

Eating out

Cooking and preparing food outdoors in all weathers can be challenging, as one Cornish nursery found out – but there are many benefits for children. **Nicole Weinstein** reports

In the picturesque Cornish village of Charlestown – well known as a filming location for the BBC series *Poldark* – a group of 20 pre-school children start their day with a walk to a patch of woodland where they prepare breakfast on an open fire.

‘Porridge with cinnamon and raisins or toasted bagels and warm milk are usually the morning favourites,’ says Tom Richardson, nursery manager at Naturally Learning Charlestown in St Austell and senior outdoor manager for the other four nurseries in the chain.

‘Each morning a different child helps us to light the fire using a flint and steel. All meals are eaten outdoors, except for in extreme weather conditions, and the children get involved in all aspects of food preparation throughout the day.’

SNACK TIME

Cinnamon rolls, bread, porridge, hot chocolate, cakes, scrambled eggs, vegetable soup, leek noodle soup and stews are just some of the snacks and meals that are prepared on the nursery’s Dutch Oven, a cast-iron cooking pot that sits on a tripod over the open fire. The setting also has long-handled frying

pans for cooking snacks such as courgette pancakes (see Recipe), as well as a popcorn pan.

Snacks such as these are usually eaten mid-morning, after children have explored the forest, taking part in a range of activities from splitting logs with a hammer and axe to learning phonics, engaging in early maths activities and creating transient art installations.

‘We will often make our own snack on the fire from foraged wild foods that grow around us,’ explains Mr Richardson. ‘We have a foraging expert on the team and this year alone we have made wild mushroom soup, three-cornered leek and potato soup, blackberry jam, dandelion marmalade, honeysuckle cordial, elderflower tea and much more. We’ve also picked and eaten wild garlic, alpine strawberries, rosehips, nasturtiums, penny worts, honeysuckle flowers, sweet chestnuts and elderberries, to name but a few.’

Also, if there are ingredients growing in the garden that can be added to the dish, the children pick them and help to prep them to be added to the food. They have recently grown tomatoes and courgettes, which have gone into pasta dishes and pancakes, and they are currently growing kale and



ABOUT THIS SETTING

- The first **Naturally Learning** setting in Poltair was established in 2012. There are now five nurseries in the group.
- The **Charlestown** setting offers 40 places (eight places for babies aged birth to two years; 12 Explorers aged two to three; and 20 Pre-schoolers aged three to five).
- The Pre-schoolers are outside from 8am-4pm (and longer if it is still nice in the late afternoon and early evening); the Explorers and babies are also outside for much of the day, regardless of the weather conditions.
- **Tom Richardson** holds an EYT qualification, and the outdoor pre-school staff team includes two QTS teachers, a foraging expert who is training to do her Forest School Level 3, and an archaeologist with no childcare qualification.



cabbage that are hardy enough to last through the winter and will provide greens for early next year.

A favourite treat that the children like to cook for themselves is toffee apple slices. Mr Richardson says, ‘They slice an apple into eighths, dip it in a sugar and cinnamon mix and then toast it on the fire on the end of a skewer. The sugar melts and caramelises on the apple.’

EATING OUTDOORS

Mealtimes take place around the fire circle, where the children sit on logs and use straw bales for tables. When the weather is poor, a large army surplus parachute that is suspended in the trees opens out to create a huge circus-top-shaped shelter around the fire circle.

‘The children find it calming to eat and watch the wildlife around them,’ says Mr Richardson. ‘The woodland is home to a number of different species of birds that can be heard chirping in the trees and some very inquisitive squirrels that the children love to watch.’

‘It’s a much more inviting and happy experience when we eat outside. The clattering of plates, cutlery and other sounds are no

recipe: courgette pancakes

Ingredients

100g plain flour
3 eggs (can substitute with hummus for a vegan recipe)
100ml milk (water or oat milk works here for vegans)
2 courgettes
1tbsp oil

Method

■ Grate the courgette and wring out excess liquid through a tea towel.

