

Feeling festive

Cultural and religious festivals are great for celebrating diversity, and there are few more enjoyable things to focus on than food. Snapdragons' *Mary Llewellyn* shares ideas for creative creations



While considering this piece about celebrating festivals in our nurseries, I stumbled across an article written in *Nursery World* in October 2001, just a few weeks after the events of 9/11 in America.

In the article, Judith Napier wondered whether celebrating religious festivals merely paid lip-service to the world's faiths and investigated how nurseries tackled awareness of diversity, often by focusing on exotic and colourful customs. Was this, she asked, the best way to promote understanding of the variety of cultures in our society?

Nearly 15 years later, we are still asking the same questions. With continuing conflicts and economic crises sweeping the world, our cultural mix has become even richer as we welcome people seeking a safe haven. Many of the latest additions to our country have come from other culturally similar European countries, but the new traditions they bring can still seem excitingly unfamiliar.

The Government's response has been to introduce guidance on promoting British values, which puts an onus on educators to 'actively promote', among other things, 'mutual respect and tolerance of those with

different faiths and beliefs'. Most early years providers have long recognised that in valuing each unique child and fostering partnerships with parents, embracing and learning about different cultures and religions is entirely natural. But are we guilty, as Judith Napier said, of bringing out the 'Twinkly lights at Diwali, a bit of hand-painting at Eid' so that we can tick the right festival boxes?

STARTING POINT

I believe that festivals are a wonderful starting point for investigating and celebrating diversity because there are so many common themes no matter what our backgrounds: sharing rituals, giving gifts and, most of all, sharing special food with friends and family. I love the Waldorf philosophy which, with its emphasis on natural learning, believes that festivals consciously remind us of the changing cycles of life and so celebrates the seasons and seasonal festivals that echo what is happening during different passages of the year.

Of course, this brings food back into focus, as so many of the foods we eat when we celebrate festivals across the world are eaten because they are in season. The joy of using food as a way of celebrating difference in nurseries is that it doesn't need to stop when the festival ends. Those new

**Snapdragons
Keynsham will be
making gingerbread
treats alongside
festival food with a
Filipino twist**

flavours and recipes shared from different homes can work their cohesive magic all year round.

Last month, during a week of Diwali, the children at Snapdragons Horfield enjoyed making, and eating, Shrina's special carrot halva: grated carrot cooked with milk and golden syrup until thickened, then pressed into a baking tin, sprinkled with desiccated coconut and allowed to cool before being cut into squares for serving. I think that would work well combined with oats for a carrot and coconut flapjack too, so maybe we will feature that in our winter menus.

In December, we will be celebrating Christmas early at Snapdragons Keynsham with our charity fundraising Winter Wonderland and, as well as the traditional gingerbread decorations, including a giant gingerbread man to be raffled for the charity, Raquel will be giving the festival food a bit of a Filipino twist in honour of her childhood and serving star anise marinated pulled pork.

For Raquel, Christmas was a very big deal in the Philippines, lasting for the whole of December and culminating in Noche Buena, or Christmas Eve, with a midnight mass, fireworks and a feast, perfectly reflecting the fusion of Spanish and Chinese culture that has influenced the region.

For Raquel, Christmas means lechon (roast pork), hamon (sweet-cured ham) and puto bumbong, a sweet treat of sticky purple rice cooked in bamboo tubes and flavoured with coconut and muscovado sugar often sold at stalls outside churches for people leaving midnight mass.

The significance of the rice in this treat harks back to the seasons, as November is the main rice harvesting season. She has promised us that we can all try puto bumbong this December, but she will also be producing one of her famous roast dinners for the children's Christmas parties.

Leading into the New Year, we will be turning our thoughts to Chinese New Year. Raquel loves to make

fortune cookies with the children – something she did as a child – filling the cookies with messages they have written for their families, but she also cooks some amazing Chinese dishes, including the best crispy duck pancakes you’ve ever had. The children love filling their own pancakes with shredded crispy duck, homemade plum sauce and shreds of spring onion and cucumber. Communal celebration food at its best!

