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## What matters most

It's been a triumphant 10 years for School Food Matters, growing from kitchen table to national food education project, so Rosanna Spence went along to its birthday bash in a secret Westminster garden.

With the London sun beating down on the picnic blankets blowing in the breeze, trees offering gentle shade, and the tower of Westminster Palace creating a poignant backdrop, there was no better venue than the College Gardens of Westminster Abbey to celebrate 10 years of School Food Matters.



By mid-morning the serenity of the concealed gardens had been infiltrated by 500 excited school children, eager to indulge their senses and expand their knowledge of fresh fruit and vegetables.

School Food Matters has gone from strength to strength in its journey for better food and nutritional education for children in the UK. It's original mission, which started around founder Stephanie Wood's kitchen table, was to fix up school food in the London Borough of Richmond, where there was a 28% take-up across 35 schools, of frozen ready meals made in a factory in Wales.

"We moved 35 schools to freshly cooked meals and the fantastically talented cooks were getting to actually cook again," Stephanie recalls.

They did this by appointing ISS Education as the new caterer, which managed to achieve a Gold Food for Life Catering Mark, and brought the meal price down.

"We proved through economies of scale that great food and service was affordable," she says.

Stephanie may have been alone at the start, but now she has longstanding partnerships with the likes of Whole Foods and Borough Market, who were both proudly at the picnic – offering kids the chance to make fresh salads with chef Jenny Chandler, as well as chia pots and pizza pitas. Many more organisations were there too, engaging the children in healthy food education, showing them unusual and exotic fruits, reinforcing the five-a-day guidelines, and providing organic gardening tips (from BBC gardener Chris Collins, previous head gardener at the Abbey).

"I wanted to hold an event that was solely focused on enjoying and sharing with children," Stephanie explains. "Because that's what it's all about. All our campaigners' work lobbying politicians and rattling the cage of the local authorities means you can get quite removed from the customers: the kids. We're terribly hands on and all our projects involve someone from our organisation going out and being in a school dining hall or school garden."

School Food Matters' work has gone beyond the borough of Richmond. I caught up with Mark Davies, managing director of ISS Education – also celebrating its 10th birthday this year – which won the original contract and continues to work with the charity.

"Stephanie's work was an inspiration to me when we were starting out," he says. "We've carried on that good work with School Food Matters and now operate many different food education projects in areas like Southwark, Lambeth, Redbridge, Bracknell and Devon."

Back to the celebrations and crowds gather for an almighty simultaneous carrot crunch, a special record of its own, and Stephanie took the opportunity to thank everyone who had been an integral part of School Food Matters' success. And of course, a birthday celebration wouldn't be complete without a cake, and this delightful creation had its own garden shed and vegetable plot.

It wasn't just the sun shining down onto the oasis in central London. Everyone working with and for School Food Matters is clearly dedicated to improving the food standards for children. None more so than the charity's ambassador, chef Tom Aikens, who flew in especially from Abu Dhabi to judge the picnic competition and celebrate a decade of hard work. He has worked with School Food Matters from the beginning, giving cooking classes in schools.

"We would talk about food and what it means to them," he explains. "It's not just something to fill your stomach, but something to understand and know what good food does to the body. I'm a parent as well, so I think it's very important for children to have that education."

While the picnic presented an opportunity for reflection on the last 10 years, the world of school food is moving quickly, and Stephanie maintains her clear vision for the future of children's nutrition.

"If caterers start thinking about feeding children as a key part of education I think that changes the mindset and the culture of an organisation," she says. "It goes beyond the need for food to fulfill a purpose, which is to provide a meal, and think about the opportunities to tell their story too."

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School Food Matters was able to celebrate its 10th birthday in style thanks to the Big Lottery Celebrate Fund, which aims to highlight occasions that bring communities together to share positive experiences and, of course, celebrate the success of good work by people seeking a better future.

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Charlton Manor Primary School won an exclusive cooking session with Tom Aikens for 15 of its pupils in the picnic competition that was judged by Aikens at 'Tom's Tasting Table'. Their winning picnic hamper included a quiche that featured many ingredients the school had grown itself.

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