

A CLASS ACT

Inventive. Delicious. Healthy. Not words often used to describe school dinners. But a new initiative bringing top chefs into London state primaries is changing all that. *Frankie McCoy reports*



Children from Mandeville Primary School join chefs, from left, Angela Church, Nicole Pisani, Cheryl-Lynn Booth and Oliver Pagani at the school

I'm eating lunch at a trestle table in Homerton: a deconstructed burrito heavy with slow-braised, lushly dissolving chuck steak. Generous cheddar and sour cream add velvety bite while a tangle of veg — peas, French beans and emerald cavolo nero — glints alongside. It's a lot better than the fridge-cold salad box I'd normally be eating at my desk, unsurprising given that this was cooked by a former *Masterchef: The Professionals* contestant. But I'm not in some achingly hip east London street food shack. This is Mandeville Primary School and the 400 five- to 10-year-olds who eat here every day live in one of the most deprived areas in London. It is also one of the pioneering schools in the Chefs in Schools initiative, launched today by Henry Dimpleby, co-founder of healthy fast food chain Leon and all around champion of kids' food.

School dinners are a notorious joke. Anyone educated in Britain has their own horror story. For some it's corned beef, semolina and tear-inducing 'ocean pie' (don't ask). For others it's unidentifiable dry meat in congealed gravy. My personal primary school demons were gloopy, powdered custard dyed pink and obscene frankfurters wallowing in seeping yellow oil; endless shrivelled nuggets and, of course, the legendary roadkill that was the Turkey Twizzler before Jamie Oliver stepped in. The only vegetable I remember eating was claggy baked beans, soupy from several days' reheating.

'Why do people turn a blind eye to schools, and hospitals and prisons?' asks Nicole Pisani, 38, head chef at Gayhurst Community School in London Fields. 'Powdered egg and powdered mash contain no sustenance. Some kids have never even cracked an egg open before.' In 2014, Pisani was head chef at Ottolenghi's high-end Soho restaurant Nopi, working 80-hour weeks to create the dazzling Middle Eastern menu of five-spice lamb sweetbreads and koji rainbow trout with yuzu and labneh — and she was exhausted. At the same time Louise Nichols, headteacher at Gayhurst, was

asking Dimpleby — a school governor — for help finding a new school cook. Dimpleby, after all, had form; besides healthy Leon, he had also just written the Government's School Food Plan, setting out how to improve food and food culture at schools. He tweeted, Pisani responded. And soon Gayhurst had a restaurant-trained chef turning out healthy, balanced and exciting school lunches: chicken jolloff, Nopi-inspired vegetable 'troughs' with edible soil and crudités, fresh spelt soda bread — and not a powdered egg in sight.

Since then, three other restaurant chefs have swapped tasting menus for kid-friendly lasagne. Oliver Pagani (27, former junior sous chef at Broadway Market favourite Poco, who worked with Pisani at Nopi) is sous chef at Gayhurst; Cheryl-Lynn Booth (38, formerly of the Riding House Café) has taken the reins at Rushmore Primary in Clapton; and Angela Church (that *Masterchef* entrant with a Michelin and private-chef background) is making those brilliant burritos at Mandeville.

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Now Dimpleby, Nichols and Pisani are on a mission to improve school lunches nationwide. Their new charity, Chefs in Schools, launching today, aims to put 100 restaurant chefs in 100 schools by 2023. Patrons include Prue Leith, food writer Diana Henry and Pisani's old boss Ottolenghi himself. One of their primary goals? To combat the horrific food-related health statistics for children that show one in 10 children starting primary school is seriously overweight — and one in five children leaving is obese, thanks to a daily diet of nuggets and chips.

But why, exactly, would restaurant chefs — famed egoists who put up with long hours in pursuit of their own Michelin-starred joint — jack it all in to cook mash in primary-school obscurity? 'Professional kitchens get bogged down with hierarchy and the pursuit to the top,' says Pagani. 'Ambition is the only thing.

But I think there are a lot of chefs who are in the job because they love food. They're not necessarily in it for the glory of owning a restaurant.' His motives for swapping restaurant for reception class were 'partly selfish' anyway. As a restaurant chef de partie, he earned £24,000. 'At the worst time I was working at a Michelin-starred place doing an 80-hour week for that. Now it's about half that time for the same money. So I have hobbies! I have a life! I get to see my girlfriend! It's wonderful.'

As Church points out, now 'I work less than 100 days a year. I get more per hour from this job, and significantly more per hour emotionally.' A Leiths-trained chef with restaurant ambitions, she was disillusioned in the 'hardcore, Michelin-aspiring' kitchens where conditions were 'abominable. The treatment of women in kitchens is less than excellent. I honestly found them brutal.' A move into private catering for six years was far more enjoyable, flying around the world with clients and with 'an unlimited budget' for ingredients: 'the best quality beef, the freshest langoustines'. Just before she came into Mandeville she won a place on series eight of *Masterchef: The Professionals*, cooking Turkish lamb with crackling, pickled shallot salad with sumac and pomegranate molasses for Marcus and Monica. Slightly different from stewed chuck steak burritos. But that high-end cooking, says Church, left 'my soul a bit sad. You get nothing emotional from that.' Now she's working with a budget of 72p per child per meal. Hence that luscious slow-cooked beef. 'The cuts of meat we can use are limited because of pricing. Chuck steak is affordable for us and it braises perfectly.'

