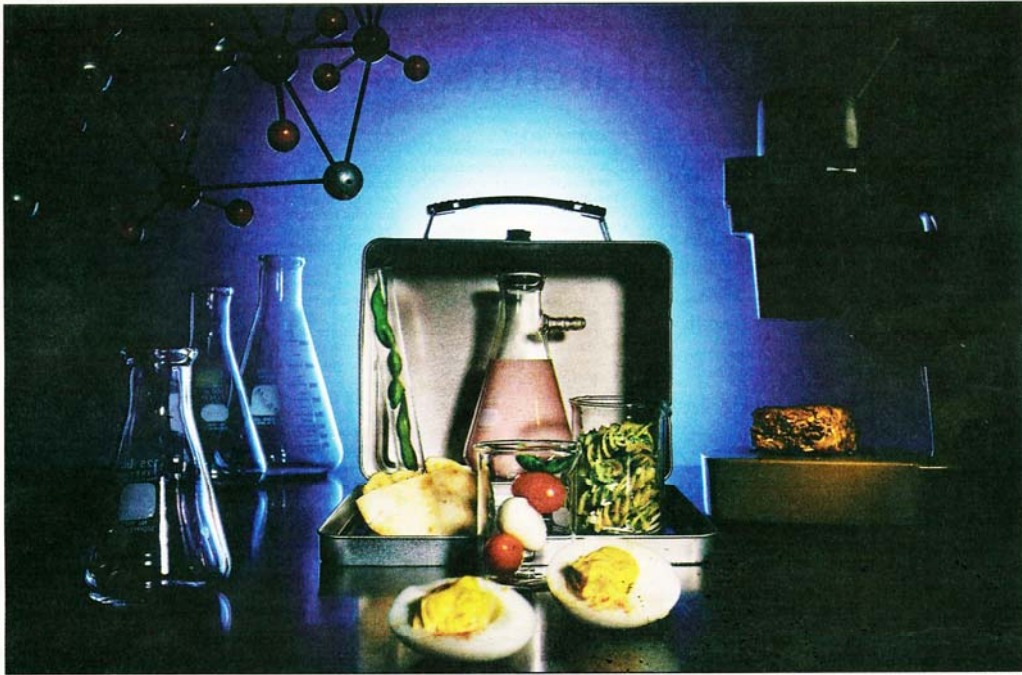


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Packing a healthful lunch for your child can be a daunting experiment, but there are solutions



The lunch equation can include deviled eggs, edamame, pasta with broccoli pesto, mozzarella balls, tomatoes and basil, a fruit and nut snack bar and kefir. ANDY ROGERS/P-I

Lunch science

BY REBEKAH DENN
P-I food writer

While children prepare for school each morning, parents perform an experiment as challenging as any classroom problem: packing a lunch that meets the day's demands. The scientific variables include:

- ▶ **Time:** How many minutes will your children spend eating, especially if they can lengthen recess by shortening lunch?
- ▶ **Volume:** How much can their small stomachs hold before feeling full?
- ▶ **Energy:** What foods are calorie-dense enough to power them through the afternoon, tasty enough to tempt their appetites, compact enough to fit in the lunchbox and yet not so junky that parents despair?

School lunches, Nigella Lawson told me a few months ago, "are hard to do well. It's easy to get in a rut."

We were supposed to be discussing her latest book, but the conversation inevitably turned to the laboratory of the lunchbox.

"In order to get the sort of calorie level a growing boy needs," she said, "it's very hard to create something portable that isn't high in unhealthy fats, and that is a real challenge."

I'm the lucky parent of a "good eater," a

5-year-old who happily downs anything from sushi to saag paneer at home, but I've still been stumped by my daily pack-it-up assignment. For some fresh ideas and lunchbox protocols, I decided to ask a few people whose experience covers children, cooking and nutrition.

