

An appetite for food awareness

Primary school pupils are discovering the importance of healthy eating and where their dinners come from. Maxine Boersma reports



Plucky: Raphael, nine, and Oliver, six, collect eggs from the Christ Church chickens Photo: Martin Pope

By Maxine Boersma

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All sorts of things were made in Chelsea before the area became synonymous with the fleeting fame of trust-funded teenagers.

Historically, Old Church Street used to house Wright's Dairy, with cows grazing nearby, and the agricultural tradition continues in a different form. Each day the pupils of Christ Church Primary School, off the King's Road, take turns to feed Doughnut and Fluffy, who may sound like soft toys but are actually the school's very own chickens.

The 210 pupils also have to collect fresh eggs from the playground, which are savoured as key ingredients in school meals. Parents can buy any surplus eggs to take home.

This daily ritual is part of Head Teacher Avis Hawkins's plan to teach the children not only about nutrition and healthy eating but also about the provenance of food and how to eat communally.

In the four years since the chickens arrived, Christ Church pupils have linked up with Michelin-starred chefs, hosted their own “pop-up” Italian restaurant, developed a compost area and benefited from celebrity fundraising drives to ensure that all red meat served in the school is organic.

The school gardener, a retired head teacher, ensures that all children have the opportunity to grow vegetables as part of the school curriculum.

Hawkins is ahead of her time – and not just because her pupils have their own children’s kitchen area. Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg has announced that from September, every child in Reception, Year One and Year Two in state-funded schools will receive a free school lunch from a £1 billion fund.

This concept of free school meals for primary schools was a key recommendation in the School Food Plan – the July 2013 review of school food provision.

The plan provided evidence that school meals would lead to positive improvements in health, attainment and social cohesion as well as helping families with the cost of living. That is why Hawkins wants her children, and staff who look after them, thinking about food before the September lunch date.

At present, nearly 20 per cent of Christ Church pupils receive free school meals. But the focus at the school now is on knowledge and nutrition as well as provision.

At the auction evening that raised funds to support organic meat at the school for two years, the keynote speaker was the multiple Michelin-starred local chef Tom Aikens. He told the audience that: “Feeding our children is providing fuel for their future – and the best way to feed them is by giving wholesome, nutritious food – prepared by people who care.”

Hawkins eats with the children each lunchtime. As well as making sure that pupils learn about where food comes from and that they eat wholesome food, she is keen to get them cooking at their Thursday Cooking Club, as well as learning about other aspects of preparing and serving food through running their own pop-up restaurant.

“The pop-up touched on so many parts of the national curriculum,” Hawkins said. “It was enjoyed by the parents too – they came for two sittings. The pupils planned and cooked the meals themselves, designed the menus, served the food, waited at tables and asked for feedback.”

The pop up was inspired by sessions with the national charity Chefs Adopt A School. Founded

in 1990 by the Royal Academy of Culinary Arts, the charity reaches more than 21,000 children every year, and attempts to add practical education to the raised awareness of food that comes with constant cookery programmes on television.

At Christ Church the sessions, for Year 3 and Year 4 pupils aged 7 and 8, were integrated into the school's science and personal and social curriculum and dealt with food provenance, healthy eating, hygiene and the value of cooking and eating together.

The "Front of House" session was delivered by Jean-Claude Breton, restaurant director at Chelsea's Restaurant Gordon Ramsay, together with Sarah Howard, the charity's development chef. Pupils were handed a menu and asked to identify the healthy options. They discussed the role of the sommelier, the proper use of cutlery and what a restaurant needs from diners to run effectively.

For Breton, the session ignited imaginations: "In my experience, it is important for children to appreciate the importance of proper dining habits as early as possible," he said. "The children surprised me with some questions – such as how many covers we had each night."

The connections with top-quality restaurants and top-name chefs continue to proliferate. Hawkins has recently met Raymond Blanc, and Aikens plans to follow up his performance at the organic meat fundraiser by teaching the pupils how to make pancakes. He will also be partnering with them on The Food for Life programme, part of a network of schools and communities committed to transforming food culture.

Celebrity chefs are not the only enthusiasts for the school's approach – parents have become true believers too. Nick Smith, is the father of 7-year-old Amelia (Year 3) and Esther, aged 5, in Year 1.

"Children learning about their food in a garden will help them finish what's on the plate, we hope," he said. "We must try to get our children out of the supermarkets and into the fields and farms, to help them understand why our obsession with cheap food can harm the countryside."

For the headmistress there is no room for complacency in the quest for learning about food and the art of eating. Hawkins's latest initiative involves children from Reception and Year 6 making each other a healthy snack once a week to have after school. Her ultimate aim? "For all children to visit the kitchen, see their lunch being made, deliver garden vegetables to the chef and cook recipes from the website at home. We are just beginning." A virtuous hors d'oeuvre.

How we moderate

