



Roast chicken and broccoli pie with a crisp puff-pastry lid, served with a side of steamed carrots? A pasta salad with pesto and mozzarella, or a cup of Thai-style sweet potato and lemongrass soup, followed by a fresh fruit salad for pudding?

It is a lunch menu that would not be out of place in a smart cafe, and it tastes as good as it sounds. The food is from the lunch room at St Andrew's College, a co-educational private school in Booterstown, in the south Dublin suburbs. It has about 1,300 pupils, aged from 5 to 18.

Lunch comprises largely healthy fare, and the students love it — but this was not always the case. Sixth years John Guilfoyle, Demi Awosika, Gavin McDaid, Lily Mae Boorman, Lara Sommerville and Sophie Carr are tucking into a selection of the day's options. A few years ago, they say, they would have brought lunch from home most days; now they eat in the canteen several times a week, at lunchtime and in the evening, between sessions of night study.

"I plan which days I'm going to eat in the canteen around the menus that are up on the screens around the school," says Lily Mae.

"There's so much more choice now," says Lara, whose favourite is the pasta salad with chorizo and roasted peppers. Demi says that the food is very different from the way it used to be. "Before, there were cookies and 7Up, and they are gone now. I was hesitant at first, but I like it now. You get lots of veg with the main course."

Cookies and Coke go to the bottom of the class

KATY MCGUINNESS



At first they rebelled against losing their fizzy drinks, but now pupils at a south Dublin school love the healthy meals they get as part of a pilot project by the Irish Heart Foundation

"The puddings for night study are really good — profiteroles, banoffee pie, chocolate cake, victoria sponge," says head boy John, who is a member of the Under-21 Irish hockey squad and presumably burns off enough calories to be able to indulge his sweet tooth.

It is not just the students who are eating better than before. Yvonne Chapman, who teaches Spanish, says she has started eating lunch in the canteen again after years of bringing her own.

"The food is fantastic — I'm always looking for recipes, and I'm trying new things and expanding my palate. At staff meetings we used to get biscuits, and now it's fruit lollipops."

The dramatic change in the school's kitchen is the result of a deliberate strategy. "We did surveys of the parents and the students, and it was clear that people weren't happy with the food," says principal Joan Kirby. "As a school we are very much into well-being — we promote an ethos of healthy body, healthy mind — and we knew that the food needed to improve." Kirby and the school's

Making the grade Carr, above, and her fellow students at St Andrew's, below, enjoy the healthier options on the menu

catering company, Sodexo, joined forces with the Irish Heart Foundation, to participate in a pilot programme to improve the food. St Andrew's addressed its menu planning and cooking methods, and became the first school to receive the charity's healthy-eating accreditation.

"Sinead Shanley, the IHF dietician, advised us to make the changes incrementally, so we started out by installing lots of water fountains around the school, before we took the fizzy drinks out of the vending machines," says Kirby.

Sodexo provides catering services to businesses, as well as fee-paying schools in Ireland, including Blackrock College, in Blackrock and Clongowes Wood College, in Co Kildare. All the food in schools is cooked fresh and from scratch, and no processed ingredients are allowed. The company uses only Irish meat, from Bord Bia-approved sources.

"We recognise that schools are a unique and different case, and in boarding schools there is a particular responsibility for the health and welfare of the students; it's part of the pastoral remit," says Deirdre



→ Saunders, of Sodexo. "The students want food that they perceive as trendy and healthy, and that's quick to eat — the kind of thing that they see on the high street. We have an in-house development team that supports the chefs, although each chef is autonomous in their own kitchen."

A 2015 survey by the IHF found that students in 51% of Ireland's secondary schools were exposed to unhealthy food and drinks high in fat, sugar and salt every day, and 40% of schools did not provide free drinking water for pupils. At a time when one in five teenagers is obese or overweight, there is no national standard in relation to food provision in post-primary schools.

Chef Dan Cruickshank worked in restaurants, including A Caviston in Greystones, in Co Wicklow, before he joined Sodexo at St Andrew's earlier this year. He has been key to the success of the pilot project.

