



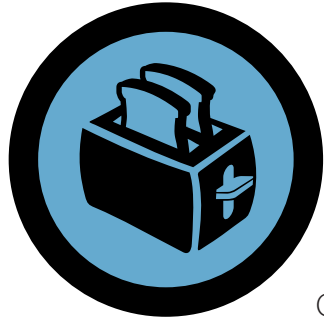
A caption can go right here in this spot explaining who these people are



Get a Load of *This!*

[How a cafeteria based on healthy, local foods convinced the truck drivers at Team Elmer's to abandon the super-size-me lifestyle.]





It seems like you can't travel more than 20 minutes on a Northern Michigan byway without seeing some kind of Team Elmer's truck rumbling by. Colossal blue and gray cabs pulling tandem rigs of gravel, flatbeds loaded with jumbo bulldozers, monster cement trucks, their mondo mixers rotating as the miles spin by. Everything about Elmer's says "big." Big equipment. Big projects. Big ideas. And, of course, big guys eating big meals to keep all the bigness going. So you might not necessarily envision Elmer's as being a hotbed of the healthy, local foods movement. But that is in fact what's going on here in the cafeteria at Elmer's headquarters just south of Traverse City, hub for the 320-person company that supports 13 offices around Michigan.

To check it out (yes, the public can eat here too) you venture from the lobby, down a long hallway, walk downstairs, and discover a cozy cafeteria with green-gray cloth curtains similar to ones your grandmother might have sewn. Employees—most are men in typical construction worker garb—sit at family-style wooden picnic tables. They're gnoshing on homemade pizza made with red and yellow bell peppers, pepperoni and ham, fresh salads, and homemade soup. Sprinkled throughout the café are bowls filled with fresh apples, bananas, peaches and pears.

On this particular day, Chef Ed is in the small kitchen, fixing a special order take-out meal of a tuna wrap made with fresh vegetables for an employee who's about to head out into the field. Out in the cafeteria line, instead of, say, fried donuts on the glass shelves, whole wheat muffins stand at the ready. And though Pepsi and Mountain Dew are available, guys head for the apple, orange and cranberry juice dispensers more often. Some of the employees are sipping on foamy cappuccinos next to cases filled with bottled spring water.

Even more striking, while standing by the salad bar filled with local lettuce, organic nuts, sprouts, and sliced vegetables, men in overalls and flannel shirts are discussing the benefits of healthy eating. One guy is talking about his cholesterol level. Another is looking through a guidebook that's stashed on a shelf by the kitchen to find out how many calories he's consumed that day. A third man, wearing Carhartt blue jeans and a hard hat, is talking about how much weight he lost last month.

The food offerings are not what you'd expect from workers at a company that's known for excavation, earth moving, underground utility and asphalt installation, concrete ready mix, and crane and rigging operations. Although, the food names fit perfectly: The Dozer Breakfast, The Full Load, and The Dozer Loaf (see recipe).

One of the owners of Team Elmer's, Tonya Wildfong, says the

café is at the heart of what some are calling a sea change in the culture of the company. The café not only helps teach employees about nutrition, but also it has become a gathering spot where workers feel taken care of between what are often very difficult jobs. It's what Wildfong calls "a slice of home."

How did Team Elmer's create a cozy café and encourage healthy eating among its employees?

Tonya Wildfong's father, Russell "Butch" Broad, purchased the then-21-year-old company from the founder, Elmer Schaub, in 1977. In 2009, Wildfong and her two brothers, Troy and Todd Broad, bought the company, and carried on her father's tradition of respect and encouragement for the company's employees.

Wildfong's dad would always say, "We have the best people north of the Florida Keys. It's all about people. The dozer is not going to run itself. You really need to get people who are dedicated to quality and service, and when you have them behind you, you can do anything," Wildfong recalls. "And that's what we continue to do," she says.

"The kitchen was my dad's idea," Wildfong says. "We were so busy in 2005, 2006, and 2007. Workers were going on runs to McDonald's to get breakfast and lunch and stopping at convenience stores. We decided to put in a kitchen to save time, make meals more convenient for workers and more efficient for the company."

