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## Lunchroom Coup

### Revolution Foods Upends the Way Kids Eat at School

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It is not yet dawn, but already the aroma of rich cheddar cheese, toasty potatoes and baked chicken fills the air. There is an upbeat bustle in this Alameda kitchen. There are children to be fed, even though lunch is still hours away. Food preparation moves ahead like clockwork, orchestrated with care. But despite the enticing scents and warm attention

to detail, this is not grandma's kitchen. The crew—which is busy fixing lunch for thousands of hungry schoolchildren throughout the Bay Area, loading gleaming white trucks sporting bright red apple logos and sending out the fresh-from-the-oven meals into the early morning light—works for Revolution Foods, a private and innovative business taking a new approach to school lunch programs.

Launched in August 2006, Rev Foods represents a sea change in what many parents, students and school administrators have come to accept as standard school lunch fare. Rather than precooked, frozen and reheated lunches brimming with salt, sugar and fat, Rev Foods dishes up lunches made daily from scratch. The emphasis is on ingredients that are local, fresh and at least 50 percent organic. Every school day Rev Foods trucks fan out across the East Bay (including 20 Oakland schools) and other Bay Area sites, delivering healthy and delicious food—which can also include breakfast and snacks—to almost 80 public charter and private schools, many in low-income communities. Fifty percent of students dining on Rev Foods lunches qualify for the free or reduced-fee National School Lunch Program, which reimburses schools serving meals to children based on family income falling within federal poverty guidelines.

In fact, the goal of providing fresh, seasonal, balanced meals to school children, regardless of socio-economic level, fuels Rev Foods' mission—to make healthy, flavorful meals and a solid grounding in nutrition indispensable parts of the educational experience. For every child, every school day.

Revolution Foods' founders, Kristin Richmond and Kirsten Tobey, feel the time has come for a school lunch paradigm shift. They say they want a revolution, and they started one. Rev Foods, which started operations (in a deliciously ironic twist) out of a defunct McDonald's at the Alameda Naval Base, was founded on the principle of positive social change. The company uses a "social venture" business model, addressing the impact of malnourishment on children's academic success, supporting local farmers and using "green"—environmentally friendly—corporate practices. And the company does it with strict attention to the bottom line; well, actually, the triple bottom line—the one that benefits people, protects the planet and generates profit.

Richmond and Tobey have ample statistics at their fingertips demonstrating the negative effects of poor nourishment on children's school success—for example, lower scores on standardized tests; more missed days of school due to illness; low energy and irritability, which can translate into challenging discipline problems; and difficulty with concentration. But it was lessons learned during their own childhoods and real-world experiences encountered during their college years that fired their entrepreneurial, social-change passions, uniting them in the Rev Foods vision.

### **Food, Family and the Real World**

Kirsten Tobey, 30, knows what it takes to make education work and work well. "I grew up in a family of educators," she says. "I was very exposed to the educational environment from an early age." She experienced, firsthand, the daily challenges and accomplishments her parents brought home from school. She also grew up appreciating food. "I always loved food and my family was very interested in eating healthy," Tobey explains. Her mother, the primary cook in the family, was very flexible and supportive of new approaches, even when Tobey suddenly converted to a vegetarian diet at the age of 12, after hearing Frances Moore Lappe, author of the classic *Diet for a Small Planet*, describe despicable conditions in slaughterhouses and the environmental benefits of eating lower on the food chain. "During my growing-up years, my mother cooked a lot of vegetarian food. Unlike a lot of parents who say, 'no, you'll eat whatever I make,' she was very understanding," Tobey says.

One of Tobey's first summer jobs, as an enthusiastic counselor at a farm and garden camp, allowed her to introduce kids to food cultivation, connecting them to the source of their food. She took her camp experience one step further in college by bringing garden

education to the inner city of Providence, R.I. “I brought groups of kids from this urban community, and we built a pizza garden,” Tobey says. “The garden was in the shape of a pizza. We grew all the ingredients on the pizza, including the crust and cheese.” When people wondered where the cheese was, she explained, “It is in the section where the alfalfa is planted. That is what cows eat. The cows make milk, and we make cheese from the milk,” she laughs.

