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Dance to your own beat

HOW OPERATING IN-HOUSE IS GIVING CATERERS FREEDOM AND DRIVE TO DO BETTER

MORE THAN JUST A SCHOOL

Park Community School near Portsmouth has established its own community farm to supply its spectacularly good in-house catering operation. Jane Renton went along to see how it works



Christopher Anders

I've said this before, and I'll say it again, we tend to view school catering through rose-tinted glasses, because rarely if ever do we get invited to schools that do not do their catering well. No-one ever rings us up and says, "Look, why don't you nip over to sample our execrable slops, we'd love a bad write-up in your mag." As Tolstoy wrote in *Anna Karenina*, "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Similarly, bad caterers are bad in their own inimitable way, while good school caterers tend to be good in much the same way and that is our particular journalistic challenge in our endless quest to find the new and innovative.

Imagine my surprise then, when I visited Park Community School in Havant, Hampshire, a school entirely unknown to me, even though it is only a 15-minute drive from my own front door: I discovered a first-class catering operation but one that really does do things differently and on a grander scale. Who has honestly ever been presented in a school as I was with a homemade basil sorbet as an in-between course palate cleanser, even at Eton or Harrow? Or, for that matter, been given an opportunity to sample a school's own homemade charcuterie made from the pigs from the school's two-acre smallholding?

We may have visited great school kitchens, seen their herb gardens, admired their bed of homegrown vegetables and elucked with delight at Maisie and Jessie their pet hens, but Park Community, a mixed co-educational secondary school with close on 900 pupils, is exceptional, even by those yardsticks. So far, pupils, staff and the kitchen team have raised some 80 pigs, prepared the ground in readiness for a second polytunnel of vegetables, tended to the school's pet pygmy goats, looked after the quails and collected their tiny eggs, and helped establish several hives for honey bees.

The farm is a small rural idyll in perfect harmony with much of the rest of Hampshire, the home of Jane Austen, famous for its enchanting countryside, coastline and relative affluence. Except that Park Community School is none of

those things: it is sited in Leigh Park, which constitutes Europe's second largest public housing estate, and is notorious for its high levels of deprivation. About half of all the school's pupils qualify for Pupil Premium funding.

Those social and economic disadvantages, however, co-exist with high aspiration. The school's head teacher, Christopher Anders, and his team are ambitious for their pupils. Their strategy is to create the right balance between the demands of the national curriculum and the type of wider education that more privileged children often take for granted; the extra-curricular cultural and educational experiences and trips that broaden the mind, instil confidence and prepare young people for adult life. Those are things that are not necessarily reflected in Ofsted inspections, though Park Community School is rated as 'good' by inspectors who are confined to examination of government prescribed targets.

Park Community is in Christopher's words "much more than just a school" – a phrase that is now the school's official slogan. Ultimately, the goal is to confound patronising, preconceived notions of what children from poorer and sometimes troubled backgrounds can achieve.

The Pupil Premium, which brings in an additional £400,000 of funding a year, is part of that. It allows the school to provide trips, which parents contribute to albeit at a significantly subsidised rate. Pupils from the school recently went to Tanzania and next year's Year 11s are already saving to visit New York. But educational and cultural trips nearer to home, which are often delivered free of charge, also play an important role.

"Our governors will and do spend money to allow us to do things like that," says Christopher.

The farm and the kitchen form an important part of the mix. Even a modest smallholding can teach you about animal husbandry, good land stewardship, the impact of climate and environment and the rural economy. It also teaches you patience and the importance of rearing – and killing – animals compassionately for food and sustenance.

"It teaches you patience and the importance of rearing – and killing – animals compassionately for food and sustenance"

The farm evolved from a decision taken in 2014 to take the school catering in-house from Hampshire County Council. The school wanted more flexibility over its kitchen and was frustrated at not being able to use any of its catering equipment outside school meal hours to teach pupils, for example, how to cook.

By 2014, the new school food standards were being introduced and after a frustrating hunt by the school's business manager Susan Parish to find out just how much such a service would cost for them to run themselves, the school decided it would run its own competitive tender, with several chefs and catering managers applying for the post.

"We ran the final selection based on Ready Steady Cook and it became apparent to us that what we really wanted was a chef rather than a catering manager.

