

# THE BREAKFAST CLUB

School food has gone up in the world. Semolina has made way for home-grown produce and mouth-watering menus, writes **Glynis Kozma**

**F**EW OF US CAN FORGET THE image of Oliver Twist, bowl in hand, asking, "Please, sir, I want some more".

It would be unfair to compare independent schools' catering with Victorian workhouses, but school food did have a reputation for leaving much to be desired.

Emily, who attended boarding school told me, "Former pupils' abiding memories include the awfulness of school food. Blancmange and cheese flan were the lowlights." As a parent now looking at prep schools for her son, Emily's experiences demonstrate the changes that have occurred in school catering.

"My mouth was watering at one menu. At another school, the children were served home-baked cookies and innocent smoothies at break times."

Catering for large numbers, as well as pupils with food allergies and intolerance, must test the best catering departments. How do schools manage and what do they offer?

The Dragon School, Oxfordshire, recognises the importance of food and caters for 800 pupils aged 4-13 years.

"By ensuring a pupil is nutritionally catered for, they will be supported throughout their school day. Our menus are designed to tempt children of all ages to 'have a try', particularly if we are having special menus such as the Roman, Tudor or Chinese Days." All vegetables are steamed, fried food is kept to a minimum, and unlimited fresh fruit is available for children at all meal times. Pupils are taught about the origins of the food, including air miles and whether it is local produce. Some of it is from the school's garden.

Home-grown, and home-reared, produce is central to the menu at The Elms School, Worcestershire. The school



Above, reaping the rewards of the Gardening Club at Sandroyd School, Wiltshire

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children, is the oldest prep in the country, and backs on to acres of land – which includes the site where the school originated. The majority of pupils are boarders. Headmaster Alastair Thomas says, “Food is a very important part of a boarding school. We use local suppliers as far as possible and take pride in keeping our children and staff well. We have cooked breakfasts, a meal at lunchtime, home-baked bread and biscuits for tea and then a prepared supper at 6.30pm. In Home Economics, the children learn how to grow flowers, fruit and vegetables. Every child is responsible for preparing a meal at the school and anything that is not brought into the school is grown on site. All lettuce used during the summer months comes from the school. Our own beef, pork and eggs appear on the menu from time to time.”

Canford School, Dorset, a boarding school for pupils 13-18, has menus that would make most parents envious. On offer at lunchtime is a vegetable soup, three main courses, including a vegetarian option, baguettes, potatoes and pasta. A typical menu includes: roast vegetable soup, lentil soup, sweet chilli mushrooms, mushroom rice, beef goulash, chilli tofu, and a selection of fruits or fruit. Evening meals include main courses with several vegetables, and favourites such as Dorset cake or Sticky Date pudding.

At many schools, they source supplies locally as far as possible,



**Above, pupils at The Elms School, Worcestershire, learn how to grow flowers, fruit and vegetables. Below, a mini orchard at The Elms provides apples, pears and plums for the kitchens**

and explain, “While cost is important, it is not the driving decision factor.”

How do they cater for children who need special diets?

“A direct approach is encouraged. Pupils meet the caterers – sometimes with their parents or medical staff. We show them menus and make sure there are items on offer that are appealing. As a rule, we limit the use of flour in food, using cornflour in soups and sauces.”

The Dragon has a menu from which they can meet the needs of each child, rather than sticking to a rigid gluten or dairy free menu.

But given these tempting menus, how are parents reassured that their children choose healthier options?

Canford says, “Care is taken with regard to high fat in food and in cooking procedures. Chips appear on the menu cycle, but not regularly. The use of salt and sugar is minimised, and herbs and spices maximised. During the meal times we focus on making the food look as appetising as possible.”

The Dragon publishes *Healthy Dragons – A Healthy Relationship with*

*Food and Eating*. This is a pupil friendly booklet that teaches children about food, body type, weight and the influence of the media.

Many schools take a democratic approach to catering. All of the ones I spoke to invite pupils’ opinions.

At Canford, there are regular food committee meetings that allow pupils to voice and express their suggestions.

Meanwhile at The Dragon, the catering manager attends pupil-led Food Committee Meetings with day and boarding pupils.

It would appear that schools take food seriously. An increasing number publish their menus online, and many read like Michelin-starred restaurants.

The days of soggy cabbage and wilted lettuce are over. Schools realise that pupils and parents want high quality food and will manage their budgets to provide this; they also know that if they don’t, another school will. 