“I really enjoyed engaging kids and teaching them that food doesn’t come from a shelf in the grocery store or from a Styrofoam container; that food comes from the earth, and somebody is working hard to grow it,” Tobey says. She headed off to Haas School of Business at the University of California Berkeley, with an entrepreneurial itch and a desire to build a business from the ground up that blended her lifelong exposure to education with her passion for kids and food. So her internship choice, though oddly prescient, was surprising, even to her. “I did a fellowship with McDonald’s. I thought, while I’m at business school, I might as well learn how the big, bad guys work,” she says. “I got some really interesting insights while consulting for McDonald’s of how difficult it is to affect change in a really huge corporation, even with the best of intentions,” Tobey says.

Sooner than she could predict, Tobey would join forces with another Haas student, and together they would develop a business plan geared to create real change in the way kids connect with food at school.

Kristin Richmond, 33, also grew up in a family that loved good food. Raised on her grandfather’s cattle ranch, Richmond had plenty of time to explore the outdoors surrounded by pigs, goats and cows. “When you talk about free range, that was me,” she says. “We had a garden, it was a real country upbringing, and I grew up in a family of cooks. We had dinner by candlelight every night. It was nothing fancy, just a well-balanced family meal,” says Richmond. “We never ate out, never went out for fast food,” she is quick to add.

Richmond started her career about as far from her country childhood as she could imagine—as an investment banker on Wall Street. In a few short years, however, boredom drove her from the halls of finance to Nairobi, Kenya, where she lived on a giraffe preserve, thriving on fresh garden produce and freshly slaughtered meat. While in Nairobi, Richmond helped start a school for children with learning disabilities. The school served children of diplomats and sons and daughters of street vendors, an extremely diverse group. She was struck by how profoundly the food the children brought to school for lunch affected their ability to learn, their need for discipline and their focus. “As the sports teacher taking these kids out for runs, doing yoga, doing

aerobics, I saw an enormous difference between the students who obviously ate a well-balanced meal and the students who had nothing more to eat than bread and butter,” she says. “That played a huge role for me in what I am doing today.”

Back in the United States, Richmond worked for RISE, a national nonprofit assisting schools in low-income communities attract quality teachers. In Oakland, teachers told her that their classroom lessons about how important good food is to good health were contradicted by the daily reality in the lunchroom. “I am very



entrepreneurial. I knew I wanted to start my own organization to improve schools serving low-income kids,” Richmond says. “I knew food and nutrition was a huge issue in terms of mental health and wellness, physical health and wellness, and school performance.”

### **School Lunch Revolution**

It is often said two heads are better than one, and Richmond counts the day she met Kirsten Tobey at Haas as one of the luckiest in her life. “We both had a very similar passion. Our backgrounds were different enough so we could complement

each other, but we have the same values, the same driving force,” she says. Together they committed to using their business school tenure as the incubator for Rev Foods.

Tobey, during her stint at Haas, spent time in Ghana, working for the U.N. Hunger Task Force on a project to bring produce from local farms into school lunch programs. She came away impressed with the hunger and malnutrition problems that remained to be solved in Africa. What neither she nor Richmond could predict was how close the issues hit home. “When I came back, Kris and I interviewed kids in inner city Oakland, and we were seeing the same problems,” she says.

Both young women knew that many people overlook the impact of school lunch on school success. “People say school lunch is just one meal for kids, but it is really a huge amount of food when you think about wanting to change kids’ health,” Tobey says. “Kids get anywhere from one-third to one-half of their day’s total calories from the food they eat at school,” she says. The two new partners were convinced their entrepreneurial approach to a national \$9 billion-a-year business could make a real difference in the quality and health benefits of the school lunches delivered to thousands of students every day.

Rev Foods initially targeted charter schools in low-income communities partly because these public schools have the flexibility to negotiate contracts for lunch services, and perhaps more importantly, because each charter school answers to its own board, with rigorous five-year goals. In Oakland, where Rev Foods serves almost 20 schools, many charters enroll students facing the challenges of poor nutrition and family income that limit the ability to invest in healthy, fresh, organic food—food that is often more expensive than processed packaged food loaded with empty calories. With high academic standards to meet, these students need all the support they can get to succeed in school. Well-balanced, energy-sustaining lunches are a key part of their school days.