This fusion of traditions and cultures sums up our modern approach to festivals. We love to discover and share the many and wonderful ways that people around the world cel-

brate the festivals that mark the passage of the year. In that spirit, my recipe in this December edition fuses a festive bird and some British seasonal vegetables with dried fruit and spices from North Africa and the Middle East (see box). ■

Mary Llewelin is operations manager for Snapdragons. Snapdragons Keynsham has the Food For Life Partnership Gold Catering Mark, a Children’s Food Trust Award, is accredited by the Vegetarian Society and was winner of the Nursery World Nursery Food Award in 2012 and 2014. See www.snapdragonsnursery.com

PUBLIC HEALTH ENGLAND

In comfort

Public Health England is stepping up its campaign to make breastfeeding in public more acceptable, with a collection of animated short films

Start4Life, Public Health England’s parenting advice service, launched a month-long campaign in November to encourage more women to breastfeed, and for longer. To achieve this, the campaign aims to tackle the common barrier of mothers’ reluctance to breastfeed in public.

A poll conducted as part of the campaign shows that almost three-quarters (72 per cent) of people are supportive of public breastfeeding. Yet more than a third of breastfeeding mothers shy away from doing so in public, with one in five (21 per cent) feeling people are not supportive and would rather not see them breastfeeding.

It is illegal to ask a breastfeeding woman to leave a public place, yet six out of ten mothers who breastfeed take steps to hide it in public and more than a third (34 per cent) feel embarrassed or uncomfortable.

To raise awareness of the issues, Start4Life has released these findings alongside new animated short films sharing real-life experiences of mothers breastfeeding in public, to help break down barriers and help normalise the behaviour.

TIPS AND ADVICE

Breastfeeding benefits both mother and child – from helping to protect the child from infection and disease to reducing mothers’ risk of getting breast and ovarian cancer. However, while 74 per cent of women start breastfeeding their children from birth, only 47 per cent are still doing so six to eight weeks later.

To help women, the Start4Life campaign offers tips from mums and experts on breastfeeding, as well as additional information and links to resources. The videos are available on the Start4Life Facebook page.

Other Start4Life information includes tips from midwives on the signs that show babies are feeding well and advice for partners. The campaign also encourages parents to sign up to Start4Life’s Information Service for Parents – a weekly email service about NHS-approved information and advice.

● www.nhs.uk/start4life/breastfeeding



CHRISTMAS TAGINE



Try this Christmas chicken tagine with sprout and cranberry couscous. Serves ten.

Ingredients

- 500g free-range chicken breast, diced into 2cm cubes
- 350g couscous
- 2 medium carrots, finely chopped
- 2 sticks of celery, finely chopped
- 100g dried apricots, chopped
- 400g chopped tomatoes
- 350g Brussels sprouts
- 1 large parsnip, finely chopped
- 100g dried dates, chopped
- 1 medium onion
- herbs and spices: 1 tbsp sweet paprika, bunch of coriander, 1 tbsp cinnamon, 1 tsp cumin seeds, 2 cloves of garlic (minced), 1 tsp white pepper, 1 tsp nutmeg, 4 bay leaves

Method

- Put a large saucepan of water on to boil with two of the bay leaves. Heat a tablespoon of oil in a large pan and sauté the chopped vegetables and the garlic for five minutes, stirring to prevent burning.
- In a dry frying pan, toast the cumin seeds quickly over a medium heat, then add them

to the vegetables with all the other spices and two bay leaves. Pour in the chopped tomatoes and a cup of boiling water.

- Chop the stalks of the coriander, retaining the leaves for garnish, then add the chopped dates, apricots, chicken and coriander stalks, mix them in and leave everything to simmer for 30 minutes, stirring occasionally.
- Meanwhile prepare the couscous: slice your sprouts finely, heat a tablespoon of oil in the cumin pan and saute the sprouts for 30 seconds, add the cranberries.
- Leave the sprouts and cranberries to soften on a low heat. Check the level of your boiling water – you need about 1½ cups – and pour in the couscous, then remove immediately from the heat, leaving until water is absorbed.
- Give it a quick stir, add the sprouts and cranberries and gently combine. Cover with a lid and leave to one side until the tagine is ready. Serve the tagine with the couscous and sprinkle with the coriander leaves.

For the recipe, with pictures, see pages 18-19 of Snapdragons’ magazine at <http://downloads.snapdragonsnursery.com/magazine/2015/11-January-2015.pdf>