The successful candidate was Steven Cross, an experienced chef who had worked in a number of top Hampshire restaurants, including JSW in Petersfield. During his training he had also worked at Buckingham Palace and Windsor Castle. He later appointed a sous chef, Alex Moody, and most recently another chef, Jayne Rogers.

This is a relatively expensive approach, but Steven has introduced many ideas that also generate revenues for the school, such as an event catering food wagon and consultancy services to neighbouring schools. He was also

inspired by chefs who grew their own produce, such as Raymond Blanc.

“Steven wanted to develop a smallholding where children could learn about food production and growing,” explains Christopher.

It has been a challenging project: it was difficult finding a suitable plot, and then once finding it, discovering that a low hanging phone cable across the field would delay the establishment of a portacabin site office and toilet by almost a year. Nevertheless, a proper kitchen garden is now well established, with a second polytunnel of vegetables currently being planned. The farm is five miles from the school and involves ferrying children to and from the site by one or both of the school’s mini-buses. It also involves the site team and teachers in a great deal of extra-curricular activity during evenings, weekends and holidays – an inconvenience perhaps, but one the school is prepared to countenance so great are the perceived benefits.

“We could do a lot more, but funds are limited,” says Christopher. “Our site team has to go up to the smallholding morning and evening to feed and tend to the pigs.”

The school’s chickens are tended by pupils and staff on the school’s main site in Leigh Park, along with a covey of quails. The hens’ eggs tend to be sold to staff, parents and visitors to raise additional funds, while the quails’ eggs tend to be sold to local restaurants along with charcuterie, which is by its very artisanal nature, produced in insufficient quantity for the school’s own needs.

So how has this endeavour helped the school in its core catering activities and food education activities? The answer is

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The school has its own pigs and children see the process from farm to plate

that it has helped wonderfully, despite the considerable extra work involved.

The food in the newly re-built kitchen and dining hall is of an extraordinarily high standard. I lunch on hot vichyssoise leek and potato soup, which is marvellous, followed by chicken with asparagus sauce, perfectly cooked carrots and green vegetables with crushed new potatoes in olive oil. No-one attending this school can possibly grow up not knowing what good food is.

But children have their own specific tastes, which is why a food ambassador group has been set up by pupils who work closely with Steven and his team to try out new foods, learn to cook various dishes and importantly report back on what fellow pupils want and think about their meals.

“We are trying to get our chefs to explore things with the children,” says Christopher. “Steven bought an ice cream maker recently, hence his home-made basil sorbet. He is also making sourdough bread for the school.”

Part of what Steven and his team do is to try and get pupils to try out new

things, but equally children tend to be conservative in their tastes. The school recently served pulled pork at lunchtime and while it went down well, pupils made clear that next time they would prefer it served in a bun.

All this and other perennial favourites with children, such as pasta dishes and filled baguettes also must be provided in menus that are changed on a three-week cycle and which are designed flexibly to take advantage of seasonal produce and good value offers from suppliers.

School meal uptake is around 50% in a school that does not allow pupils to wander up to fast food outlets during lunch breaks and while that may be respectable in terms of secondary schools, the head would like to see more pupils sitting down to a hot, cooked meal made from fresh ingredients each day. Significantly, however, turnover has increased by more than 80%, compared to what the school used to generate.

Park Community School was one of the first three secondary schools in the country to achieve a Gold Food for Life Served Here award, an incredibly



The school's Food Ambassadors

demanding attainment. Steven has won several awards for his work and was nominated in 2017 as EDUCATERING'S Secondary School Caterer of the Year.

This is a school that also operates a project called MUNCH, which provides free meals for children and families who are facing food poverty. Significantly, unlike many other feeding programmes, MUNCH runs through every school holiday, not just in the summer months. It also runs on Thursday evenings and provides one Sunday lunch monthly. The school is supported in this work by Fareshare and other organisations.

"I thought MUNCH would be very low key – just a few families showing up – but we quickly realised that mums, dads and grandparents who turned up to collect children, were hungry as well," says Christopher.

Park Community School is certainly much more than just a school. It has succeeded in turning the ordinary into something extraordinary and, thanks to the efforts of Christopher and his staff, enhanced the lives of the school's young charges.



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