Amy Klein, Rev Foods’ executive chef, gears her menus to help these students thrive. In charge of creating more than 9,200 Bay Area lunches every school day, Klein carefully constructs meals with no high-fructose corn syrup, trans fats, artificial colors or artificial flavors. High fiber is teamed with lean protein to boost and maintain students’ energy levels and ability to focus throughout the school day. But even the most nutritious lunches will end up in the garbage if they don’t taste good.

### **Students Speak and Eat Up**

Empowering kids to speak their minds and to exercise choice when it comes to food

are key to the Rev Foods mission. Cold wrap sandwiches are a case in point. “Latino students made it very clear they don’t do cold tortillas,” says Klein. When students persisted in their requests for pizza, Klein found a source of all-natural pizza crust from a local bakery, organic marinara sauce, natural cheese and low-fat turkey pepperoni. Needless to say, the pizzas are a hit.

As are another kid favorite—chicken nuggets. “The students really wanted chicken nuggets, and we said no, it’s big fast food; it’s against what we do,” Richmond says. But the kids were adamant, so Klein got creative. Using all natural chicken breast—no hormones, no antibiotics—and the heels of fresh whole-grain wheat bread for the breadcrumb coating, the nuggets are baked and served with organic ketchup. “Access to healthier diets is so important for school success,” says Klein. “We’re not going to shut down McDonald’s, but kids do better when they feel better. And when they enjoy their interactions with the texture, flavor and color of foods and know more about where their food comes from, they can make better choices,” she says.

### **Adding Business Partners**

Feeding thousands of kids every school day means finding good sources of huge volumes of healthy food at reasonable prices. One key to Rev Foods’ ability to grow the number of school lunches served while holding down supply is partnerships with companies like Clover Stornetta Farms Inc. in Petaluma, which supplies Rev Foods with more than 2,000 gallons of milk every week. “We were very impressed with the program and mission Kirsten and Kristin laid out for us,” says Mike Keefer, vice president of sales at Clover. “We are on a common mission. Rev Foods is another voice saying ‘here is great food’ for all kids, whether high or low income. And the working relationship also supports 25 local family farms,” he says.

Diestel Family Turkey Ranch, a family farm producing natural range-grown birds in Sonoma, is another important supplier. “Rev Foods is a perfect fit, and we are happy to be associated with a company with such integrity,” says owner Joan Diestel. “We love offering a variety of turkey tastes for Rev Food lunches [such as] chipotle seasoning for high school kids who like a little spice [or] oven-roasted for younger kids who want something familiar. It is challenging changing kids’ eating habits, and Kristin and Kirsten are committed to their focus and keeping food costs down,” says Diestel.

Whole Foods Markets is another important Rev Foods partner. “Whole Foods had received many requests from PTAs and schools looking for healthier school lunches,” says John Mitchell, formerly director of operations for Whole Foods’ Food Services and now a Rev Foods board member. “But at Whole Foods we do groceries, not lunches,” he says. Tobey and Richmond approached Whole Foods as a high-volume source of fresh, nutritious food, and it was a perfect fit. In fact, “John Mitchell was so impressed with some of our organic products for lunches, snacks and breakfasts—like raisins, peanut butter and cereal—that he told us, ‘We love your brands, we love what you do, can we get your brands into Whole Foods?’” says Tobey. “We said, we do lunches, not groceries,” she laughs. But with the help of a loan from Whole Foods, the Rev Foods brand is now available on store shelves. When it comes to partnerships, teaming up with Whole Foods has been indispensable in more ways than one. Whole Foods supplies volumes of healthy food to Rev Foods and connects the company to other suppliers for the ingredients that go into each school lunch. And 3 percent of revenues from the Rev Foods brand sold at Whole Foods goes to keeping costs down for the school lunch side of the business, which means manageable prices for schools on tight budgets in low-income areas. In October, Rev Foods, working with Emeryville-based social venture marketing firm Nest Naturals, expanded its Whole Foods line. Nest Naturals runs market tests, which guide product development, and packages the Rev Foods line. “We conducted focus groups to see what kids really liked and what parents could feel good about,” says Nest Naturals co-founder Neil Grimmer. The results? An organic whole-grain popped

chip full of fiber for long-lasting energy and “Jammy Sammy,” a PB & J-meets-energy bar experience. We are aiming for ‘lunchbox simplicity’,” he says. “The products have minimal ingredients; every bite matters.” This means families can create their own Rev Foods lunches at home, knowing the quality and nutrition meet Rev Foods’ high standards.

