

Students have appetite for healthier foods

BY KIM ZARZOUR
kzarzour@yrmg.com

The lunch that was sitting on a shelf in the shed looked pretty much the same as it did when it was abandoned there three weeks ago.

The hamburger was a bit shrivelled, the fries and bun were rock-hard, but otherwise, it looked like your typical McDonald's Happy Meal.

The dog's kibble, on the other hand, had clearly seen better days, bugs and wildlife having picked it over.

Five-year-old Juliana Silice took one look at her petrified-woodish fast-food meal, scrunched up her nose, and said, "That's disgusting!"

Just what her mother hoped to hear. Nothing like real life science to prove mom and your teachers have it right, after all.

Like many school kids, Juliana used to plead for a fast-food treat at lunchtime. She doesn't anymore, not since the Woodbridge family's science experiment in the back yard shed showed her even bugs and bacteria are not interested in consuming what she was craving.

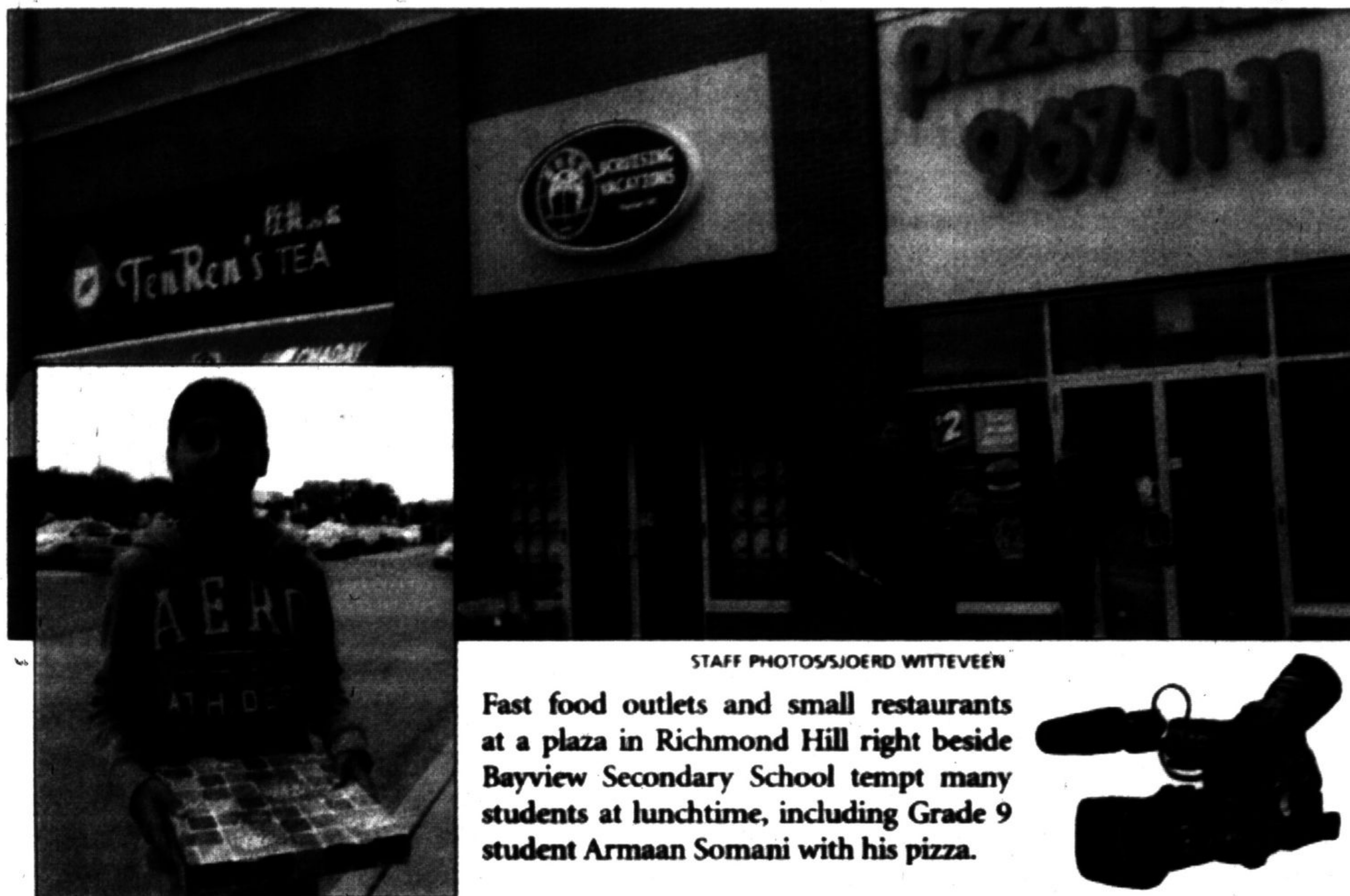
While not all students across York Region are getting such dramatic lessons in healthy eating, it appears the message is starting to spread.

