

caterer and hotelkeeper

Leading debate, inspiring success

Keeping the customers satisfied

The campaign for healthier school food may have failed to convince some pupils, but Harrison Catering proves it can still be popular. *Tom Vaughan* reports

When the media latched on to stories of parents pushing junk food through school gates to feed their salad-wary kids, the situation was, arguably, somewhat overblown. But, however much credence you lend to tabloid reports, you'd have to admit that children aren't the most eager age group to embrace fresh fruit and vegetables.

Harrison Catering Services, though, has been successfully introducing healthier meals to its 63 Lambeth schools since long before the Jamie Oliver effect. The result has been a rise in meal uptake from 53% to 72% over the last two years.

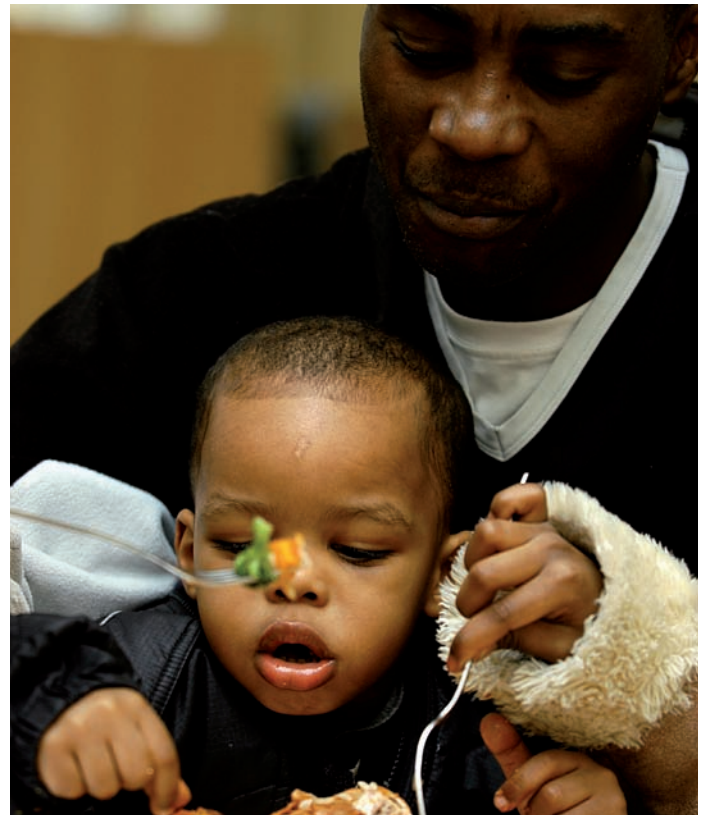
Nicola Turk, manager client services of Harrison's Lambeth contract, says the key to this is common sense: "We don't serve boiled fish with parsley sauce because the children wouldn't eat it," she says.

For the Lambeth contract there's a three-week menu cycle that changes twice a year. However, individual schools don't have to stick rigidly to this.

"This is more of a framework to work within," says Gareth Harrison, director of group business. "The degree to which a school might vary this will fluctuate across the borough."

In order to provide bespoke menus for different schools, Harrison consults with school councils, composed of pupils, and with the designated adult responsible for school meals, usually the head teacher.

Meals will often differ across the borough depending on taste



SAMPLE MENU

MONDAY

Savoury lamb and veg
Fish Wellington
Spiced vegetable rice
New potatoes
Seasonal vegetables
Salad selection
Sponge with custard
Fruit yogurt, fresh fruit

TUESDAY

Creole chicken
Cheese and tomato pizza
Corn chowder

Rice

Seasonal vegetables
Salad selection
Ice-cream wafer cup
Fruit yogurt, fresh fruit

WEDNESDAY

Jamaican lamb pie
Salmon and basil pasta
Jacket potato with
baked beans
and Cheddar cheese
Boiled potatoes
Seasonal vegetables

Salad selection

Fresh fruit fondue with
blackcurrant dip
Fruit yogurt, fresh fruit

THURSDAY

Tandoori chicken
Lentil cottage pie
Three-bean chilli
Chunky chips or braised
potatoes
Seasonal vegetables
Salad selection
Chocolate pudding

with chocolate sauce

Fruit yogurt, fresh fruit

FRIDAY

Mild lamb curry
Herb-crusted fish with
lemon mayonnaise dip
Feta- and vegetable-
stuffed peppers
Herb rice
Seasonal vegetables
Salad selection
Tropical fruit oat bar
Fruit yogurt, fresh fruit

and ethnic composition. In a school with a strong Portuguese community, chicken might be offered in a piri-piri style, whereas in a school where there's a strong Indian presence, chicken korma might be preferred. Taste and feedback is also taken into consideration. For example, lamb meatloaf is included on three-quarters of the menus, but in areas where pupils are more cautious about non-British-influenced dishes, this is excluded. "Often a recognition in our dishes of what pupils might eat at home

goes a long way to ensuring it's popular," says Turk.

