

**SUSTENANCE AND SUSTAINABILITY:**  
*A Food Philosophy for Ashley Hall*

From the beginning and throughout its nearly one-hundred year history, Ashley Hall has taken very seriously its traditional roles as being both *in loco parentis* and *alma mater* to the students whose lives are so profoundly affected by their experiences here. As a “surrogate parent” and as a “foster mother” (to translate those two familiar Latin phrases), AH understands its obligation to provide that nurturing which is the necessary fulfilling complement to the student’s innate nature. While this function is most often and no doubt rightly understood in the context of intellectual development, it is nonetheless the case that we also attend to the student’s physical well-being, both in the present and in the future, the student’s strength of mind and body being the sum of AH’s legacy to each individual.

This role has become increasingly crucial as we begin to see more fully and clearly the correlation between mental and physical health. In recent years, the ancient pedagogical ideal, *mens sana in corpore sano* (“a sound mind in a sound body”) has taken on renewed significance. Moreover, these concerns for personal well-being we now recognize as being inseparable from more general environmental, economic, and cultural issues.

For example, while we all accept and endorse the health benefits of drinking plenty of clean, fresh water, we also must acknowledge that the distribution and consumption of bottled water has led to an enormous increase in the consumption of petroleum products to produce those bottles, with a commensurate increase in the waste generated by our failure to recycle adequately. At the same time, the demand for bottled water has encouraged the privatization of water supplies around the world, thus restricting community access to this vital resource. In short, we are finally beginning to take to heart

the most essential lesson of ecological studies: everything is connected. We can no longer exclude from any “cost-benefit” analysis the ethical factor – the moral and cultural implications of our participation in a “global economy.”

Therefore, AH has undertaken a comprehensive review of our Health and Wellness curriculum to determine how we can most fittingly achieve our goal of creating for our students a truly *nurturing* environment, recognizing that the meals served at school must be regarded as the fundamental substance of any wellness curriculum, providing as they do, not only suitable nourishment but also culinary examples students can adapt to their own use beyond school. (It hardly needs to be pointed out that this has *not* been the case traditionally at most schools.) The provision, preparation, serving, and enjoying of meals defines a people’s material culture more than any other single aspect of their social existence. It is time for us to incorporate this understanding into our curriculum and into the daily life of the school.

AH’s new dining facility, which includes culinary arts classrooms and kitchens, will enable us to engage students directly with the issues surrounding “food culture.” And as we seek new sources for more healthful foods and for more locally and regionally grown seasonal products, we can devise healthful menus that also promote economic and environmental awareness. We have also come to realize that the once-fashionable allure of “instant foods” was a will o’ the wisp leading us toward a potentially fatal diet of over-processed, nutritionally suspect, chemically enhanced, and often toxic pseudo-foods. There is no short-cut to health, physical or mental. Armed with the knowledge we need to transform our consciousness of the connection between the outer world of the body and the inner world of the mind, we can refashion our campus and our curriculum to

insure a healthier and more wholesome new century at Ashley Hall.

To these variously interrelated ends, AH has established four foundational principles to guide our dietary programs:

#### SAFE FOOD

Working with our primary provider, Sodexo, we demand that the food we serve at AH be safe in every sense: clean and free of toxins, free of potentially harmful allergens, free of preservatives or additives which diminish the raw food's essential nutritional value, and free of empty calories. In short, we want food that, because it is qualitatively good in itself, will contribute to the well-being of the students, faculty, and staff who will eat it. Sodexo itself, as the largest food provider in the world (and therefore already a fully functioning participant in the 'global economy'), already demands of its sources the most stringent quality control, the corporation's continued existence being dependent upon its reputation for reliability and hygienic safety.

#### SLOW FOOD

Originating in Italy as a protest against the culinary and cultural in-roads of American fast food franchise, Slow Food has grown into an international coalition of groups dedicated to reconnecting people everywhere with "the traditions, plants, animals, fertile soils and waters that produce our food." ([www.slowfoodusa.org](http://www.slowfoodusa.org)) Given the congruence of concerns which exists between the Slow Food movement and AH's developing food policies, it is only appropriate that we have initiated an informal partnership with Slow Food Charleston to promote our shared aims.

Even more central to our understanding of "slow food" is our commitment to the restitution of the AH tradition of family-style dining. The lunch

break, during which no other obligations will impose upon our students, will provide a much-needed and unarguably beneficial period for refectation and reflection – the healthful replenishing of the body and mind in a communal ritual of good food and social conversation. This practice will greatly strengthen the students' sense of community, both within the school and, because we will adapt our menu offerings to include more local, seasonal, and organic foods, within the larger economic and environmental communities of the Low Country. Moreover, we believe that family-style dining promotes the exercise of social graces, conversational skills, and cooperative maintenance of the dining facility in such a way as to reinforce crucial objectives of our mission – specifically the cultivation of ethical responsibility and confidence in one's ability to adjust to changing social circumstances.

#### SEASONAL FOOD

Awareness of the seasonal cycles which govern organic growth and the agricultural economy heightens one's awareness as well of one's involvement in those cycles. One simple way to insure just such awareness is to eat foods in season. This practice links one much more intimately to the region in which one lives and simultaneously lessens one's dependency – both as an individual and as a community – upon foods which must be transported long distances, resulting in increased consumption of fossil fuels and an increased risk that the foods one eats have deteriorated in nutritional value en route or have become tainted with potentially harmful bacteria. Seasonal foods are fresh foods, and fresh foods come to the table more intact and nutritionally rich. At the same time, incorporation of seasonal foods encourages greater reliance upon...

## LOCAL FOOD

Consequently, our attention to the benefits of seasonal foods stimulates a determination to participate more fully in supporting local agriculture through acquisition of foods provided by local and regional farms. Sodexo already has working relationships with such providers, insuring that the produce they deliver is consistent with Sodexo's exacting standards of safety. Organizations such as Low Country Local First Initiatives and various Community Sponsored Agricultural co-ops (CSAs) help us all contribute to sustaining the Low Country's economy by our active support for local farmers and commercial concerns. This, in turn, helps to strengthen local families and attendant family values, thus contributing directly to the commonwealth --- or shared well-being -- of us all. Moreover, by working to further our relationships with local growers AH will become ever more firmly woven into the cultural fabric of the Low Country.

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