

What's on the blackboard menu today?

A new scheme is revolutionising school dinners by employing restaurant-chefs to cook them, writes Anna-Marie Julyan

It may sound an unlikely matchmaking service, but since launching at the end of April, the appropriately named charity Chefs in Schools is already on target to pair 100 professional chefs with 100 schools by 2023. It has generated an 'extraordinary response', according to its chairman and co-founder Henry Dimbleby, who set up the project to recruit and train restaurant chefs to start new careers in school kitchens.

Dimbleby, who co-founded restaurant chain Leon and co-authored The School Food Plan on behalf of the Department for Education, is supported in his initiative by high-profile patrons such as The Great British Bake Off judge Prue Leith, star chef Yotam Ottolenghi and Weekend columnist Diana Henry.

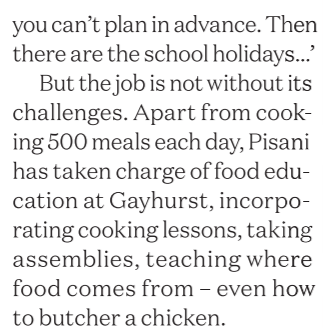
In 2013 Dimbleby tweeted to ask if anyone would be interested in taking over the kitchen at his children's primary in Hackney, east London. The head chef at Ottolenghi's NOPI restaurant, Nicole Pisani, replied and arrived at Gayhurst Community School in 2014. She's been there ever since.

The attraction for chefs is clear: fewer hours for comparable pay and the opportunity to, in Pisani's words, 'pay it forward'.

'It's nearly four years now and there hasn't been one moment I didn't think this is the best career move I've made,' she says. 'I wanted to do something that was teaching people life skills and how to feed themselves rather than follow a recipe.'

The punishing hours worked by chefs in restaurant kitchens is well documented. In Pisani's words, typically a 60 to 80-hour week with a double shift often lasting from 7am through to 1am.

'Now I start at 7.30am and finish at 4pm, but feel I'm leaving halfway through work,' she says. 'The hours are amazing. And there's stability because you're not on a rota. I've spent 20 years not knowing when I'm next working so



you can't plan in advance. Then there are the school holidays...'

But the job is not without its challenges. Apart from cooking 500 meals each day, Pisani has taken charge of food education at Gayhurst, incorporating cooking lessons, taking assemblies, teaching where food comes from – even how to butcher a chicken.

Appetite for education

The executive head teacher of Gayhurst, Louise Nichols, admits the idea of butchery in schools may send some people 'running for the hills', but says it's an example of Pisani's ambition.

'It's not just preparing 450 or 500 meals,' explains Nichols. 'It's food education too. As a head, that's how you make it work. The head school cook of a team of four to five making 450 meals would be on around £22,000 a year. By adding in the teaching and management of other elements of school food, such as the breakfast club and taking assemblies, it might be more like £32,000 – a salary comparable with a restaurant.'

From 2014, cookery and food education was introduced to the curriculum for key stages one to three, for pupils aged five to 14. This followed a recommendation made in 2013's The School Food Plan. But how schools choose to teach it is open



HIGHER EDUCATION Children from Mandeville School with chefs (left to right) Angela Church, Nicole Pisani, Cheryl-Lynn Booth and Oliver Pagani

to interpretation, especially given that many primaries do not have a teaching kitchen.

Cookery lessons from year three up at Gayhurst amount to half an hour a week on average over the year.

'There are guidelines, but the main thing is that school cookery used to be about making biscuits and cakes rather than, for example, how to use an egg in so many different ways,' says Nichols.

Pisani and her team go one step further, teaching the kids how to make sandwiches, soup and bread, as well as a three-course meal and how to fillet fish.

The lessons are key to getting the pupils eating healthier meals in the canteen, she explains. And that has been a steep learning curve.

Lunches at Gayhurst weren't 'in the depths of despair' before Pisani came along, says Nichols, 'but perhaps using a lot of frozen food and not the whole food education programme'. But one of the other three Hackney schools where she is executive head was, in her words, 'in a



LEARNING CURVE Church has gone from MasterChef to cookery lessons

bad way food-wise'. At Mandeville, where former MasterChef: The Professionals entrant Angela Church has taken over, 'it was all plastic bags cut open and food squeezed onto trays and heated up', according to Nichols.

At Gayhurst, Pisani would stand by the bins and watch what the kids threw away, asking them why. Chefs are used to garnishing food, but early on she learned not to sprinkle coriander on dishes because the kids would 'cry and say we don't want to eat the green bits'.

