



COOKING FOR A BETTER LIFE

Made in Hackney is the UK's only plant-based eco-community kitchen, whose goal is to enrich the lives of local people through growing and cooking together. Jon Bennett talks to the team behind this remarkable venture.



Some would argue Made in Hackney's existence represents a massive failure in British society.

Based in one of London's poorest boroughs, where life expectancy is 18 years below the national average, the centre was set up with the philosophy that learning how to cook changes lives. In an area where GPs are appealing to the government for more funding to cope with escalating issues of heart disease and diabetes, the Made in Hackney team believe teaching people about food – how to make it, what goes in it, what's seasonal – is vital.

Critics could say their work, however noble, shouldn't be necessary and point to fundamental failures in the health and education systems, in government, even in the family unit, if we can't feed ourselves healthily. Whatever your take on those arguments, it's impossible not to get swept up by the energy and enthusiasm when you enter the kitchen at Made in Hackney. They may have started off with basic cookery lessons teaching essential skills, but it's obvious there are so many ideas floating around that what they do is constantly developing.

New ideas, same values

'We're thinking of doing special events like hen-dos and nights out, where people can come and spend an evening cooking and learning some new skills, but having a laugh,' says project manager Yasmin Khan.

'We also have thought about a catering programme, doing events where we're out and about,' adds Nynke Brett, who runs the volunteer programme. 'We're thinking about looking at employee away days too, where companies can send their teams out to us and we can do some work with them. We're constantly discussing things.'

What won't change are their core values. Their programme revolves around four keystones: local, organic, seasonal and plant-based. That doesn't just mean the veg they use is grown by local farmers – it also means the kitchen was upcycled and the worktops



Sarah Bentley shows how to grow your own

PHOTOGRAPH: KATE BEATTY

'We prove the possibilities of how delicious the food is before talking about the health and environmental benefits'



made from melted plastic coffee cups. And at the centre of everything they do is vegan food, although they're subtle about how they handle this.

'We do lessons for teenagers and there's a huge culture in Hackney of kids eating even twice a day in chicken shops,' says co-founder Sarah Bentley. 'What we try to do is have them make delicious food which they don't even notice hasn't got meat or dairy. We

prove the possibilities of how delicious it is, before talking about the health and environmental benefits.'

Making a difference

The origins of Made in Hackney began in 2009 when Sarah was a journalist. She started to get the feeling which affects many correspondents - a nagging worry she was spending all her time writing *about* things rather than doing something that made a direct difference.

'I'd become really interested in youth culture and environmental issues and became a growing apprentice at Hackney's farmers' market, Growing Communities. This fed into learning about organics and permacultures. I think that where our food comes from covers a huge number of issues. I realised that re-localising food systems touches on poverty, education, environmentalism, health and lots of other areas, such as corporate control. I've always found it weird when people talk about it as a "green issue": if you're alive this stuff impacts on you.'

This led to Sarah meeting Joshana Lovage in 2011. Joshana's parents had set up renowned health food shop

Co-founders Joshana Lovage and Sarah Bentley



ABOVE PHOTOGRAPH: CHRISTIAN SINIBALDI



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Foodheroes

PHOTOGRAPH: KATE BEATTY



PHOTOGRAPH: MADE IN HACKNEY



Food for All in 1976, on Cazenove Road in Hackney. She had grown up above the shop, going on to manage it, and had an idea on how they could develop the use of their basement area.

'They wanted to put in a bid for Big Lottery funding and Joshana said they needed someone to write it up,' recalls Sarah. 'It was along the lines of "Well, you're a writer, so



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could you do this?" I decided to give it a go.'

It was a big challenge that took several months, writing page after page of a meticulous business plan and meeting regularly with the council to discuss the details. In October 2011 they asked for £106,000 to fund the project.

The eco-kitchen

In June 2012 they were awarded £120,000. A thrill, but it also presented the problem of how they would go about actually *doing* what they'd said in the bid.

'The first thing you realise is that we should have asked for more money!' laughs Sarah. 'We had a lot to do to sort the kitchen, but the upcycling part was quite easy because we worked with a firm called Milestone Kitchens who specialise. They looked after the cabinets and worktops, and there are brilliant charity shops in Hackney so we got a load of crockery there.'

They started out working with a range of community groups and charities, offering different classes, including preserving, and growing and eating your own, to groups including housing associations, youth groups and adults on rehabilitation programmes. This has developed into other paid-for masterclasses covering more specialised

topics, where chefs come in and teach how to make things like sourdough, raw food and even cosmetics.

'Those courses are around £65, which is very competitive for London, and also helps supplement the free courses we run,' stresses Nynka. 'We also run free courses on a Sunday that anyone can drop in to, which is great fun because you get a real mix of people,' adds Yasmin.

Volunteers are vital to Made in Hackney and they've now worked with over 150 volunteers, delivering 350 classes so far. Their lottery grant ended in March 2014 and they're now funded by a mix of grants, crowd-funding campaigns and the revenue they generate, so donations are vital and they still have to work hard to raise funds.

Sarah says she is convinced Made in Hackney could be replicated elsewhere. 'We are into the idea of movement building rather than empire building. If we can talk to other people about what we've learned so they could do it where they live, that would be fantastic.'

● To attend a class, volunteer or make a donation, go to www.madeinhackney.org. Made in Hackney is a project of registered charity AMURT UK (www.amurt.org.uk).

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