Gayhurst's budget is similarly just under 80p a child, a price made possible by Pisani implementing two vegetarian days every week when kids will eat home-made vegetarian sausages or pea and feta fritters (a Nopi recipe). I visit the school on a Monday and vegetarian lasagne with home-made chips is on the menu with cucumber salad and freshly baked ciabatta, and fruit for dessert. At 11.30am the reception class troops in — five-year-olds in sequin T-shirts and red tights, mini pastel trainers and dinosaur hoodies.



Cucumber salad



Veg out: pupils at Gayhurst tuck in to two vegetarian lunches a week; the Leon co-founder Henry Dimpleby, above

Luella loves lasagne and eats all of her matchbox-sized portion. Ryan's a big fan, too. What's Fox's favourite food? 'Chips!' he shouts, brandishing a freshly fried potato slice. These are actually spiked with olives (Fox HATES olives) but he hasn't noticed and happily tucks in.

The new regime is working. Nichols says that if you get a healthy lunch inside kids, 'teachers report better concentration, better attitude. And they're more adventurous.' As are the original kitchen staff. Some of Pisani's team had never chopped a carrot before she came in, as everything was bought in pre-sliced, in packets. She trained them up and helped them discover natural ability, as in the case of Sousou, their brilliant baker, now solely in charge of the daily changing bread (focaccia today) and healthy cakes such as tomorrow's upside-down banana cake.

Getting kids to try new foods isn't exactly child's play. One day Pagani decided to do mussels, shelling and breading 400 portions of molluscs. 'Yeah, that wasn't the most successful day...' he grimaces. 'But sometimes we have done odd things that worked out really great.' Fish, for example, always had to be disguised — breaded and pan-fried — in order to get the kids to eat it. But one day their Dorset fish delivery turned up late. 'There was no way we were going to get 400 odd portions of fish coated by lunch time. So I just did a really traditional Italian tomato sauce on the bottom and baked the fish whole, skin side up, in a really high oven so that the

skin crackled and absorbed all of that tomato flavour. And it went down a storm.'

There are some things kids still won't go near: 'They're deeply suspicious of an aubergine,' according to Church. But more challenging for the *Masterchef* contestant has been 'working out how to energise a kitchen team that has been so de-skilled for such a long time' — something that happened in the Seventies 'to keep budgets tighter. Schools were fed the lie that if you have this packaged food, everything will be easier, and numbers of kitchen staff were hugely reduced.' At Mandeville, Church arguably had the greatest challenge. When Nichols arrived as head teacher from Gayhurst in 2015, kids were being fed dried-up sausages and old spaghetti in what Louise calls a '1950s model of using up leftovers'. 'It brought tears to your eyes,' she winces — especially as for many Mandeville kids, their free school lunch (90 per cent of Mandeville's 400 students receive free school meals) might be their only hot meal of the day — and almost certainly their only healthy one. Children in deprived areas are three times more likely to be obese than those in less deprived areas and Mandeville is 'high-end deprivation. There's a lot of "ding food" — microwave food — or those little red and yellow chicken and chips boxes. That's what a lot of these kids will have as their evening meal. It costs a pound: four little pieces of chicken and about seven chips. Before we

became the packed lunch police, some of them used to bring that cold for lunch.'

That heartbreaking situation is starting to be rectified now that food has been incorporated into Mandeville's culture. The incredibly well-behaved Year 6s with whom I eat my burrito have been enchanted by the change. Emmanuel confides that healthy eating helps him 'live the lifestyle I want', and Mimina explains that 'the vegetables, in my opinion, are actually really nice. Last year I used to hate them, but now I really like them.' Every scrap of cavolo nero is gone from her plate. She's also psyched to study food science at GCSE, since children now get cooking lessons ('they choose their own chef names. I think my favourite was "Chefy" [pronounced as a pun on Geoffrey]', laughs Pagani). Even reception kids have exotic foods — samphire, candied beetroot, razor clams — brought into the classroom for investigation. And pupils are encouraged to take home recipes to cook for their parents, from whom the revamped school food has had an almost wholly positive reception. The only pushback came from the policing of packed lunches: parents were not happy about notes in bags asking them to avoid fruit winders ('The sugar is ridiculous,' winces Booth) and to remove crisps.

It's not just children and their parents getting cookery lessons. Part of the Chefs in Schools initiative is the planned Hackney Cookery School, set to open at Mandeville this year to train chefs looking to escape the hardcore, 80-hour treadmill. Just don't call them cooks. 'The status of the "school cook"

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is often very low,' explains Dimpleby. 'They're often the only member of staff who comes in by the back door.' Part of his aim with Chefs in Schools is to 'raise their status on a national level'. One of Pisani's first moves at Gayhurst was to create restaurant-style kitchen prep sections and to use the titles 'head chef' and 'sous chef' rather than school cook or the dreaded 'dinner lady'. "'Dinner ladies" is actually quite offensive,' laughs Pagani.

Change is inevitable, it's just slow. As Dimpleby points out: 'Food generally in our society is getting better. But institutions are always 10 years behind everyone else.' The great nugget rebuttal might be a while coming yet. But if Chefs in Schools has its way, the next generation of schoolchildren might just leave school not only healthy — but entirely untraumatised by powdered egg. (chefsinschools.org.uk)



Moroccan Bread (G/D)



Gayhurst Community School's budget is just under 80p a child per meal; Booth, Pagani, Church and Pisani don their whites; freshly baked bread; the school kitchen's prep area

Hair and make-up by Nohelia Reyes using Inika Organic and Leonor Greyll