

Bringing communities together through food

Anna-Marie Julyan meets some of the many volunteers who have committed themselves to help put decent meals on the table for those who need them most

'I'm not a brain surgeon,' explains Ravinder Bhogal over lunch at her restaurant Jikoni. 'I have one skill: I cook. And I know what kind of impact that can have.'

At the entrance of Jikoni in London's Marylebone sits a black-and-white photograph of Bhogal with her grandfather, Karam Singh. In the early 1940s he left his home in the Punjab and set sail, hoping for a new life in Kenya.

'He went through a lot of hardship, but ultimately became a very successful businessman there,' says Bhogal. 'He was religious and took people off the street to feed them – he felt that food was an important service.'

Singh taught Bhogal about sewa, a tenet of the Sikh faith meaning 'selfless service'. All Sikh temples have a langar, a community kitchen where free food is served to anyone, regardless of caste or creed. Even when he died, Singh was running the kitchen at a hospital camp in India.

Says Bhogal: 'My grandmother rang and said: "He's gone, but there are still sacks of rice and flour everywhere."'

Today, we're eating bowls of Omani lime dahl topped with soft-boiled egg, fragrant with dill and parsley. Charred courgette and feta salad, and olive flatbread form the accompaniment. It costs £12, with £1 of every meal going to two charities – The Felix Project and Food Cycle – that collect surplus provisions for those living in food poverty and social isolation.

Every day Bhogal serves up a different £12 meal, each sounding more exotic than the last: it could be pomegranate sour chicken and kisir with whipped feta and radishes, or spelt, spinach, ricotta and egg pide with preserved lemon salad and charred baby gem drizzled with tahini. This is Jikoni's community lunch scheme.

Serving the community through food is hardly a new concept, but the need has grown. More than two million people in the UK cannot afford to eat every day. In the year to March 2018, The Trussell Trust's network of food banks gave out 13% more emergency supplies than in the previous year. And in London alone, 70,000 children go to school hungry – that's without having eaten breakfast or dinner the night before.

In response to this need, London-based charity The Felix Project provides a free weekly delivery of surplus provisions to 21 schools for children and their families. Its ambition is to supply 120 schools by the end of

next year. And it's all quality stuff, according to Mary Powys, the charity's head of fundraising. 'We're not talking about canned, long-life products and fizzy drinks,' she says. 'Around 70% of what we deliver is fresh, which is wonderful and healthy. It's the food you need to cook.'

Providers include Waitrose & Partners, HelloFresh, AmazonFresh, Daylesford Organic, Gail's Bakery and Fortnum & Mason. Food might be supplied because the packaging is damaged, it's getting close to its use-by date, for cosmetic reasons, or for stock control. This means there is a small window to act and the charity works by turning things around fast.

To reach children, food is bagged up and displayed on 'school stalls' with a message that families can help to fight waste. The Felix Project also gives to 189 charities across the capital – everything from food banks to homeless shelters and refuges for victims of domestic violence.

Evening Standard chairman Justin Byam Shaw and his wife Jane founded the charity in 2016 in memory of their son Felix, who died suddenly at the age of 14 from a rare strain of meningitis. When searching for a way to commemorate him, his father recalled a boys' football tournament Felix played in where he was upset to learn that many of the opposing team hadn't eaten anything that day.

'We started in a really small and humble way with Justin and a couple of people, one van and one depot,' explains Powys. 'And in these two years we've grown to have a fleet of 12 vans, 400 volunteers and deliveries of close to 20 tonnes of food per week, and we expect to double our tonnage next year. The need is growing, not diminishing.'

Jikoni may be based in affluent Marylebone, yet here too there is food poverty. Down the road at St Paul's Church Marylebone, Food Cycle hosts a free community meal every Wednesday evening.

The charity's model is to collect surplus food and serve up meals across the country. 'The point is to combat waste, food poverty and social isolation,' says Alex Cameron, food and wellbeing officer at St Paul's.

The charity was set up after they found that people from the area near the church live on average 10 years less than those just a 15-minute walk away. And that's directly related to food poverty and social isolation.

Now, every Wednesday volunteers collect surplus provisions from local businesses, another six cook at the West London Synagogue's kitchen, then it's delivered 10 minutes



GET INVOLVED

1 The Felix Project, which is based in London, would love support to help them rescue more food and deliver it to the people who need it. For more information, visit thefelixproject.org.

2 Food Cycle is a UK-wide organisation, which relies on a team of volunteers to collect surplus food and serve up community meals. A flexible set-up means you can choose when and how much time you commit. Visit foodcycle.org.uk.