"When I was approached about the job, I wasn't sure I wanted to work in schools," he says. "I had visions of tapioca pudding. To be honest, it went down very badly with the students when we took away the fizzy drinks and the

sugary snacks. There was a bit of a revolution.

"But now they are eating the food and I find it rewarding. The most popular dishes are lasagne, chicken curry and roasts — the old favourites. The difference now is that they are made from scratch on the premises, so they are just like what they would get at home. The pulled-pork sandwich is another really popular option."

Cruickshank makes bread, including focaccia and a seeded brown loaf, and a different dairy-free and gluten-free soup every day. He has got rid of the deep-fat fryer. On Fridays, which is as close as it gets to a "cheat day", the kitchen makes oven-baked twisty fries to accompany a Cajun-spiced chicken fillet burger.

His team of eight chefs produces fresh salads each day (couscous with apricots and roasted vegetables one day, Asian 'slaw with chicken and rocket the next) and they chop the fruit for the fruit salad by hand. A large tub of fruit salad looks just as appetising as the ones in Marks & Spencer — it contains pineapple, watermelon, grapes and orange — but costs just 75c.

"Kids will eat fruit when the work is done for them," says Saunders. "They don't want to spend their break peeling a whole orange and getting their hands sticky."

Cruickshank keeps portion sizes smaller for the junior school children, and has become adept at hiding vegetables in their meals. So far, he says, the only dish that has not gone down well with the students is fish pie — even though he uses the same recipe that he did in A Caviston. (The staff loved it, however.) "Since Dan took over there have been no complaints about the food," says Kirby.

To date, the IHF has accredited 20 schools around the country, for adhering to its food guidelines. The organisation will audit schools every two years to ensure continuing compliance.

"There are no national requirements as to the food that a school can and can't serve, so we are calling for a national standard," says Shanley. "To date, it's been a free-for-all, and the quality of food varies enormously from one school to the next. In essence the award programme is calling for healthier choices in

'In Japan, the focus is on food education'

Japan has one of the lowest rates of childhood obesity in the world. Fiona Uyema spent three years living there, first as a student and later as a teacher, working in a rural village.

"I went back last year and talked to the students, teachers and canteen staff. They get it so right. There is a focus on food education in schools, and the kids get excited about it through doing projects."

While Uyema was back at the school, there was a focus on the hidden ingredients in products that are targeted at children. Children were given a newsletter to take home, with cartoons and fun facts about food.

"Lunches are made in school. A nutritionist or dietician devises a seasonal menu for the school year."

"They manage food waste, so if there are things that the kids don't eat, they change the menu."

"The food is subsidised by the state — parents pay the equivalent of €2-€3. The children help to prepare for lunch by setting the tables and pouring soup. Each child gets a tray that's divided into four sections with soup, either rice, noodles or potatoes, something like a pork chop with



Fiona Uyema visited Japan, where children learn about food at school, and where nutritious lunches for pupils are subsidised by the government

miso seasoning, and vegetables. "It's simple, healthy food — and the calorie count is worked out so that it meets the nutritional needs of the children."

"I've noticed since my son Scott started school that parents here feel pushed towards processed and convenience foods that can be eaten in a short period of time with no mess. The focus is on handiness rather than nutrition, with children being given crackers because they're easy. I give Scott things such as rice balls — they

don't fall apart and you can put whatever you like in the middle; kids get sick of sandwiches."

"I have given a few workshops in schools and I am really trying to find a way to change the way children eat in school — the government should run a pilot programme in a few schools and learn from the way they do it in Japan. Food education should be on the curriculum — children want to be healthy and strong. It's all about balance. Kids in Japan still get treats, but fewer of them."

School rules

The Irish Heart Foundation's guidelines for healthier school meals

● BREAD, CEREALS, POTATOES, PASTA AND RICE

One or more types of food from this group should be offered at each meal. A choice of wholemeal/wholegrain should be included. Starchy food cooked in fat or oil, chips and potato wedges, for example, should be offered no more than three days each week.

