

Ready, steady,



Sarah West takes a closer look at the Just Childcare winner of the NMT Chef of Year award and finds out more about catering and nutritional practices across the settings



Slider with sides



The NMT Nursery Chef of the Year award shines a spotlight on the fresh talent coming out of nursery kitchens across the country. The accolade recognises a nursery setting able to adapt to a fast-paced and demanding environment and still produce a high volume of dishes that appeal to arguably the fussiest - and conversely the most nutritionally vulnerable - of age groups.

All high-achieving finalists competing to take the crown, the nursery chefs were tasked with creating a typical two-course nursery meal from scratch, each at their own work station. Judges were on the lookout for unique and varied dishes that pushed the boundaries of traditional nursery food (not a turkey twizzler in sight!). They also

evaluated the finalists on costing per portion and overall nutritional value – both key features of any successful nursery menu.

This year's winner was Vickie Young from Park Wood Day Nursery, part of the wider Just Childcare group (comprised of 33 nurseries across the North West). Their menu hugely impressed the judges, who heaped praise upon the dishes and described them as "a joy to sample". The menu was described as "well balanced" with the judges praising the "visually appealing" toddler-friendly options, which they felt would help encourage children to branch out and try new flavours and foods – an important consideration when catering for picky eaters!

The winning dishes

The main course: turkey and sweet potato sliders presented in a freshly baked wholemeal bun, with coleslaw and a selection of toppers including sliced avocado, tomato salsa and thinly sliced cheese squares. Served with fresh sweetcorn cut into slices.

Dessert: sugar-free coconut rice pudding with a mixed-berry compote and a selection of fresh fruit slices.

Focus on nutrition

So, what was the inspiration behind this award-winning menu? The team at Park Wood reveal that they

specifically chose these dishes to reflect the wider approach to healthy eating demonstrated across all of the Just Childcare settings – showcasing fresh, colourful and nutritious ingredients.

In a nod to this nutritional focus, the main dish featured turkey mince rather than minced beef. Turkey offers an equally protein-rich alternative to red meat and is a great way to help inspire the younger generation to find innovative ways to reduce their overall saturated fat intake.

Served in a wholegrain bun (providing fibre, zinc and much needed slow-release energy for busy toddlers), with calcium-rich cheese on top, the sliders provide an ideal mix of protein, carbohydrates and fat.

The dish is further enhanced with the provision of mixed-vegetable toppings that children can easily pick up and serve themselves. The group is firmly in favour of self-serving, which helps encourage the development of motor skills and social skills. This, in turn, can benefit pre-school children's development and independence. It also enhances mealtime enjoyment – the staff at Park Wood reinforce this, confirming that they specifically chose this element as they find that children get the most out of meals that provide them with opportunities to serve themselves.

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cook!



Rice
pudding plus!

And to finish...

To complete the meal, a coconut and mixed-berry compote provides a sweet tasting dessert that provides a source of vitamin C and fibre with no added refined sugar – a consistently hot topic amongst parents!

Desserts at Park Wood settings are routinely low in sugar as standard. The staff stress that while they will serve sweet puddings such as Banana Crunch following some meals, with others they will serve a healthy starter instead. This helps teach the children that while no foods are banned and everything can be beneficial in moderation, savoury food doesn't always have to be followed by a pudding.

A unique challenge

As a nutritionist for a busy nursery caterer (Zebedees.co.uk), I am well aware of the nutritional challenges faced by nursery settings on a daily basis. Planning and building nutritionally balanced menus that are not only appealing to young taste buds but can also be adapted to suit a range of allergies and intolerances, cultural and ethical requirements presents a huge challenge for nursery chefs and caterers alike - requiring great flexibility and a meticulous eye for detail.

The team at Park Wood acknowledge these challenges and are strongly committed to meeting nutritional guidelines for school-age children. Their four-week rotating seasonal menu follows the Children's Trust Guidelines, ensuring that all meals are low in salt and NME sugars (sometimes called free sugars). Furthermore, dishes are

changed on a regular basis - introducing the children to as many different tastes and textures as possible.

The ingredients used across all settings are organic and locally sourced where possible, which led to the chain receiving a Bronze Catering Mark from the Soil Association last year. They're also official supporters of Meat Free Monday, with the children eating vegetarian meals and snacks each Monday as a nod to both good health and sustainable living.

A joint effort

The staff at Park Wood recognise that children are much more likely to try different foods when they're involved in the process – from growing their own fruits and vegetables right through to chopping fresh ingredients in their weekly cookery classes. Such classes present an ideal opportunity for children to discuss where different foods come from, why healthy ingredients are good for them and how they can be transformed into something delicious.

Favourite dishes tend to be such healthy alternatives to popular convenience foods as fruit pizza and banana muffins. They also have their own beehive at the nursery, and the staff find that the children love incorporating their bees' honey into their cooking.

Family support

Park View also recognise the importance of supporting families in continuing healthy-food education at

home. Staff invite parents to regular open days and stay-and-play sessions, providing them with the opportunity to try dishes, give feedback on recipes and ask for any advice on recreating the meals themselves.

Meals such as Italian Salmon and Broccoli Bake and Autumn Shepherd's pie have been found to be very popular, as parents can easily make enough to feed their whole family. Staff report that a number of the parents who have tried their food have said they'd be happy if it was served to them in a restaurant. Praise indeed! The nursery take pride in knowing that they've been able to help families provide a healthy and varied diet for their children.

So, how does it feel to go one step further and win this accolade? The staff at Park Wood say: "We're so incredibly proud. A great deal of hard work goes into the food we provide for the children at Park Wood, so it feels amazing to have this recognised by NMT."

With so much going on behind the scenes, it's inspiring to see Just Childcare getting the recognition they deserve. ■

- Sarah West is the in-house nutritionist for nursery catering provider Zebedees, who provide nutritionally balanced meals to nurseries across the South of England
W: zebedees.co.uk

- Vickie Young won the NMT Nursery Chef of the Year award for 2018 on behalf of Just Childcare, which has 33 settings across the North West.

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