At first, the café served what most of the workers were accustomed to. Comfort foods. Mashed potatoes and gravy. Grandma's cooking. "Meatloaf ... that was big! A lot of it was heavy foods," Wildfong says. Five dollars bought an entrée and a side of salad or soup.

Right away, there was another benefit besides convenience and expediency. "We saw that when we put in the café that employees could share information and stop and sit down with each other and share stories."

Around the time the kitchen was being installed, the company was also tracking a disturbing trend. Health care costs had been going up and up and managers noticed they had some very unhealthy employees. "We had some obese workers—like almost any population in America," Wildfong says.

That's when Team Elmer's started a wellness program. "We don't require our employees to pay for insurance. It's free," Wildfong says. "But with that, and to try to control costs, we ask them to participate in the wellness program. It means getting educated about your health, finding out about cholesterol levels and other health issues."

When the wellness program came in, the Elmer's kitchen crew realized they were feeding the workers high cholesterol



Broccoli-Bacon Salad

Makes 6, 1-cup servings. 92 calories per serving

- 1 clove garlic, minced
- ¼ cup low-fat mayonnaise
- ¼ cup reduced fat sour cream
- 2 teaspoons cider vinegar
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 4 cups finely chopped broccoli crowns
- 8 ounce can sliced water chestnuts, rinsed and chopped
- 3 slices cooked bacon, crumbled (use turkey bacon for an alternative less saturated fat option)
- 3 tablespoons dried cranberries

Freshly ground pepper to taste

Whisk garlic, mayonnaise, sour cream, vinegar, and sugar in a large bowl. Add broccoli, water chestnuts, bacon, cranberries, and pepper; stir to coat with the dressing.

safety vest as he pours a glass of orange juice from a dispenser, has worked at Team Elmer's for 14 years. He says since the café started operating, he's lost a little bit of weight, but more important, he eats nutritious meals now. "I never ate breakfast until they opened this cafeteria. I eat healthier now. I think there's a new awareness since the wellness program began and the cafeteria opened."

Dan Beckelic, wearing a Team Elmer's camouflage baseball cap and Team Elmer's blue T-shirt, has worked in Elmer's concrete division for 16 years. Until the café came in, his co-workers would just buy food wherever they could—mostly McDonald's or Wendy's. When the café started operating, "We all got healthier," he says. He chuckled as he looked down at his belly. "Not all of us lost weight, but we're healthier! I now eat yogurt and fruit and vegetables, because of the health plan. I've eaten more vegetables in the last three years than I ate my whole life! And because of the café, I even find them good now, too. I even found out that I like green beans. I didn't know I liked green beans before. It's definitely made a difference."

Joel Hensley, a concrete cutter, says there's another benefit from the café: he's getting more sleep. "Normally, I'd stay up late packing up a lunch. I don't have to do that anymore. It's convenient."

Former chef, Jacquie Wilson, who worked at the café from 2008 to 2010, had a major impact on the café and the company. Jacquie loved food and brought her passion for healthy meals to the people at Elmer's. She introduced homemade pizza; brown rice instead of white rice; whole grain pasta rather than egg noodles or white flour pasta. She brought in local vendors both to serve better, fresher produce and to support the local community. She encouraged the workers to try new things.

Now, a duo called Chef Ed and Chef Ben—Ed Karker and Ben Crowe—share command of the kitchen and collaborate on innovative ideas about how to bring more local produce and meat into the mix and make the café more eco-friendly, too. They serve breakfast and lunch to 30 to 50 workers each day, and the café is now open to the public. Some employees who work at

meals. They started looking at new kinds of vegetables and salads with local lettuces instead of iceberg lettuce. They started offering a 500-calorie lunch instead of a 1,000-calorie high cholesterol lunch. Then Elmer's launched the Five Fruits and Vegetables a Day Challenge.

At first, some people were skeptical. "Some of the workers thought healthy eating was rabbit food! But they started to understand. It's a different way of thinking about food," she says.

The café started making some subtle changes. Whole grains and spelt bread replaced white bread. Chefs increased the choices of vegetables and fruit. Taking healthy eating a few steps further, Team Elmer's offered up a "Biggest Loser" weight loss program: 300 employees and their spouses participated.

