

Natural source

Providing nursery food with sustainable credentials is one way that providers can help set children up for a better future, says Snapdragons' *Mary Llewellyn*

Sustainability is a topic that is engaging scientists and governments across the globe as the world's population increases and resources become ever more thinly stretched. However, it is a subject that also affects us, as early years providers, and we need to respond as well.

In September, all 193 member states of the United Nations met to agree on a list of 17 Sustainable Development Goals that they hope will 'end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all' and they have set a target of 15 years to achieve these goals.

The goals address areas like hunger, health, availability and quality of water, responsible consumption, climate action, the health of our oceans and our lands. One of the biggest single areas under the spotlight is food production, transportation and consumption.

According to the scientific journal *Nature*, 'The global food system, from fertilizer manufacture to food storage and packaging, is responsible for up to one-third of all human-caused greenhouse gas emissions'.

In 2008, our Government passed the Climate Change Act, which was the world's first legally binding climate change target, with the aim of



Snapdragons' menus use the fresh produce on its doorstep

reducing the UK's greenhouse gas emissions by at least 80 per cent by 2050. That means that the children in our nurseries now will be working to achieve this target until they are 40 years old. We owe it to them to source our food responsibly and consider the impact our actions have on the world's people and resources.

So what can we do to help? For us, achieving a Gold Food for Life Catering Mark from The Soil Association has helped us to do our bit to tackle many of the issues of sustainable food. We use fresh ingredients that are free from trans fats, harmful additives and genetic modification (GM) and are produced in ways that take account of animal welfare.

During our annual audit, the inspector analyses all the invoices from our food suppliers to ascertain the proportion of our food bill that is spent on organic, local, ethically and sustainably sourced produce. They also look into our use of seasonal food, food wastage and the proportion of meat served.

LOCAL AND SEASONAL

We are used to being able to buy whatever we want whenever we want, but strawberries in December

WINTRY TAGINE

Wintry chicken tagine with sprout and cranberry couscous

Ingredients ✓ 500g free-range chicken breast, diced into 2cm cubes ✓ 400g chopped tomatoes ✓ 350g couscous ✓ 350g Brussels sprouts ✓ 2 medium carrots, 1 large parsnip, and 2 sticks of celery, all finely chopped ✓ 100g dried dates and 100g dried apricots, chopped ✓ 1 medium onion ✓ 1 tbsp sweet paprika ✓ bunch of coriander ✓ 1 tbsp cinnamon ✓ 1 tsp cumin seeds ✓ 2 cloves of garlic (minced) ✓ 1 tsp white pepper ✓ 1 tsp nutmeg ✓ 4 bay leaves

Method ✓ Put a large saucepan of water on to boil with two of the bay leaves. Heat a tablespoon of oil in a large pan and sauté the chopped vegetables and the garlic for five minutes, stirring to prevent burning. ✓ In a dry frying pan, toast the cumin seeds quickly over a medium heat, then add them to the vegetables with all the other spices and two bay leaves. Pour in the chopped tomatoes and a cup of boiling water. ✓ Chop the stalks of the coriander, retaining the leaves for garnish, then add the chopped dates, apricots, chicken and coriander stalks, mix them in and

leave everything to simmer gently for 30 minutes, stirring occasionally. ✓ Meanwhile, prepare the couscous. Finely slice your sprouts, heat a tablespoon of oil in the cumin pan and sauté the sprouts for 30 seconds; add the cranberries. ✓ Leave the sprouts and cranberries to soften on a low heat. Then check the level of your boiling water – you need about 1½ cups – and pour in the couscous then remove immediately from the heat, leaving until the water is absorbed. ✓ Give it a stir, add the sprouts and cranberries, then cover with a lid and leave until the tagine is ready.



come at a cost. Food miles contribute to the burning of fossil fuels and food transported for long distances loses nutritional value. At Snapdragons, we use local suppliers and have seasonal menus so that we can make the most of the fresh produce on our doorstep.

Far from limiting our choices, the inspiration of the seasons inspires invention in our menus. A Moroccan tagine made in the depths of the English winter might use parsnips to achieve the traditional sweetness, for instance (see recipe). Inspired by our visit to a local organic watercress farm recently, we added a cream cheese and watercress dip to our autumn snack menu.