She admits 500 plates of food is a huge volume, bringing its own challenges. 'We cut up about 40 to 60 kilos of vegetables and potatoes daily,' she says.

The team batch-cooks green vegetables such as broccoli during service to keep it green and appetising, and all the bread is baked on the premises.

Successes include a sweet potato and tahini curry served with quinoa and whole hake fillets in tomato sauce.

The price of the meals has gone down from 91p to 71p per child through Pisani



PRIMARY GOAL Pisani is on a mission to bring children good food

'It's not just about preparing 450 to 500 meals – it's food education too'

changing her sourcing and cooking vegetarian meals two days a week.

'You suddenly have a chef with skills cooking things from scratch rather than buying them in, which is cheaper,' explains Dimbleby. 'Chefs are also paranoid about waste by nature, so you're making sure stuff doesn't get thrown away.'

New model army of chefs

The Chefs in Schools model does away with the term school cook, replacing it with chef, which Dimbleby explains is key to the entire venture.

'The idea used to be that the cool thing was to be a chef doing barbecued whole turbot in a restaurant, while schools were where dinner ladies went and made pink sponge with coconut on top,' he says.

As part of this new model, the kitchen team is organised brigade-style following the traditional restaurant system.

'Any chef is trained to be teaching another chef,' explains Pisani. 'The head chef is training the sous chef and so on. It means that people who join through Chefs in Schools in the future can stay, or they can move on and train others.'

Although she says she will always oversee Gayhurst, Pisani's new role is to help people at other institutions that want to copy the model. So far three Hackney schools have adopted it (with chefs joining from London restaurants Dabbous and Riding House Café) and two others elsewhere in the capital have also signed up.

Dimbleby and the team's challenge is to share their programme with all those who want it. They are also planning to open a Hackney School of Food next spring for use by both the charity and local community.

'For schools and chefs to get in touch with us would be amazing,' says Pisani. 'We want to nail this once and for all, and give our kids good food.'

Fi Glover In my opinion



The BBC Radio 4 journalist airs her views

It's been a tad warm of late, hasn't it? I opened a drawer to put some clothes away today and let out a sigh at the sight of my jumpers lying there all plump and warm, waiting like old friends to be greeted in the sharper, fresher air of September. Sometimes that tingling first day of autumn is the only thing that keeps me going during a long, hot summer. With pale skin and blue eyes my ancestors have imparted to me the DNA of a troglodyte without a cave to crawl into. Anything above 25°C reduces me to a shadow of my former self. If only I could find a way to stay in that shadow.

My mother is the same. She is of an age when heat is a really, really unwelcome visitor. She is also of an age when opening the windows makes her think unwelcome visitors will become a reality, so the combination is stifling and not good. We had a conversation yesterday in which she recalled the searing heat of the summer of 1976 with its parched fields, buckled train tracks and nationwide hosepipe ban. I joined in with my memories of the yellow, crusty grass and the heat haze rising up off the road outside our house.

'Of course we weren't here for it,' she said.

'Wait, what?' I cried, using the language of da kidz.

'Well, we didn't live here then. We were in Hong Kong.'

'With pale skin and blue eyes my ancestors have imparted to me the DNA of a troglodyte without a cave to crawl into'

Blow me down with a feather. I was certain I'd lived through Hot UK 76. I'm sure it was the same year I got my Abba clogs and you don't forget a fashion incident like that. But she was right. So where does the feeling that I sat through that summer come from? Is it the sheer power of shared imagery? And if that has happened using only a few Newsround reports and some well-told anecdotes, what is the impact of 24-hour incoming television/internet/YouTube going to do?

Our own memories are so vital. They are the coat pegs that make sense of the untidy hall cupboard. Without them to hang our stories on aren't we all a metaphorical heap on the floor? This has been a bumper year for memories already – the progressive wedding; the out-of-nowhere heat, the penalty shootout that changed a little bit of football history. I've been trying extra hard to imprint these things on the kids because they are all important in different ways. I've taken to saying: 'Look! This is a memory! Watch it! Drink it in!'

But the response is lame... 'Oh don't worry, Mum – we can always watch it on the replay.'

If I wasn't so hot, I'd spend a bit more time blowing a fuse. In the meantime, I'll put it on the pile of Things That Are Going To Get Worse, and deal with it come September.

@ffiglover
Tune in to The Listening Project, afternoons on BBC Radio 4

Get involved

If you are a chef or school, you can register your interest with Chefs in Schools at chefsinschools.org.uk.