3 Or check out the community lunch served at Jikoni, Marylebone, London, Tuesday-Friday. Visit jikonilondon.com.



DOING THEIR BIT

Clockwise from left: The Felix Project recruits former England cricket star Mike Gatting; Food Cycle volunteers serve guests; £1 from each community lunch at Jikoni goes to food charities



'People are struggling to put food on the table. We try to give them back their dignity'

down the road to the church, where more volunteers serve an average of 50 guests. Cameron freely admits it's 'like Ready Steady Cook' at 3pm when the volunteers arrive, but by 3.30pm they've started cooking and food is on the table at 6.30pm.

Sometimes they might have lots of odd veg such as one mushroom and a courgette, at others a surplus of peppers – once they even got an aloe vera leaf. Last night they had a load of carrots, so they made carrot soup to start followed by a pasta bake with spring greens and radish salad, then fruit salad and cakes.

'We try to give people back their dignity,' says Cameron. 'We don't ask for any evidence – if you walk through the door and sit down, we believe you need to be there. For some people, it's because there's no one else to be with, for others they're struggling to put food on the table.'

There are tablecloths, and volunteers serve the food direct to guests restaurant-style, sitting and chatting with them. The volunteers are often seeking out community every bit as much as the guests, adds Cameron.

Back to that notion of sewa: Ravinder Bhogal's grandfather told her that the simplest way to perform service was to feed people. But it's about more than just providing nutrition.

'What he said stuck in my head and became my mantra,' she says. 'I found that the way of calming people, particularly people trying to settle in a new country, was to cook.'

Having moved to the UK as a child and suffered from homesickness, Bhogal knows something of what that is like. She was born in Kenya, where visitors from Britain, America or Japan dined with them regularly – her mother cooking 'through the lens of an immigrant'.

Now the fusion food that she serves at Jikoni draws on that immigrant experience, like her prawn toast Scotch egg or banana cake with miso butterscotch, peanut brittle and Ovaltine kulfi. Alongside the lunch scheme, Bhogal also plans to cook up feasts at Marylebone Food Cycle and help out in the kitchen there.

'Food is the excuse for conversation,' explains Cameron. 'Having food out on a table also gives you something to do while talking. It's a really simple idea, but it works. We'll never solve the world's problems, but we're there week in and week out, and people really enjoy that stability.'

IN MY OPINION *Fi Glover*



The Radio 4 journalist airs her views

My daughter had a homework assignment this week which was to 'interview an adult about how technology has changed since their own childhood'. I looked up briefly from my smartphone and agreed to email the answers to her later. Seriously, though, it's a great assignment because we really are generations apart technologically. I'm not going to rehearse all the obvious arguments about how we are going to hell in a HandcartApp in case you put this column on TripAdvisor and rate it poorly. You know the score.

After we had completed the challenge, we then had a chat about what might happen next. In 30 years what might it be she looks back on as old and tired and moribund if, or when, she has kids of her own? It might well be the desk. Yup. The simple desk. This week there was breaking news from the world of office furniture. It's an area of life often left behind in this revolution because, apart from the bean bags in the hipster headquarters, most offices look pretty standard. Desks. Chairs. A coat on the rack that no one ever claims. And lots of people sitting down – at desks.

'Who could have predicted that the animal with only two legs functions better when up on those two legs?'

Make the most of it, folks. A new experiment has revealed that the traditional sit-down desk doesn't work! A number of NHS staff have been taking part in a year-long study of 'standing desks' – height adjustable things that you can wind up to whatever level suits you. The results have shown these can improve health, wellbeing and productivity. Over the course of the year the workers in the study chose to remain more and more upright and reported higher levels of engagement and lower levels of anxiety.

I know! Who could have predicted that the animal with only two legs is happier and functions better when they are up on those two legs? I will be a little sad, though, to see the end of the old desk and chair combo. I had an editor at the BBC who would steal up on you without warning and take you and your swivel chair on a dangerous careering zoom through the chicanery of the Radio 4 newsroom. It made me laugh like a child every time. He's ever so high powered now and I often wonder if he still does that. And then there's the fact that as a person of diminutive stature the wind-to-your-own-height desk might leave me a little, er... invisible? Sorry. Who's saying that? Where's that voice coming from? I said 'the person of diminutive stature'... Oh never mind.

But it's not the case everywhere. In Sweden, sit-stand working is commonplace – and in 2014 Denmark made it mandatory for employers to offer staff such desks.

However, the authors of the report say more research is needed to gauge the longer-term benefits.

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SELFLESS SERVICE
Ravinder Bhogal is following in her grandfather's footsteps with her community lunch scheme