Lisa Dupar of Pomegranate Bistro in Redmond filled pages in my lab notebook. She's a

SEE LUNCHBOX, E4

FUN WITH LUNCH

Suggestions for lunchbox success from Lisa Dupar, Susan Levin and Susanna Block:

- ▶ Soups in a Thermos, such as bean chili or vegetable minestrone
- ▶ Pasta salad with lots of veggies chopped into it
- ▶ A snack bag with "chip" strips of crunchy seasoned nori (Japanese seaweed)
- ▶ Dried fruit mixed with nuts
- ▶ Yogurt parfait (a cup of plain yogurt with fresh or frozen berries added)
- ▶ Hard-boiled eggs
- ▶ Celery filled with peanut butter or cream cheese and raisins
- ▶ Tuna salad packed in a container with multigrain chips for scooping
- ▶ Food roll-ups, such as pesto spread on a slice of turkey rolled around a stick of low-fat string cheese

LUNCHBOX: Portion size is elemental

FROM EI

mom as well as a chef, and has some perspective on both issues now that her children are college age.

"If I did it all over again, looking back, the thing I was off on was portioning," Dupar said. "I would just make a whole sandwich or put a whole apple in there when I was in a hurry and just throwing stuff together. It was ridiculously large for grammar-school kids."

Better, she said, would be smaller samples of a variety of foods.

It seems obvious, she said, but parents need to go with children's individual tastes. If they don't like tuna salad at home, they probably won't eat it at school either. (Dupar's son hated tuna and didn't get it in his lunch; her daughter loved it and Dupar would pack it in a container with multigrain chips for scooping.)

Some preparations might sound or look elaborate, Dupar said, but they don't actually take much time. Her children liked Asian rice paper wraps, and it was fast work to soften them with a dip in hot water, stuff them with rice noodles and a little leftover chicken, and put them in the lunchbox with a container of peanut sauce for dipping. Also fast and popular were "roll-ups," such as spreading pesto on a slice of turkey and rolling it around a stick of low-fat string cheese.

A key is making the food easy for kids to eat and not overwhelming. Rather than negotiating an entire apple, for instance, Dupar began sandwiching peanut butter or other nut butters between crescents of apple or slices of crunchy jicama. Also, just as on the restaurant plate, presentation makes a difference in the lunchbox. If the food looks appealing, with contrasting colors and textures, it's more likely to get a warm reception.

Dupar's daughter loved caprese salads, so she skewered mozzarella balls, cherry tomatoes and basil leaves into appealing lunchbox snacks. Rather than a whole peanut butter sandwich, she would halve mini-pitas and spread them with peanut butter, banana slices and – for crunch – banana chips. Deviled eggs are a treat, and if they get bounced around and messy in a plastic container, spread the filling so it's level, sandwich the egg halves together, and wrap up two halves so they look like a whole stuffed egg.

As a treat that also packs in protein and some vitamins, Dupar put in a Thermos of fruit kefir, a cultured milk drink available in most markets. (Think Danimals Drinkables, but more natural.) Dupar also gave the P-I her recipe for "nutty breakfast bars," which easily could serve as a lunchbox dessert, loaded with nuts and dried fruit.

After speaking with Dupar I felt loaded with ideas, but I also got a boost from the non-profit Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (healthyschoollunches.org), a Washington, D.C.-based organization that does extensive work on improving school lunches, focusing

on cafeterias. Susan Levin, a dietitian on the committee, said packing fruit regularly would solve some of our dilemmas, especially if it's prepared so kids don't use up their lunch minutes peeling and segmenting.

"Have sliced fruit that's easy, and (they) can grab some sliced apples or oranges, skipping over some of the harder work. It's ready for them, it's refreshing, it's hydrating, it's also easy to digest," Levin said.

Or, try grapes. "You can just pop those in and those are fun and easy to eat. Those calories are sweet, but they're full of vitamins and minerals, which is also important."

Then, Levin said, think Lunchboxes – sort of.

"I would never recommend those, but you can do something," she said, keeping the idea while ditching the highly processed commercial reality. Try filling one compartment of a plastic container with a flour tortilla, one with black beans and rice, one with corn, and one with sliced avocado.

"They can roll up their own healthy, high-fiber burrito," Levin said. "Kids like getting their hands in there. It's like cooking when they do that, they're much more receptive to what they're eating. Any time they're closer to the source, whether it's gardening or being in the kitchen and helping, this is the same idea."

