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National Portrait Gallery

Portrait Presentation: A Conversation with Alice Waters

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WEBVTT

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<i>Alice Waters</i>: We had completely changed the way we eat in my lifetime. So we have the possibility of changing back, coming back to our senses, coming back to real food.

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And, I think in a way it's something so astonishing that I seem unusual, you know, that I'm doing something really unusual by just wanting children to eat real food at school. To sit down at a table and to take their time, and to connect with other friends, and to have the pleasure of being connected to nature.

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It's a revelation every time I go over to the old schoolyard. I can't believe how beautiful it is and how excited the kids are.

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<i>José Andrés</i>: For the people that don't know, tell us exactly about the schoolyard. You created in 1996 a Chez Panisse foundation and through the Chez Panisse foundation you supported the Schoolyard project. Tell us a little bit exactly what it is.

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<i>Alice Waters</i>: It just happened in a very serendipitous way cause I'm always talking about how public education in Berkeley has deteriorated so much and at a place like Berkeley that you could not pay attention to what the public schools look like.

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But of course that's happened all around California. We used to be number one in the nation in terms of excellence in the school, and because of the taxes sort of being changed around to benefit, how should we say, the people who had the money instead of the people who did not have the money, the schools were let go.

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And now we're number forty-seven. Forty-seven in the country.

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So, we have a school system that is unable to paint the building or mow the grass, pay the teachers, or have books and chairs.

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And I was remarking on the state of affairs to some reporter somehow and the principal of King's school called me up and he said that "Come into my office" and so I did. I did. I went over to the school and he said "Would you come and make a garden in the front of the schoolyard. Make it look better.

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And we walked around the school, and I said, "You know, I don't just want to make a garden. You have so much space." But it was a school that was really built back in 1921.

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For 500 kids on seventeen acres of land. Seventeen acres of land back in 1921. There are a lot of schools that still exist, particularly on the east coast, that have a lot of land connected to them.

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So, I just walked around the school with him and I just said "I want to do the whole thing, Neil. I think we should change the whole cafeteria, and we should build the garden, and we can take all the produce to the cafeteria and then they could eat lunch together and then they could go take it all back to the composting. I just went for the whole nine yards.

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And I said, "It could be a beautiful test ground with teenagers." Because that's a very difficult group and there were a thousand of them. Seventh, eighth, and ninth graders.

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And I thought if we could bring them into a new relationship to food, one that's very positive, that we could change their eating habits and really bring them into a set of values that would help them take care of the land, and nourish themselves, and communicate with their family and friends for their whole life.

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<i>José Andrés</i>: Fascinating. So when you opened in 1971, Chez Panisse, I was two years old. [[audience laughter]]



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