quinoa and amaranth that aren’t subsidized. That makes it a perfect candidate for cash-strapped school kitchens.

The question is, how much healthier are those dinner rolls if 49 percent of the flour in them is still refined? Flour and other starchy carbohydrates have been closely linked to the current epidemic of childhood obesity and related health problems, such as type 2 diabetes, hypertension and coronary artery disease.

In fact, one of the things the USDA proposes to do to make school meals healthier is cut back sharply on other starchy foods such as potatoes. Potatoes are another crop the federal government does not subsidize.

The USDA has made previous efforts to promote healthier school food. In 2004, the agency launched The HealthierUS School Challenge (<http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/healthierus/index.html>). Participation in this program is voluntary. Monetary incentives are awarded to schools that meet specific criteria for menu planning, nutrition education and physical activity that go beyond what is required of schools that participate in the traditional National School Lunch Program.

The criteria for grains and breads are these:

- Whole grain food products must be at least the portion size of one Grains/Breads serving as defined by the USDA *Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs* manual.
- Whole grain food products that meet HUSSC criteria are categorized into two groups:
 - o Group A – Food products with whole grain(s) as the primary ingredient by weight (whole grain is first ingredient on list)
 - o Group B – Food products with whole grain(s) as the primary *grain* ingredient by weight . For example: water is the first ingredient, whole grain is the second
- Whole grain food products from Group A must be the majority of whole grain foods offered each week.

While these are effective guidelines in theory, the FDA’s definition of “whole grain” ensures that children only get one-quarter of their grain servings from actual whole grain sources.

There are many other densely nutritious grains available for human consumption—bulgar, wheat

berries, barley, quinoa, millet, to name a few. However, the current system discourages their use and instead provides a loophole for cheap, refined flour.

Of the 48 grain products on the USDA's list of commodity foods available to schools, 17 fall under the "white flour" category and 12 under white rice. The USDA only lists three brown rice products.

The USDA in issuing its new meal guidelines says it will work with schools and manufacturers to develop new whole grain products and recipes.

I've been closely following [Fed Up With Lunch](http://fedupwithschoolunch.blogspot.com/search/label/rice) (<http://fedupwithschoolunch.blogspot.com/search/label/rice>) where a teacher calling herself "Mrs. Q" ate 162 school lunches over the course of a year and blogged about it. In all those meals, rice—mostly white, not brown—was served only seven times.

And even when rice was served, it was accompanied by still more starch in the form of a "whole wheat" bun or breadstick in order to satisfy the USDA's grain requirement for school meals.

As a nutritionist with extensive experience in school food service, I believe it's entirely possible to work within established guidelines, fulfill HealthierUS School Challenge requirements and simultaneously educate young palates about nutrient-packed whole grains.

Why do we grind so much of the nation's wheat crop into flour? There are many other nutritious ways to enjoy wheat.

Bulgur wheat, for example, is full of fiber, potassium and iron. It's parboiled during processing, making it a very quick cooking grain. For the around 24 cents, a half-cup of bulgur wheat could be served for lunch.

Match it with some government black-eyed peas and a piece of barbecued chicken and you have a reimbursable meal that children *will* eat.

Lisa Suriano is the owner and founder of [Veggiecation](http://www.veggiecation.com/) (<http://www.veggiecation.com/>), a curriculum-based lunch program that introduces young children to the nutritious world of vegetables.



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