And more success stories started coming in, like this one: An employee was told by his doctor that he had to start taking cholesterol medicine. He didn't want to. The doctor told him he really didn't have a choice. But the Elmer's guy decided he didn't want to live that way—eat poorly and then try to undo the damage by taking medicine.

Team Elmer's wellness program and the availability of healthy food at the company café were instrumental in helping the employee improve his health. "He started being more conscious of fruits and vegetables and fiber, and high cholesterol foods," Wildfong says. He changed the choices he made when he ate at the café, and when he went back to his doctor after a few months of eating the new way, he didn't have to go on meds.

Ready-Mix Driver Dave Ullom, wearing blue jeans and a





DozerLoaf

Makes 6 servings. Less than 300 calories per serving

- 1 pound extra lean ground round
- 8 ounces pork sausage
- 2 large egg whites
- ½ medium green bell pepper, chopped
- ½ medium onion, chopped
- ½ cup Italian-style breadcrumbs
- ¼ cup chopped fresh parsley
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon freshly ground pepper
- ¾ cup no salt added tomato sauce
- 2 tablespoons brown sugar
- 2 tablespoons vinegar (any type)

Preheat oven to 375. Coat a baking sheet with cooking spray.

Combine the beef, pork, egg whites, bell pepper, onion, breadcrumbs, parsley, salt, black pepper, and ¼ cup of tomato sauce in a large bowl. Mix gently. Transfer to the prepared baking sheet and form into a 9" x 4" x 2" loaf. Mix remaining tomato sauce, brown sugar, and vinegar. Spread remaining ½-cup tomato sauce mixture over the top of the meat loaf. Bake for about 45 to 50 minutes, until thermometer inserted into the thickest part of the meatloaf registers 165°. Let stand for 10 minutes before slicing.

companies in industrial complexes nearby are beginning to take advantage of this healthy alternative to nearby chain restaurants. And Team Elmer's likes it that way.

Chef Ed—a Traverse City native who trained at the Epicurean Arts Program at Traverse City High School before working at various local restaurants—says, "I get to do pretty much whatever I want. I order what I want. I have guidelines, of course. I can't go extravagant. But if I want to do a breakfast burrito, or biscuits and gravy, I can do it, as long as it's healthy." Chef Ed says the cafe has become something very special for him and for the people who work at Team Elmer's.

Chef Ed doesn't mind making to-go orders for employees, either. "If they're here at 10 a.m. and they're heading out on the road for the rest of the day, they can pop their head in the kitchen and say, 'Hey, I'm not going to be around at lunch. I need a sandwich, or I need a salad,'" he says. What if somebody orders something that isn't on the menu? "We'll make it for them. We just do what we can," he says. Some of the workers still sneak out to get a high-carb, high-fat fix from a fast food restaurant nearby. But employees say it's happening less these days.

Plans for the cafe's future include purchasing still more food directly from local farms as well as from local-foods distributor Cherry Capital Foods. The company has also joined a CSA (community supported agriculture farm) with Meadowlark Farms, a Traverse City area organic farm, for the upcoming

growing season. Adding more eco-friendly products is also on the agenda. "We all leave a carbon footprint," Chef Ed says. "But the greener we can be, the better." He found 100 percent biodegradable cups that save six gallons of gasoline over normal plastic cups. He's seeking better alternatives to disposable silverware, coffee cups, to-go containers. "I want to do everything as green as possible."

Team Elmer's plans to continue feeding it's workers high quality, fresh, nutritious meals —much of it made from local foods created in its eco-friendly kitchen—and inspiring its workers to lead healthier lives. And the cafe is expected to remain the heart of this new kind of food culture at the company. "It's that support system for you to be able to do your job well, and not have to worry about packing your lunch or where you're going to get your food," Wildfong says. "You can take a break and come downstairs to refuel and recharge and then head back out into the world." Four and a half years after the cafe opened, breakfast and lunch still cost five bucks.

So: do front loaders and frisee mix? Can trucks and tofu be compatible?

At Team Elmer's, the answer is "yes." ■

Radio journalist and author Mary Ellen Geist writes from Walloon Lake. Her latest book, *Measure of the Heart*, chronicles her father's battle with Alzheimer's disease. megpie123@earthlink.net



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