● FRUIT AND VEGETABLES

One or more portions of vegetables or salad must be offered with a hot meal, sandwich or as an accompaniment every day. Whole or chopped fruit should be available all day, every day.

● MILK, YOGHURT AND CHEESE

At least one portion of food from this group should be provided every day.

● MEAT, POULTRY, FISH, EGG, BEANS AND NUTS

At least one meat or poultry option and one other choice of food from this group should be offered daily. One serving is 100g/4oz of raw meat, poultry or fish, six dessertspoons of peas or beans. Try to offer fish as part of a main dish at least once a week.

● HEALTHIER DRINKS

Offer free, fresh drinking water. Do not offer sugar-sweetened drinks. Juice drinks with no added sugar and milk drinks (with less than 5% sugar content) are acceptable.

● FOODS HIGH IN FAT, SUGAR AND SALT

Foods high in fat, sugar and salt — chocolate bars, crisps, sweets, cakes, pastries, for example — should not be provided by school canteens. Alternatives such as popcorn, dried fruit, unsalted nuts, nut bars, ricecakes and oatcakes are suggested. If hot food is provided, food that is deep-fried, batter-coated, or processed should be offered no more than twice a week.



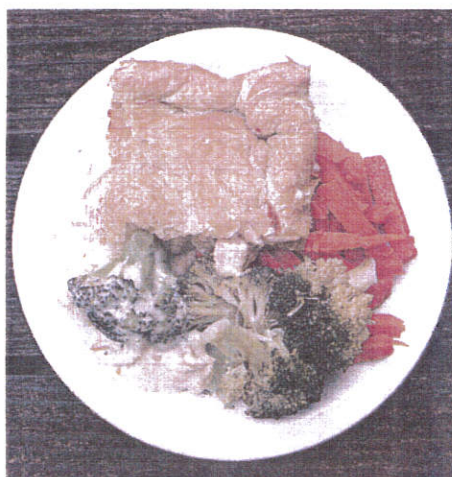
schools and asking that food from the 'top shelf' that is high in fat, sugar and salt [HFSS] should not be permitted.

"The Department of Education and Skills' 2015 circular on the promotion of healthy lifestyles in post-primary schools does not recommend the removal of HFSS products from sale in schools, or the removal of HFSS marketing from schools. Instead, there is a presumption that HFSS will be available and the emphasis is placed on managing their sale and promotion." Of course, not every

school is as well-resourced as St Andrew's to implement healthier options, nor do they have their own Dan Cruickshank.

"In some schools it's a one-woman show," says Shanley. "The kitchen is poorly kitted out and all they are capable of is chicken nuggets and pizza slices. We are lobbying for the introduction of a sugar tax, which would be used to fund schools to invest in the equipment that they need to be able to offer healthy, normal food."

Despite the economic and logistical challenges, the IHF has worked successfully with a number of schools. One that has received the IHF healthy eating award is Donahies Community School in Kilbarrack, Dublin, a mixed



First-class fare
Guillfoyle, above,
used to bring his own
lunch to school most
days. Not any more;
right, St Andrew's
chef Dan Cruickshank
prepares fresh salads
every day and
wholesome meals
such as chicken pie
with broccoli and
steamed carrots, left



secondary school with nearly 600 pupils. "I felt for a number of years that the menu in school was not good enough," says principal Peter Keohane. "We had a long lunch break, so students went home for lunch and then attendance was less in the afternoons, maybe only 75%-80% of what it had been in the morning."

"We decided to cut the lunch break, not allow them to go home, but to finish half-an-hour earlier in the afternoon."

"At around the same time we brought in an outside provider, Kevin Craven, of Glanmore Foods, and started to work with Sinead. She analysed our menu and made suggestions, and we banned fizzy drinks and confectionery from the vending machines outright; the only 'treat' that's available now is cereal bars."

"The food has become healthier. For C3 they get a healthy sandwich or pasta with water and fruit, although as with books and uniform, we have discretion as to who doesn't have to pay."