Two years after the province introduced a healthy food and beverage policy in Ontario schools, the message is slowly sinking in, and it seems younger students are the first converts.

"Attitudes are changing. They'd never think of tossing a water bottle in the garbage now," Christy Silice says, adding similar changes are happening with nutrition as children learn to take care of the earth and their bodies.

In 2008, the province banned most junk food in schools and three years later, added more restrictions in an effort to develop healthier learning environments.

Some school districts are going further. In Toronto, the public health department plans to weigh middle- and high-school students to find out the proportion of students who are a "normal" weight, overweight, over-



STAFF PHOTOS/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

Fast food outlets and small restaurants at a plaza in Richmond Hill right beside Bayview Secondary School tempt many students at lunchtime, including Grade 9 student Armaan Somani with his pizza.



What do students say about cafeterias and healthy eating? Check out video at yorkregion.com

weight or obese and at risk of weight-related health consequences.

But in York Region, school boards are hoping to encourage change via education and good old-fashioned peer pressure.

At Keswick High School, students in the hospitality course are cooking up healthy fare, then talking it up with their classmates. When your buddies rave about their homemade tomato sauce or baked onion rings, Dylan Swan suggests, you're more likely to give it a try.

The 17-year-old is taking the cafeteria class for a second year and has become an enthusiastic epicurean.

"Our teacher, Mr. Clarida, he's a phenomenal guy. When he does the ordering, he tries to keep it from within 100 miles away. He encourages people to try things. He's open to anything, lets us make our own recipes and taste test on ourselves.

He makes these unorthodox soups, a different one each day."

There was the awesome lentil soup Dylan helped make one day, and the muffins, they blew him away. They had zucchini, something he'd never tried, wasn't really even sure what it was. Who knew veggies could be so yummy?

The local pizza joint down the street still does brisk business on Toonie Tuesdays, but more and more, Keswick students are discovering new tastes in what their classmates are whipping up.

It's Mitchell Kraft's first year at the school and he's impressed.

"Even though the food may be healthy, it still tastes pretty good and is relatively inexpensive," the Grade 9 student says. But not everyone is noshing on campus.

Students who walked to a nearby Richmond Hill plaza from Bayview

Secondary School last week said they don't like the long line-ups, the smells, or the prices of their school cafeteria food.

"There's this cold pasta with meatballs and soggy fries," said Jonathan Ma, 16. "It's not too nice."

Lucas Weston, in Grade 12 at Jean Vanier in Richmond Hill, blames the province's healthy food policy. "There's not much they can do. They can't serve fried food. Fried food was the best."

Those old tastes and habits will take time to change, educators say.

Public and separate school boards in York plan to tackle the challenge "wholistically", offering healthy choices at school, education in health and gym classes, and newsletters and website information for parents.

"We've seen some improvement, especially among younger students,"

says Sandee Fennell, health and phys-ed curriculum consultant with the separate board. "The real improvement is what's being packed from home."

"The industry has moved so far forward," adds May Moore, York Catholic board spokesperson. Five to 10 years ago, busy parents had to rely on mostly unhealthy, packaged food, but more nutritious choices are available now, she notes, even in fast food restaurants with pre-cut veggies and fruits.

Schoolwide allergies make old standbys, such as peanut butter and jam verboten, but many schools offer new, healthier options, such as smoothie fundraisers and whole wheat pizza crust on lunch days.

Lindsay Schnarr, 21, is an inaugural member of the national non-profit group Young Canadians Roundtable on Health. The Markham student of biomedical science suggests schools consider incentive programs to encourage healthy eating.

A stamp card program for items such as fruits and veggies can reward kids with prizes or free food items when the card is full, she says.

"I also think it is important to focus on positively encouraging healthy eating as opposed to negative criticizing unhealthy eating. We need to reward children for making good choices. If they are constantly being chastised for poor eating, they will feel discouraged and have a negative outlook on healthy living."

Denise Oakes thinks the secret is planning ahead — and a good dose of "sneakiness".

The Oak Ridges mother of four prepares bags of carrots, cucumbers, dry cereal and pretzels ahead of time so the morning rush is more manageable. She's also a fan of "Sneaky Chef" recipes that offer low-fat, healthy substitutes.

For more, see <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/choose-choix/advice-conseil/child-enfant-eng.php>

Y.

CHILD CARE IN YOUR NEIGHBOURHOOD

Spaces limited – register now!



1-866-317-6251

ymcagta.org/childcare