Of course, the most local food is the food you grow yourself. At Snapdragons Keynsham, our chef Raquel has a thriving vegetable patch, which the children help her to tend. Not only does this help to provide some of the seasonal food that the children eat at the nursery – it also teaches them how to grow food and inspires them to try new flavours.

ORGANIC WHERE POSSIBLE

Organic farming encourages biodiversity and helps to maintain soil

fertility for future food production. To achieve a Gold Catering Mark, 15 per cent of our food spend had to be on organic produce, although in our last inspection we reached 30 per cent.

Our organic spend is mostly concentrated on key ingredients like milk, eggs and flour. It is more expensive and we have to be aware of keeping meal costs reasonable for our families, so it is a balancing act.

LESS MEAT

The meat industry, particularly beef, has a huge impact on the world's resources, with one expert saying that 'eating less red meat would be a better way for people to cut carbon emissions than giving up their cars'.

We have taken steps to reduce the amount of meat we serve and replace it with more plant-based protein. We have a meat-free day every week and we supplement our meat dishes with lentils, beans and extra vegetables for a more balanced diet that still packs a protein punch.

All the meat we serve on our Catering Mark menus must be certified higher-welfare – such as Red Tractor – and pork and chicken must be free range.

RESPONSIBLY SOURCED FISH

Fish is good for us and it is recommended that we eat at least two portions a week, but at the same time overfishing is depleting our oceans. Our fish supplier, M&J Seafood, helps us to make ethical choices by providing a list of responsibly sourced fish. When buying, just ask about the Marine Conservation Society (MCS) and the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC).

FAIRTRADE

The Fairtrade logo ensures that producers are paid fairly for their work, helping to alleviate poverty and supporting sustainable development, so we try to choose Fairtrade products when possible and the Catering Mark recognises that too. Cheap food comes at a cost to the producers as our UK dairy farmers have been making clear in their debates with the big supermarkets recently.

WASTE AND PACKAGING

Food that is shipped for miles and sold in supermarkets is highly packaged to protect it and, worse, food contamination means that the packaging often cannot be recycled.

MORE INFORMATION

- Article on red meat, www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/jul/21/giving-up-beef-reduce-carbon-footprint-more-than-cars
- Fairtrade, www.fairtrade.org.uk
- Livewell, www.wwf.org.uk/what_we_do/changing_the_way_we_live/food/livewell_2020
- MCS, www.mcsuk.org, and MSC, www.msc.org
- Nature article, www.nature.com/news/one-third-of-our-greenhouse-gas-emissions-come-from-agriculture-1.11708
- Price debates, www.ibtimes.com/eu-agricultural-crisis-uk-dairy-farmers-release-cows-supermarkets-protest-pricing-war-2046608
- Soil Association, www.soilassociation.org
- Tagine recipe, <http://downloads.snapdragonsnursery.com/magazine/2015/11-January-2015.pdf>
- 'Waste not', www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/feature/1150655/a-unique-child-health-nutrition-waste-not



The huge impact on greenhouse gas emissions caused by the production of packaging can be cut radically by buying local, seasonal food which can be delivered unpackaged. As well as the waste caused by packaging, we are also guilty of wasting the food itself. About 30-40 per cent of the food we buy in the UK is thrown away, which is environmentally and ethically disastrous, so it is really important that we monitor our buying, storing and serving of food to cut down on food waste. (See 'More information')

HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Sustainable food is about health and well-being for everyone, and the biggest factor here is knowledge and education. As nursery providers, we are in a wonderful position to give the next generation the skills that they need to support a sustainable food culture for the future.

Teaching children about where their food comes from, and inspiring them to grow food for themselves and to cook it with passion will be the key to a better, fairer, safer food future for them and their children. ■

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Mary Llewellyn is operations manager for Snapdragons. Snapdragons Keynsham has the Food For Life Partnership Gold Catering Mark, a Children's Food Trust award, is accredited by the Vegetarian Society and was winner of the Nursery World Nursery Food Award in 2012 and 2014. For more information, see www.snapdragonsnursery.com