- Combine all ingredients together (except the oil).
- Place the oil in a frying pan and pour in the batter mix to cook.





case study: Flo

Three-year-old Flo joined the setting last year and struggled with lunch times. Mr Richardson explains, 'By the time we got to July, we would have over 20 children sat around three tables for lunch in a room with a very high ceiling. This meant that lunch was always a very noisy experience that Flo did not cope well with. We would regularly find her hidden away in the Sprite Den, away from the other children and not wanting to eat her lunch.'

'We believed that lunch inside was a sensory overload for Flo and she simply couldn't

manage with all of the noise and heightened sensory experience that came with such a large group sitting down and eating together in the hall.

'Since we have moved to eating outside, Flo is much happier around meal times and will sit with the group around the fire circle and join us all for lunch. At first, she would only sit on an old tree stump next to the fire circle, but after a couple of weeks she had joined in fully with the group. I believe the large communal circle and the decreased intensity of noise have made the biggest impact on her.'

longer so loud the children can't think, and our children really benefit from it. Also, nothing quite compares to cooking on the fire. The food tastes different. There is an earthy, smoky depth of flavour to whatever we cook that lets you know that it has been prepared out in the wild over an open flame.' (See case study.)

Juliet Robertson, an early years consultant specialising in outdoor learning and founder of Creative STAR Learning Company, says providing opportunities for children to eat outside helps give them a broader range of eating experiences.

'Not every child may get to enjoy a picnic, cook food over a fire, have a barbecue or feel the steady warmth of a hot drink sipped on a cold day,' she points out. 'They may not have opportunities to transfer the skills acquired through eating a snack inside a school or nursery to other contexts. Many children's experiences of food may be screen-based, as they watch TV or the computer while eating, thereby losing out on the social aspect of eating and sharing a meal together.'

EXTREME WEATHER

The children have been spending the bulk of their day outdoors since

the start of 2017 when a local property developer granted the setting permission to use a piece of woodland that was formerly the ropewalk for Charlestown harbour.

Previously, they were outside for half the day, by making the most of the garden at the old church hall, where the setting is based, and regular trips to the beach and local parks. Now they are outside from 8am to 4pm.

But moving mealtimes outdoors has its challenges.

'One of the main challenges to eating outdoors is the practical aspects of catering in a variety of weathers,' says Mr Richardson. 'Although the majority of our lunches are prepared fresh daily inside the nursery by our chef Lindsay, we still have to transport it to the woods in a metal garden trolley along a small dirt track, making sure we don't spill any.'

'When lunch is finished, the children scrape their left-over food into one of two trugs – compostable and non-compostable – and the dishes go into a large trug to soak and then we wheel it back inside to be cleaned.'

'Another challenge is eating on the straw bales we are using as tables. They are a useful, inexpensive resource but they will not last the winter. We hope to have a budget to build our own tables and chairs soon.' ■

→ OUTDOOR COOKING STARTER KIT

- **FireSteel**, <https://bit.ly/1UjWVZS>
- **AmazonBasics Heavy Duty Folding Campfire Grill, X-Large**, £33.99, www.amazon.co.uk
- **Dutch Oven**, from £34.95, <https://bit.ly/2REPLjX>
- **Gardeco COOK-IRON2 Long Handled Frying Pan**, £21.99, www.amazon.co.uk
- **Popcorn Pan**, <https://bit.ly/2RCAss0>

GOOD PRACTICE: EATING OUTDOORS

- Hand-washing is key, but choosing environmentally friendly soap is also very important. Tippy taps – suspended water containers – are excellent for hand-washing; otherwise use a big bowl or trug. (To make a tippy tap, see: www.wateraid.org.)

[org/uk/sites/g/files/jkxooof211/files/schools-challenge-ks1-tippy-tap-instructions.pdf](http://www.wateraid.org/uk/sites/g/files/jkxooof211/files/schools-challenge-ks1-tippy-tap-instructions.pdf).

- Cover food serving tables with a wax cloth or plastic tablecloth to keep them clean.
- The number of pots and pans you have is less

important than how well you care for the ones that you do have. Dutch ovens and other cast-iron pans will rust if not looked after. So, if it is going to rain, erect your shelter and put on your fire early to keep the pans as dry as possible.