



Meet meat-free school meals

Nicky Adams celebrates environmentally friendly Felsted food

According to the United Nations, global animal agriculture is responsible for more greenhouse gases than all the world's transportation systems combined, and it was this fact that spurred Felsted School to introduce a monthly school lunch that is meat-free.

'It's not our intention to impose a vegetarian lifestyle on anyone,' says catering manager René Hauret. 'Asking around, it was obvious that many students – and staff for that matter – were unaware of the negative impact the global meat industry has on the environment. So we thought that if we could make even a small change at our school, at least we would be doing something to help.'

René, who has been at Felsted for the past four years and previously ran restaurants for Albert Roux, came up with the idea of offering a solely vegetarian lunch once every three weeks for the 150 staff and 750 students.

'It was surprising to chat to students, particularly the boys, and find out that when they think of vegetarian food, all they think of is salads,' says René. 'I wanted to show them that not eating meat occasionally wouldn't mean missing out on a filling meal and would make a big difference to the environment.'

According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, the UK is the 22nd highest consumer of meat in the world, with each of us eating an average 85.8 kilograms per year. Raising animals for food requires significant amounts of land, energy and water. Around 40 percent of the food grown in the world today is feed for animals and this figure is expected to increase to 60 percent in the next 20 years with the emergence of an expanding global middle class with the means to buy and eat even more meat and dairy.

'Meat-free days are becoming very popular around the world,' says René. 'Meat-free Mondays are quite established in Japan and just recently the mayor of New York has declared that every school in the city should serve a weekly meat-free meal. I felt it was time for Felsted to follow their lead.' Even in René's native France, there is a movement for restaurants to serve a weekly meat-free menu, so when asked to present new initiatives at the year's first meeting of Felsted students' Food Committee, he put forward a proposal for a Meat-free Tuesday.

'Every lunchtime we offer a hot meal with a vegetarian option, a pasta dish, jacket potatoes and toppings and a salad bar, followed by a selection of hot and cold desserts and fruit,' he says. 'My plan was to remove meat from the menu completely for one lunchtime every three weeks – not often, but a regular occurrence to show how easy it is to forego meat once in a while.'

Food Committee representatives took the idea away to discuss with their school friends. While a good number were positive about the proposed change, the reaction from some was quite strong and a petition against it was even circulated. 'My

own son is at the school and he told me that, although he was all for the idea of a Meat-free Tuesday, the rest of his boys' boarding house was dead against it,' says René. 'I realised I would have to do some lobbying, to explain a bit more about what it would entail, so I sat down with the students at lunchtimes and supper times and reminded them that they would have the usual meat and vegetarian options at breakfast, supper and for the late-night snack and we would make sure that they would hardly notice there was no meat in their lunch. I reassured them that they would not leave the dining hall starving!'

With murmurings among the meat-eaters, opinions were clearly polarised throughout the school, so Felsted's headmaster Chris Townsend decided to put the meat-free meal suggestion to a vote and ran a poll for every member of the school community – students, staff and parents – to have their say.





'I was surprised at the initial resistance, but very pleased with the outcome of the meat-free meal referendum,' says René. '415 voted in favour, with 275 against, and 120 abstentions. This was a great turn-out and a big step forward for the school. Just to get people talking about food and the impact it has on the environment was an achievement, and I was determined to show that a meat-free meal could work.'

The headmaster was happy to introduce the initiative based on the majority. 'Certainly there is a global challenge about sustainability that needs to be addressed,' he says. 'I am impressed that our students are sufficiently aware of this and

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want to make a difference. Felsted is a member of the Round Square organisation of 200 schools around the world, so global awareness is a key aim of the education we offer here. We don't want our students to be bystanders, we want them to get involved.'

With the monthly meat-free meal now firmly on the menu, the headmaster, René and the head chef set about considering appropriate dishes. 'The headmaster wanted us to use imagination,' says René. 'A vegetable ragout would not

be enough!' The first Meat-free Tuesday kicked off with a Malaysian Quorn curry and rice, with a beetroot, halloumi cheese and roasted vegetable wrap as an alternative. No ham appeared on the salad bar; instead, eggs and cheese. 'The pasta bar was a challenge,' admits René. 'It's particularly popular with Prep School pupils in Years 6 to 8 who tend to choose food that's familiar to them. We tried pasta with a creamy sauce with roasted peppers, which was a bit outside their comfort zone, so we realised we needed to simplify that for them.'

However, introducing students to new food experiences is something that is high on the agenda at Felsted. 'It's really important that the students are educated in food here,' says René. 'We run themed days every month – Chinese New Year, for example, but also focusing on the food of Canada and Kenya – but all the meals we offer are very international and also current. In fact, I take the chefs to London for a day every school holiday to visit the markets and see the variety of vegetables, fruits and other foods available, to spot the latest trends and find out what people are eating right now. It refreshes and inspires us. Just yesterday for the late supper we served a Cubana sandwich – ham, mustard and gherkins on toasted bread – something we picked up from our recent visit to Borough Market. It's delicious!'

The hope is that broadening young people's food horizons will encourage them to try meals of all kinds, and to be open-minded when it comes to meat-free choices. 'The purpose of our Meat-free Tuesday is not to drive our students away from the consumption of meat,' says Chris Townsend. 'The UK industry can be proud of its environmental record and progress in meat production, and at Felsted we are committed to supporting local producers. This initiative is about raising awareness, while we also look to reduce food waste, and minimise the distances that produce travels from production to plate.'

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