"We are competing hard for numbers here, and the fact that one school down the road is serving curry sauce and chips could be enough to attract 25 more kids into the school, so it's important that our food appeals to the students."

"I see a change, in that the kids are beginning to understand the importance of improving their eating habits. It's never going to be a five-star restaurant but neither are we providing Coke and chips with curry sauce," says Keohane.

"In an area such as ours, sometimes the cheapest option is the first choice, but there's a responsibility on me to provide something better. I'm conscious that what we give them might be the best meal of their day."

Shanley says that some schools are making money from selling high-fat, high-sugar foods and that change means hard choices have to be made. "In order for food to work in a school there has to be volume," she says.

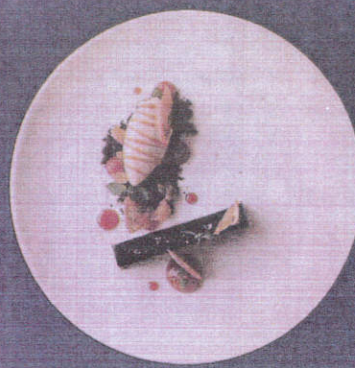
"So we have to figure out what's affordable and will sell. If it tastes good, they'll eat it. At the moment, the government contribution to the food in Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools is unregretted-so a school can choose to spend the money provided on crisps and chocolate bars."

"The chicken baguette roll is the number-one selling product in Irish schools," says Shanley. "It contains 1,000 calories and that's the equivalent of four-and-a-half slices of bread. There's a lot of work to do."

SIDE ORDERS

Snap for your supper

No dress code, no waiting list, good music, high-end food and reasonable prices – that's what you can expect at Brioche in Dublin's Ranelagh, says chef Gavin McDonagh. "We want our guests to know they're in good company, listening to very good music and eating very good food," he says. To promote the restaurant, McDonagh has commissioned large-scale photo-realistic images of select dishes to be displayed in public spaces across Dublin. The public is invited to photograph the hand-painted artworks as they stumble upon them, post the photo on Instagram, and tag @BriocheRanelagh using the hashtag #BriocheRanelagh. Selected snappers will get to attend a free dining event on October 12, where they'll eat the dishes featured in the paintings. Visit Brioche's Facebook page for more details.



A fistful of ladies' fingers

Okra, a flowering member of the mallow family, is sometimes called ladies' fingers due to its tapered shape. It had a moment in the 1980s, popping up in trendy London and New York restaurants where it was hailed as "the new edamame". But although it remains a staple of African, Caribbean, Creole, Cajun and Indian cuisine, it never went mainstream. As legumes go, Okra is versatile. Its most common use is in a traditional Louisiana gumbo; indeed, Okra is beaten only by fried green tomatoes for Deep South street-food cred. Its green pods contain seeds that go gooey when cooked – or mucilaginous, to use the technical term – so either let this dissolve in a stew or avoid the slime entirely by chopping them up for a crunchy stir-fry. You can also slice and dry them as crispy snacks, or pickle them for use in salads or to replace the olive in a cocktail. When it comes to purchase, always pass a limp okra by, and bear in mind that size matters: the ideal, tender okra should be less than 4in long.



Barista in your bag

We get all sorts of gadgets to check out here from time to time, and an inordinate amount of our time is spent charging the batteries in them. But not so with the Handpresso, which is an entirely human-powered piece of kit that is billed as an espresso coffee maker you can take with you anywhere. It resembles a baton, on the end of which is a small water reservoir and filter for the coffee. In the handle is a pump, rather like a bicycle pump, which allows you to manually compress air inside the Handpresso. You load the coffee, or an Easy Serving Espresso pod, fill the reservoir with hot water, press the button and the compressed air is released. This pushes the hot water through the coffee to give you a single serving of espresso coffee. The manufacturer also makes a range of accessories to go with the Handpresso, and there is also a powered, automatic version that runs off the cigarette lighter socket in your car. The manual Handpresso cost €99. handpresso.com



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