

The students of Greenfield Elementary may call their beloved and bubbly lunch lady, Salley Young, “Kook,” but they’ll never call her a “slop slinger.”

When the kindergartners burst into the lunchroom of the rural Fairfield, Mont., school at 10:45, they’re greeted with a selection of fresh, locally sourced food, including beef from Salley and her husband, Steve’s, ranch.

Aha moment. The fare for these happy young diners hasn’t always been fresh and local. Before 2006, their lunch fixings were often frozen, processed, and well traveled. And that didn’t sit right with Young.

“Beef is the second-largest industry in our state, yet we ship our beef to the Midwest, comingle it with thousands of other animals, and ship it

►**Large photo:** The wheat for the whole wheat bread in these fresh sandwiches was farmed, harvested, milled, and baked less than 200 miles down the road. ►**Below:** Salley Young keeps money in the community by contracting with local wheat, potato, beef, and other growers.



KEEPING LUNCH LOCAL

This lunch lady fuels learning with fresh, local food



►**Left:** Greenfield kindergartners are all smiles as they enjoy a fresh, local lunch that doesn’t include highly processed classic cafeteria fare.

And it’s 85 percent lean or better, which means that compared to mass-produced beef, there will be more product left in the pan after cooking.”

Once started, Young didn’t stop with the beef. She now contracts with local wheat, potato, cantaloupe, and other growers of local, fresh foods. Plus, students and locals can donate goodies from their gardens.

Knowledge. “People are afraid that if it doesn’t come in on a truck, they can’t serve it,” Young says. But, the USDA says if you wash fresh fruits and vegetables that have never been cut, they are safe to eat. “You just need to know your growers and trust their fertilizer and water sources,” she says.

Garden produce helps education spill over from the classroom to the cafeteria. For example, Young taught students about safe food handling while they helped shuck donated corn. They learned about hand washing and avoiding cross contamination.

Young has worked extensively with the National Farm To School Network to enact these curriculum changes.

Besides our efforts to get local, healthy food to schools, we work to provide agricultural, health, and nutritional education,” says Mary Stein, associate director. “That includes school gardens, field trips, and even cooking lessons.”

This program has gone a long way toward opening young palates to healthy foods, she says. “You can bet a kid who helped plant, nurture, and harvest a carrot will try a bite.”

Young only feeds 70, but her concept works on a larger scale.

“Near Denver there’s a program that serves 5,000 students,” Young says. “One person opened bags of frozen food all day long. In just 3 years they’ve gone to 98 percent cooking from scratch with largely local food. It can be done. And we want to do it. These are our kids we’re feeding.” ■

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►**Above:** Just 5 miles from Salley’s cafeteria, Steve Young feeds the cows that provide high quality beef to Greenfield and other area schools.

all the way back here to our schools,” Young says. “It just seemed crazy.”

In 2006 at a breakout session on the Farm To School Network at a Montana School Nutrition Association conference, Young discovered she didn’t have to bring food in from afar.

“I learned we were allowed to go directly to local growers and purchase food for use in our school,” she says.

She came home determined to get locally raised food into area schools.

Beef was the logical first step for Young. Not only does she raise it, but she’s also witnessed firsthand the negatives of mass-produced beef.

“In 2009 there was a massive beef recall due to E. coli. Schools in our na-

tion had to throw millions of pounds of beef in the trash,” she recalls. “We shouldn’t have to do that.”

The USDA is obligated to take the lowest bid for commodities for the school lunch program, which can result in low-quality product, Young says. But, in Montana, Young can—for a certain percent of supplies—take a local bid that is slightly higher.

Young, along with husband Steve, started by taking one of their own cows to a local USDA-inspected processing facility, and delivering the frozen end product to the school.

“We’re not making a big profit, but we at least get what we would selling at the local stockyard,” Young says.

See the difference. But for the schools, the difference can be significant. Steve recalls that one area school got a load of beef that, no matter how long or to what temperature it was cooked, remained pink throughout.

“Kids went home saying they ate raw beef at school and caused an uproar,” Steve says. That batch of hamburger had too much of the dye used to keep the beef looking fresh. Another trick used to pink the beef back up is adding ice, he says. The Youngs now supply beef to several schools, day cares and assisted living facilities.

“Our beef doesn’t have any dyes, contains no ice, and no added fat,” he says. “All the cuts are ground into hamburger, not just the poor cuts.

By Martha Mintz