

# A taste of the future?

A group of top chefs are leaving restaurants to work in school kitchens, with the aim of changing the health of a generation. **Jane Swift** meets the chef who started it all

**T**he kids learn so much when you have someone who loves food at the centre of your kitchen,' enthuses chef Nicole Pisani. 'We serve fresh fish, we grow mushrooms, we had someone in to talk about date syrup... We can make food part of the children's whole day instead of just an hour.'

Nicole is talking about the charity Chefs in Schools, which she co-founded in 2014 with Louise Nichols, executive head teacher at Hackney's Leap Federation of Schools, and Henry Dimpleby, co-founder of restaurant chain Leon and co-author of the Government's *School Food Plan*.

Formerly a senior chef in Yotam Ottolenghi's restaurant, Nopi, in London, Nicole gave up that role to work at Gayhurst Community School in Hackney, east London, and set up Chefs in Schools, with its main aim to introduce a healthy food ethos in schools. To do that, Nicole argues, schools need to hire a qualified chef and allow them to manage the kitchen the way they would manage a restaurant.

With a professional chef at the helm, the kitchen staff (often mums of pupils) are upskilled and trained in cooking a balanced meal. The first job when Nicole arrived was to clear out the powdered and packet food from the cupboards and to 'remove anything bought in ready-made, such as fish fingers, pies and frozen fries, a lot of which is quite standard for a school to be serving'.

## The children learn about healthy food and how to cook it



Chefs in Schools' Nicole Pisani

Nicole's approach is very different. 'We make it all ourselves,' she says. The advantages are multifold. The children learn about healthy food, where it comes from, how it's made and how to cook it. They benefit from a fresh, balanced midday meal, and learn skills to enable them to continue enjoying a healthy diet in the future. In addition, the kitchen staff become skilled cooks inspired about food. And, interestingly, the food costs for the school dramatically decrease.

'We make bread in-house every day and the food costs go down massively when making it fresh,' explains Nicole. 'We worked out how much the school will be saving. When we costed the ingredients, plus labour, to make the bread, it came to £50 per day. It would cost £140 to buy in the same amount of ready-made bread. And that's just one product. You can only imagine the savings.'

As well as managing the kitchen, Nicole runs regular cookery and nutrition lessons. 'The best way to engage the children is to make it exciting,' she says. 'They learn how to make a three-course menu, and they've been looking forward to today's butchery lesson all week. They cut up chickens and learn where the different cuts of meat come from. The education side is fun for them and for us, and it enables them to make fundamental changes to what they eat.'

In addition to providing an inspiring and unusual job progression for chefs,

working in schools allows for a much improved work/life balance. 'Working in a school allows much more sociable hours,' says Nicole, 'and during holidays I do pop-ups or work in a friend's restaurant, to keep up my skills and interest.'

She acknowledges that there are big challenges in working in a school, but the focus of her work has shifted. 'This is the ultimate feeding experience – we actually hand the food over to the children; we literally feed 500 children each day.'

It's obvious that Nicole is passionate about her role, and a great advocate of Chefs in Schools. The aim is to have 100 professional, restaurant chefs in 100 schools by 2023, and the charity plans

to expand the scheme outside London, particularly to places where there is a high percentage take-up of free school meals, and the need for good nutrition and food education is high.

'The best thing for the kids to see, when serving them, is staff proud of the food they have made,' says Nicole. 'I want to help more and more schools do this, make sure everything is cooked from scratch, and make it a part of everyday life.'

*Nicole Pisani's cookbook Salt, Butter, Bones: Mastering the art of great cooking (Seven Dials, £25) was published in September 2018.*

## NUTRITION BY NUMBERS

The nutrition-related statistics for UK children prove just how much Nicole's initiative is needed.

- 74% are not eating enough fruit and veg
- 25% are obese
- More than twice as many children in deprived areas are obese compared to affluent areas
- Only 1% of packed lunches are healthy



Nicole's fellow chef Oliver Pagani

- 64% eat too much red and processed meat
- Four million UK children are too poor to have a healthy diet
- 47% of households with children do not spend enough on food to meet the Government's dietary guidance – it rises to 60% for single-parent families
- Only 27% of 14- to 16-year-olds

report eating at least five portions of fruit and veg a day

Statistics from the Food Foundation, NHS Digital and the British Nutrition Foundation.



Pupils at Gayhurst are enjoying nutritional meals

## MOROCCAN CHICKEN

Nicole usually cooks this for 500 hungry children! But she's reduced the quantities for us so that it serves eight people.

### INGREDIENTS

- 2 tbsp olive oil
- 2 red onions, peeled and sliced
- 3 cinnamon sticks
- 2 tsp ground cumin
- 2 tsp of fresh grated or ground turmeric
- 16 chicken thighs, bone in
- 2 preserved lemons, pulp discarded and skin finely sliced
- a handful of star anise
- 1 litre chicken stock
- 200g good-quality olives, destoned
- 1 large bunch fresh coriander, leaves picked and chopped
- 6 spring onions, finely sliced

### METHOD

1. Heat the olive oil in an ovenproof pan and add the onion, along with the cinnamon sticks, cumin and turmeric.
2. Cook for 2-3 mins until it smells fragrant, then add the chicken and seal the skin, making sure you have a good golden colour. Add the preserved lemon and star anise.
3. Cover with chicken stock. Stir, bring to the boil, cover and place in the oven at 180°C/Gas 4 for 30 mins. Ideally, using a probe thermometer, check the temperature of the chicken after cooking – it should be 75 degrees.
4. Check if cooked, add the olives and then switch off the oven, and let rest, covered, for 20 mins before serving.
5. Sprinkle with coriander and spring onion, and serve with your choice of rice and vegetables.

