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FEATURES

Tasty school meals for Dorset

By  **Samantha Harman**, Senior Reporter 10:14am Monday 13th January 2014 in Features



Prince of Wales School pupil Rocco Taylor tries a piece of cake supplied by Local Food Links, run by Caroline Morgan

MEMORIES of something which resembles gruel being slopped on to your plate are enough to make you feel five years old again.

The school dinner has become somewhat of a joke – so much so that it even has jokes about it.

'What's the worst thing you're likely to find in the school canteen? The dinner' – just one doing the rounds.

But a Dorset caterer is ensuring that more children are enjoying lunch time.

And more importantly, that they're enjoying locally produced foods.

Taste or fun might be an issue for the children, but knowing where food comes from has become an ever-increasing priority for parents.

Dorchester mum Caroline Morgan felt passionately that children should be taught from a young age about food and

eating well.

So she set up Local Food Links in 2006, a not-for-profit organisation that now caters for 29 local schools.

Chief executive Caroline said: "I think it's really important that children

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learn about food and eat well.

"For some children, it might be their only meal of the day so it's important that what they're eating is good.

"It's important that early on they start appreciating fresh food and the different tastes and learn about using local produce.

"There has been more of an emphasis on that in recent years, I think parents want to know that their children are getting a good meal."

Prince of Wales School and the Summertime Nursery at Thomas Hardy in Dorchester have both just come aboard.

On the menu for the spring term pupils are tucking in to dishes like chicken italienne with pasta, Red Dragon Pie (aduki beans, rice and sauce) or good old favourites like roast dinner and pasta bolognaise.

There is also a special menu set for January 31 in celebration of Chinese New Year, when pupils can try sweet and sour chicken or stir fry vegetables.

A new addition to the menu is fisherman's pie as the organisation has started working with Samways of Bridport. All fish used in school meals must be MSC certified, so Caroline was pleased to discover a local producer that could be used.

There are Government guidelines that all school meal providers must work to, such as fish once a week and oily fish once every three weeks.

Caroline described choosing meals for the menu as a 'balancing act' as there's lots to think about, such as budget, health and any special requirements.

"Some schools deliver in hot, some schools have chilled so there is some element of cooking on-site.

"We don't receive any subsidy and as we make everything from scratch we have to think about labour costs," she said.

"If we use potatoes for example, they come in a sack and they're muddy and so we have to wash and peel them.

"Sometimes the meals also depend on what's available.

"Last summer the price of potatoes increased and potatoes of course are one of our key ingredients.

"At the moment the price of cheese has got high, so we have to make it balance out."

Local Food Links prepares its menu options for a term and parents can go online and select with their children which meals they'd like to have.

"It's good because a parent can think 'my child has swimming after school on Thursday' and they can select something that's going to give them lots of energy.

"And if they hover over a certain meal with the mouse, a list of ingredients comes up," said Caroline, "So they can always be sure what's in it.

"That helps for parents with children who might have dietary requirements, such as an intolerance.


"We want to encourage parents to talk to us. We are small and we are local, so wherever we can we're saying to parents 'call us'.

"It's rare that parents get to speak directly to a school caterer."

Food loving Year 3 Prince of Wales pupil Rocco, aged eight, said his favourite meal so far had been pizza but he also enjoyed roast dinner and shepherd's pie.

Rocco said he has made it his pledge not to eat another packed lunch again.

As reported in the Echo, Local Food Links was awarded a place in the

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Lloyds Banking Group Social Entrepreneurs programme giving it a £15,000 grant to help expansion.

Caroline is also enrolled on a year-long mentoring scheme at the School for Social Entrepreneurs.

Local Food links has two hubs, one in Bridport and one in Blandford Forum, with an on-site kitchen at Dorchester Middle School.

This is where the meals for the schools in Dorchester are prepared.

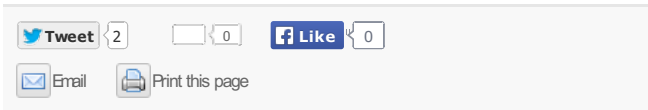
With the county council's school catering contract up for tender soon, Caroline is hoping the future for Local Food Links is tasty.

Caroline said an aim for the organisation is to acquire a bigger kitchen in the county town, supply more schools in Dorchester and expand further into Weymouth.

It is an interesting time for school meal makers, with the Government announcing all infants will get free school meals in the first three years of education from September.

Chocolate brownies might not seem like they have any nutritional value, but these are filled with hidden goodness.

Local Food Links say that although dates might not seem like a child's favourite, lots of pupils are loving them in these brownies, so they've suggested parents can try to make these tasty treats at home.



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