For chips, she suggested making your own at home by slicing pita or tortillas into triangles, brushing them with a little oil and baking them crisp.

"They're not deep-fried, but it's a good chip to eat with soups and sandwiches. What's important about this is if they help you make it, they tend to eat it."

Levin also has found a lot of kids favor protein-rich edamame in the pod, with the fun factor outweighing the extra effort it takes to eat it.

"It's like having carte blanche to spit your food out," she said. "And it's very easy to make, and tastes good cold with a little bit of sea salt on there."

For a last check, I drew on the expertise of Seattle pediatrician Susanna Block. Block co-founded World Baby Foods with an aim toward building young children's sense of taste, but she has experience with the elementary set as well.

Block warns against the flood of processed snacks and drinks that are aimed squarely at lunchboxes, promising convenience and even nutrients.

"They are usually filled with (things like) salt and high fructose corn syrup and fill kids up without providing worthwhile nutritional benefit," she said in an e-mail. She also voted for involving the kids – even taking

them shopping for the food – and adding silly treats like drawing a face on their bananas or including a note on a napkin. She voted for fast preparations for anyone who realistically plans to pack lunch five days a week. She suggested another version of roll-ups, flour tortilla wrapped around turkey, cheese and lettuce.

Block also added that it's important with lunch, like all meals, to keep eating "fun and non-stressful."

Ideally, with some of these ideas, that will be true for the adults as well as the kids.

BROCCOLI PESTO

SERVES 8 (OVER PASTA)

2 cups steamed and chopped broccoli

¼ cup chopped flat-leaf parsley

¼ teaspoon minced garlic

½ cup grated Parmesan cheese

½ cup olive oil

Salt

Freshly ground black pepper

► In bowl of food processor, combine broccoli, parsley, garlic and Parmesan, and begin processing. While processing, add the olive oil in a thin stream and blend until smooth. Add salt and pepper to taste.

From "Lunch Lessons," by Ann Cooper and Lisa M. Holmes

DEVILED EGGS

MAKES 12

6 large eggs

¼ cup mayonnaise

1 teaspoon Dijon mustard

½ teaspoon cayenne

Salt

Freshly ground black pepper

Paprika (optional)

► Put eggs in a 3-quart heavy saucepan, cover with cold water by 1½ inches, partially cover pan and bring to a rolling boil. Reduce heat to low, cover completely, and cook eggs for 30 seconds. Remove from heat and let stand, covered, for 15 minutes.

► Transfer eggs to a bowl of ice and cold water and let stand for 30 minutes; drain.

► Peel eggs and halve lengthwise. Carefully remove yolks and mash the yolks in a bowl with a fork. Add mayonnaise, mustard and cayenne and stir with fork until smooth. Season with salt and pepper. Spoon yolk back into egg whites, or pipe in with a pastry bag. Sprinkle yolk mixture with paprika if desired.

From "The Gourmet Cookbook"

NUTTY BREAKFAST BARS

MAKES 24 BARS

2 ounces melted butter

4 eggs (about 8 ounces)

5 ounces all-purpose flour

½ teaspoon baking powder

1½ ounces baking powder

1½ ounces nonfat milk powder

2¼ ounces rolled oats

1 teaspoon salt

12 ounces organic dark brown sugar

2 cups dried fruits (your choice, e.g., a mix of raisins and dried blueberries, cranberries and chopped dried apricots)

10 ounces chopped and toasted nuts, such as a mix of almonds and pecans; you can use seeds such as flax or pumpkin in place of some of the nuts

► Combine the butter and eggs.

► Combine the dry ingredients and add to the liquid mixture. Fold in the fruit and nuts. Pour into a greased 8-by-13-inch baking dish. Bake at 325 degrees for about 30 minutes, or until the mixture springs back when touched in the center. The edges will get golden and the center can still be a little bit soft. Cool completely and cut into bars.

Courtesy of Lisa Dupar

P-I food writer Rebekah Denn can be reached at 206-448-8117 or rebekahdenn@seattlepi.com.