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. Colorful blue and gray cabs pulling tandem rigs of gravel, flatbeds loaded with jumbo bulldozers, monster cement trucks, their monodo 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, in fact, is exactly what's going on here at 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 those your grandmother might have sewn. Employees—most are men in typical construction worker garb—but at family-style wooden picnic tables. They're gobbling on homemade pizza made with red and yellow bell peppers, peppers and ham, fresh salads, and homemade soup. Sprinkled throughout the cafe 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 red and yellow bell peppers, pepperoni and ham, fresh vegetables for an employees 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 grab 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 fruits and vegetables, men in overalls and flannel shirts are discussing the benefits of healthy eating. One guy is talking about his cholesterol level. Another is waxing poetic about how much weight he lost last month. And though Pepsi and Mountain Dew are available, guys grab 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.

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One of the owners of Team Elmer's, Tonya Wildfong, says the cafe is at the heart of what some are calling a sea change in the culture of the company. The cafe 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 cafe and encourage healthy eating among its employees?

Tonya Wildfong's father, Russell “Butch” Brod, purchased the then-a-year-old company from the founder, Elmer Schaub, in 1977. In 2005, Wildfong and her two brothers, Troy and Todd Brod, 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 doctor 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 cafe served what most of the workers were accustomed to. Comfort foods. Mashed potatoes and gravy. And more success stories started coming in, like this one: “A man thought healthy eating was rabbit food! But they started to understand. It’s a different way of thinking about food,” she says.

The cafe 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 launched the Five Fruits and Vegetables a Day Challenge.

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Team Elmer's wellness program and the availability of healthy foods at the company cafe 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 cafe, 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 Ullion, wearing blue jeans and a 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 cafe 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.”

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

1 clove garlic, minced
1 cup low-fat mayonnaise
1 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.

Day Challenge. 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 four, and to try to control成本, 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 meals. They started looking at new kinds of vegetables and salads with local lettuce 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.

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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 its 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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**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  
½ cup chopped fresh parsley  
½ teaspoon salt  
½ teaspoon fresh ground pepper  
½ cup no salt added tomato sauce  
2 tablespoons brown sugar  
2 tablespoons vinegar (any type)

Combine the beef, pork, egg whites, bell pepper, onion, bread crumbs, 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.

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