

Super food!

At the Mulberry Bush nursery in Southampton, the winner of *Nursery World's* Nursery Food Award 2017, its manager says 'it is all about cooking with love'. *Karen Faux* finds out about its food ethos

Each child attending Mulberry Bush knows exactly who prepares their food, and that makes them feel really special. They enjoy watching chef Carol cooking their meals almost as much as they enjoy eating them. As co-owner and manager Rachael Thomson says, 'It is all about cooking with love.'

The smell of good food is always guaranteed to get the day off to a good start. 'This morning I received an email from one of our parents to say how lovely it had been bringing her son Arthur into the nursery with cooking smells wafting from the kitchen. Carol had popped out to say "hello" to him, which pleased him greatly,' says Ms Thomson.

Coming from a 'hugely foodie' family, she approaches the introduction of food to children in the same way that she would reading. 'Like opening young minds to the exciting world of literature, it's exactly the same with food,' she says. 'Our dishes are never bland, and their colours and flavours are a springboard for children's learning, whether this is linked to vocabulary, the maths of measuring or the science of baking.'

Underpinning Mulberry Bush's healthy eating ethos is its regularly reviewed food policy, which it shares



Children are involved in cooking



with parents in its Parent Handbook. All staff are made aware of the policy at induction and whenever it is updated, while communication with parents and staff about food is an ongoing process.

'We talk to them about our ethos towards food all the time,' says Ms Thomson. 'Whenever we review and launch new menus, we share them with parents and talk about changes and choices we have made. We send out regular parent and staff questionnaires about our practice, including one about food. This is really helpful in enabling us to gauge how aware parents are about what their children are being provided with, as well as their opinions.'

RELAXED MEALTIMES

Careful thought is given to how meals and snack times fit in with the children's nursery day. Rolling snack times are run in all rooms, which helps to avoid breaking children's play and allows them independence in their choices. In order to accom-

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modate 100 children for main mealtimes, Mulberry Bush splits its two to threes and pre-school rooms into two groups.

Ms Thomson says, 'Although this means that we actually have to stick to our times quite carefully, we give realistic time-frames, and because the groups are small and a practitioner remains with each one throughout their meal, it never feels rushed. Children are enabled to, and encouraged, to serve themselves from main dishes on each table.'

She believes that it is important to have serving cutlery that children can handle and enough dishes and jugs for each table to manage this, otherwise it would take forever and be disheartening.

'We would never ask a child to hurry up, although we do encourage them to eat. Some children just take longer to eat than others,' she says. 'This will serve them very well in adulthood as many of us over-eat because we eat too fast! We will always allow a child to remain at the

table until they have finished their meal at their own speed.’

FRESH SELECTIONS

Nursery World Awards judges were particularly impressed by children’s ability to talk about food knowledgeably and express their preferences. This has a lot to do with the fact that they regularly pop into the kitchen to help out, and that staff talk to all of them about their food at every meal.

‘All staff are encouraged to talk about the dishes and their ingredients as well as why different foods and drinks are important. For example, we talk about why it is important to drink water and remain hydrated,’ says Ms Thomson. ‘This is easy to illustrate by using the plants that we grow to demonstrate. If our tomato plants are a bit limp and we water them, then they perk up.’

Mulberry Bush also talks about plants and how, where and why things grow. Although its growing area is not huge, it involves children in the growing and tending process as much as possible so they have a tangible understanding of where their food comes from.

‘We also use real vegetables and fruit in our home corners so children get to handle it and explore food as a play substance. There are also lots of food-based activities for all age groups; some of these are cooking activities, but not all. This may mean using vegetables for printing or herbs and spices for a sensory activity.’

Mulberry Bush has an excellent relationship with its local food suppliers and this supports its reputation for first-class quality ingredients. Its greengrocer will often get in touch when it has something that is particularly nice, or encourage the nursery to choose a different product if it doesn’t feel that its first choice is the best option.

‘This is why you are likely to see ‘fresh fruit’ or ‘fruit platter’ on our menus and not specific fruit so that we can be flexible with the seasons and the best produce available,’ says Ms Thomson. ‘Because our suppliers are local, they are accountable. If we were unhappy with a product we can call them and address it immediately. I must say, though, that we have very rarely had to do this.’

She adds, ‘Our enthusiasm for food, and the quality of what we provide, ensures it is exciting as any other area of learning. We like making a big deal of food, and so do our children.’ ■

Cookery corner

Sweet potato and lentil dhal with flat breads

This dhal is great for settings with children with allergies as most of the main allergens (wheat, dairy, eggs) do not feature. The spinach and lentils are fabulous to get much-prized iron into children’s diets, and the squeeze of lemon gives a little hit of vitamin C, which helps with iron absorption. The flat breads are easy for children to help make and are savoury and delicious.

Serves 4/6

Dhal

Ingredients

- ✓ 1 tbsp sesame oil
- ✓ 1 onion finely chopped
- ✓ 1 garlic clove crushed
- ✓ 1 tsp finely grated ginger
- ✓ (optional) 1 red chilli, finely chopped
- ✓ 1½ tsp turmeric
- ✓ 1½ tsp cumin
- ✓ 2 sweet potatoes cut into chunks
- ✓ 250g red lentils
- ✓ 800ml low-salt vegetable stock
- ✓ 80g bag of baby spinach
- ✓ A squeeze of lemon juice

Method

- ✓ Heat oil in a heavy based pan, add onion and cook over a low heat for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally.
- ✓ Add garlic, ginger and chilli (if using) and cook for one minute then add spices and cook for a further minute.
- ✓ Turn up the heat to medium and add sweet potato and stir everything together so that the potato is well coated in the spice mix.
- ✓ Tip in the lentils, stock and seasoning. Bring the liquid to the boil.
- ✓ Then reduce the heat to a simmer and cook for 20 minutes or until the lentils are tender and sweet potato is cooked but still holding its shape.
- ✓ Add the baby spinach leaves as they are, or, if your child isn’t keen on spinach then whizz the raw leaves in a food processor till finely chopped and add to the dhal. Cook for a further two minutes. Just before you serve, add a squeeze of lemon juice and stir in.
- ✓ Serve with flat breads or rice.

Flat breads

Ingredients

- ✓ 100g plain flour
- ✓ 200g plain wholemeal flour
- ✓ Pinch of salt
- ✓ 100 fl oz warm water
- ✓ 2 tbsp olive oil (extra for cooking)

Method

- ✓ Put flour and pinch of salt into a large bowl.
- ✓ Add two tablespoons of olive oil and work into the flour with finger tips.
- ✓ Gradually add the water a little at a time, bringing the dough together with your hands.
- ✓ If the dough is too sticky then add a little more flour.
- ✓ Tip: do not wash sticky, doughy hands! Instead add a little flour and rub hands together to remove the dough.
- ✓ Knead the dough for about five minutes until it is a smooth, soft consistency.
- ✓ You can use dough immediately or cover with cling film and leave to rest for 30 mins.
- ✓ Divide the dough into four to six balls – depending on the size of flat bread you want.
- ✓ On a clean, lightly floured surface, roll out the flatbreads to about 5mm thick.
- ✓ Add a drizzle of olive oil to a non-stick frying pan over a medium heat.
- ✓ Cook each flat bread for approximately two minutes on each side. Pop into a warm oven covered with a clean tea towel to keep warm while you make the rest.