Recipes are put together by Turk, the group managers of the Lambeth contract, and its craft trainer, who is responsible for carrying out training days and one-on-one help sessions with kitchen staff.

Turk says the menu must continually evolve to keep children interested while keeping old favourites like handmade pizza. To achieve this, as much feedback as possible is sought from staff and pupils.

Far left: Initiatives include juice and smoothie weeks

Below: Lambeth has a three-week menu cycle that changes twice a year
Cooks and kitchen staff are also invited to send in recipes, and a

cooks forum takes place once a term to get feedback and to bounce recipe ideas around with staff.

To provide the 63 Lambeth schools with enough meat and vegetables, the company employs a butcher and a greengrocer. "As much as possible we use fresh, seasonal produce," says Harrison. "We try to buy seasonal produce when it's at its most competitive. We like as much as possible to be fresh; the menu will only feature a couple of frozen vegetable items a week, at most."

With the strong possibility that kids will return home from school to far less healthy meals, Harrison sees food education as a key role. As part of its contract with Lambeth, Harrison is

involved directly with the children in activities such as salad and vegetable workshops, where children are taught to prepare salads and learn more about fresh produce.

Initiatives like juice and smoothie week, when pupils can make fresh fruit drinks, a weekly

deli day with cold meat and salad selections, and outdoor barbecues all add variety and interactivity to the menu. "We're trying to get away from the label of healthy food," says Turk. "We're trying to cook food that's healthy but also fun."

When so many children are objecting to the disappearance of junk food from school menus, to what does Turk attribute Harrison's continued success?

"It's about giving them what they want but making sure it's healthy and fresh," she says. "We're continually training staff to make sure what they deliver is high quality so that it's popular with the pupils. A good ingredient cooked badly will always taste bad."

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HARRISON IN LAMBETH

Number of schools	63
Number of meals a day	About 10,000
Cost per meal to the parent	£1.45
Council subsidy	49p
Total per meal	£1.94
Profit per meal	8.5p
Gross profit margin	4.6%



RECIPE: JAMAICAN FISH PATTIES

INGREDIENTS

(20 portions)

For the rough puff pastry

450g plain flour
340g margarine, refrigerated
1tbs vinegar
280ml ice-cold water
2tsp turmeric

For the fish mixture

1.4kg pollack fillets
60ml oil for frying
120g onions, chopped
120g fresh carrots, diced

120g sweet potato, diced

1/4tsp turmeric

1/2tsp chilli powder

1/2tsp ground ginger

1 1/2tsp thyme

680g tinned kidney beans

120g frozen peas

METHOD

For the pastry, mix and sieve dry ingredients into the bowl of the mixing machine. Cut margarine into small

dice. Toss through the flour by hand. Add the vinegar to the water and pour all the liquid into the mixing bowl. Mix to a soft dough at slow speed using a dough hook or pastry knife.

Depending on the size of your work surface you may want to divide the dough into anything from two to six pieces at this stage. Roll out each piece

to form a rectangle roughly twice as long as wide. Give it a book turn by folding the edges of the rectangle's short side into the middle and then folding the dough in half. You will have four layers. Press gently together and leave to rest in a refrigerator for 15 minutes.

Remove from refrigerator, repeat the rolling and folding

process, then cover with a clean cloth or plastic bag. Leave in the refrigerator overnight and repeat the process the following day. Store in the refrigerator until needed.

For the fish mixture, skin the fish and cut each piece into strips, checking for bones. Heat the oil in a sauteuse and fry the onions, sweet potato

and carrots until soft. Add the seasonings. Stir in the fish and fry until evenly browned. Add the kidney beans and peas. Allow the mixture to cool slightly.

Roll out the pastry and cut with a 105mm cutter. Fill the pastry rounds with the fish mixture and crimp edges.

Bake at 200°C for 25-30 minutes. Serve immediately.