### **Edible Education**

What do students say about their Rev Foods’ lunches? At Millsmont Academy in Oakland, kids in grades K-5 rave about their favorites. Sloppy Joes, pasta dishes and barbecue chicken top the list. Fresh fruits—apples, pears and oranges—are always mentioned. On the day this reporter pays a visit, cheesy potatoes with chicken, milk and apples are on the menu for Rev Food lunch students; other kids eat chips, bright pink juice and more chips.

“This is our second year with Rev Foods. It does take some getting used to,” says principal Kristin Gallagher. “Brown rice, for example, was new for the kids. But the students are eating more of their lunch, throwing less away. We have noticed an improvement in behavior and discipline,” says Gallagher. “Having breakfast available has reduced tardiness, and we are getting positive feedback from parents.” A bulletin board near the school office touts improvements in academic test scores, reinforcing, perhaps, the connection between good food and good school performance.

Students don’t just eat healthy food at schools served by Rev Foods—they learn about it as well. For those in grades K-5, Family Corner educational materials sent home pull the entire family into the school lunch loop. Kids share nutrition information with parents, and all are invited to tastings of new Rev Food entrees. Kids in middle and high school take home The Revy Reader, which features teacher and student profiles, recipes and features on local farms.

It’s all part of what is called “edible education.” Anya Fernald, formerly with the California Alliance with Family Farmers, started the Grower’s Collaborative, a source for Rev Foods of fresh fruits and vegetables from local farmers. Now executive director of Slow Food Nation, Fernald applauds Rev Foods’ role in edible education. “We used to learn about foods from our families, but we have lost touch with our agricultural roots and food knowledge,” she says. “The role of edible education is to bring traditional food wisdom into the classroom. The Rev Foods mission to provide really high-quality food, along with educational materials, to schools in underserved areas is a perfect example,” says Fernald. “As Rev Foods grows, it could be a



challenge to maintain the business success with the deep strong social conscience, but Kristin and Kirsten really create a balance between being strong idealists, and smart, savvy business people—that’s what makes them unique,” she says.

### **The Future of the Revolution**

Growth is definitely the goal for Rev Foods, which anticipates doubling the number of school lunches served in the Bay Area, Los Angeles (where a pilot program is now serving 5,500 lunches each school day) and other locations during the next few years. But it is the personal side of the company that brings the Rev Foods crew to Alameda before the crack of dawn each school day. Tobey and Richmond, both mothers, know how challenging it can be to feed kids well and to engage kids with healthy, tasty meals. “A high school senior recently told me, ‘When I opened my Rev Foods lunch, I thought there was hot mango on my plate,’ ” says Richmond. Turns out it was organic roasted butternut squash. “She loved it so much, she took her mom produce shopping to buy butternut squash. She and her mom had never done that together before,” she says. “This is how we know we aren’t just impacting the kids in school but actually parents and the larger community.”

“If you can get kids engaged with what they eat, and eating more healthfully, then society will become more healthy and productive as a whole,” says Tobey, adding “Healthy food is part of a great educational experience—and that is the path to social change.”

Maybe even a revolution.

### **Rev foods School Lunch Sample Menu**

**ENTREES:** All-natural beef-and-bean chili with carrots and fresh-baked cornbread; barbecue chicken on roasted potatoes with corn on the cob; pasta with beef and organic peas; chicken teriyaki with spinach and bok choy

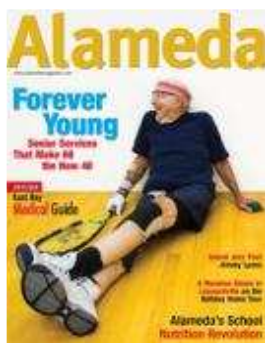
**FRUIT:** Pears, satsuma Mandarin oranges, bananas, Gala apples

**DRINK:** 1 percent Clover Stornetta Farms Milk

**DESSERT:** Nada, Zip, Zero, Zilch

*Rev Foods’ school lunches never contain high fructose corn syrup, trans fats, soda, or potato chips.*

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