

Schools

Nicole Pisani quits top London restaurant to make school dinners

Chef who made her name in Yotam Ottolenghi's Soho restaurant to serve up lunch for 500 students on a budget of 92p a child



Next week Nicole Pisani will serve pupils sweet potato and spinach dahl muffin cake, with celeriac and parsnip. Photograph: Graham Turner for the Guardian

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A top chef at one of London's chicest restaurants, where she has made her name cooking sumptuous Middle Eastern and Asian-inspired dishes, has left her job to work in a school kitchen.

Nicole Pisani made her name as head chef at Nopi – the Soho restaurant set up by chef and cookery writer Yotam Ottolenghi. From Monday, however, she will be preparing lunch for 500 schoolchildren at an inner London state primary school, on a budget of 92p a child.

Until recently, Pisani was serving up exquisite dishes such as whole twice-cooked baby chicken with lemon myrtle salt and chilli sauce, tea-smoked lamb cutlet with jalapeno salsa and miso aubergine, and lemon sole with burnt butter, ginger and nori – each setting diners back more than £20.

Ingredients like burrata, onglet, skordalia, yuzu and agrodolce featured regularly in the dishes she cooked for customers to enjoy amid the

glittering, bright-white surroundings of Nopi (named owing to its location north of Piccadilly Circus).

But exhausted from the 70- to 80-hour weeks, which are the norm at top restaurants, and the challenge of managing a brigade of 15 men (women are rare), Pisani, 34, decided to leave and look for a new challenge.



Yotam Ottolenghi's Nopi restaurant in Soho, where Pisani made her name.
Photograph: Katherine Anne Rose/Katherine Anne Rose

That came in the unexpected form of a tweet by Henry Dimbleby, co-founder of the fast food restaurant chain Leon and architect of the School Food Plan that came into force earlier this month, setting new, improved standards for all food served in schools.

In the tweet, he said the chef at his sons' school, Gayhurst community school in Hackney, had left and asked if there was anyone interested in the job. Dimbleby, who is passionate about transforming school food, also wants to change the way in which school cooks are perceived.

A friend of Pisani spotted the tweet and told her. The chef responded, applied, and cooked a trial meal for the entire school and the job was hers.

"I had an amazing time at Nopi. It was a massive learning experience for me. But after two and a half years I was tired," says Pisani. "I wanted a break. It's hard being on your feet for 16 hours a day."

What Hackneythe schoolchildren will make of their exciting new menu remains to be seen. Pisani plans to start slowly, keeping many of the dishes already familiar to pupils, but cooking them "beautifully", and with as much passion and care as she would cook one of Nopi's famed courgette and manouri fritters with cardamom yoghurt.

"I want to try and stick to the same menu they have, but cook it better," she says. Ideally she would like the children to eat from proper plates, rather than plastic trays, and she would like the cooks to wear chefs' jackets to instil pride.

"In school kitchens the mentality is they are cooks, not chefs. But it would be really nice to have people who love cooking in schools. I've always

loved feeding people. It's a profession, but the idea that you feed someone is so rewarding."

The children at Gayhurst have been eating good quality food for some time, with ingredients delivered daily and cooked on the premises. On the current menu is bolognese with wholegrain pasta, margherita pizza with salad and cauliflower cheese.

Next week, however, will see a few changes. On Wednesday, pupils will be served sweet potato and spinach dahl muffin cake, with celeriac and parsnip, smashed beetroot and labneh. On Friday, it's fresh salmon goujons or cheese and butternut squash quiche, with peashoots, sour cream and corn salsa.

"The kitchen staff are a bit nervous," says the executive head teacher, Louise Nichols. "But they will take it all on. It's fast and furious getting 500 children fed at lunchtime. They are very hard-working."

Pisani, meanwhile, is hoping to graduate to more exotic ingredients – clams, perhaps, and sumac, and maybe even kombu seaweed – but not for a while. "The kids wouldn't know what had hit them," she says.

Pisani grew up in Malta; her family were in the restaurant trade. Ingredients were always good quality, but meals were basic. Memories of the food she ate at the convent school she attended are of packed lunches, a tuna or chicken sandwich, prepared by her friend's mother. "All of my family own restaurants but none of them can cook," she says.

One of her aims at Gayhurst is to persuade the 150 children bringing in packed lunches to switch to school meals. She wants all the staff to enjoy her food, too (teachers are already encouraged to eat with the children with an offer of a free lunch) and she's hoping parents will also get involved.

"Nicole is smart and generally brilliant," says Ottolenghi. Dimpleby adds that he is hoping Pisani will help to take food, cooking and the profile of school cooks to a new level at Gayhurst, where he is a school governor.

Pisani will not only run the kitchen and prepare the food, she will also teach small groups of kids how to cook. The plan is to cultivate the school garden to provide ingredients, to grow mushrooms indoors and to learn about compost.

"What we are hoping to do is create a whole school approach," says Dimpleby. "We want to change the whole food culture in school, to give children – for life – an understanding of food and the ability to enjoy and cook food. It is one of the great pleasures in life."