

Student Guide & Clearing Special On the menu

Slow food campaigners stir appetite for real meals



A revolution in eating habits is turning students away from baked beans, finds **Joanna Sugden**

A new trend in gastronomy is gaining ground across British universities with the aim of refining students' eating habits and their attitude to food. The Slow Food on Campus initiative encourages people to buy locally grown produce, prepare meals from scratch and try to create their own vegetable patch. That may sound like hard work while you are busy trying to make friends and getting to grips with your course. But for Sean McArdell it is an extension of his passion for food and adds to his social life. "The best thing about slow food for me is meeting people and having a communal experience," says Sean, who is about to start the second year of a history degree at Grey College Durham University. McArdell arranges eat-ins, inspired by the sit-ins of the Civil Rights movement in America in the 1960s, as part of Slow Food on Campus (SFC). "We hold them in a public place or offer an open invitation to a house. The idea is that you come and bring and share food together," he explains. "Only the top chefs can really change the taste of food but a lot can be added if you have a good experience of talking to people while eating." Durham SFC is keen to get away from the image of students surviving on beans on toast. Cheap convenience food can seem like the only option when money is tight and reheating last night's pizza is as close as you have ever come to cooking. But Slow Food advocates argue that it is a false economy and "proper food" can be much more cost effective than heavily packaged and processed foods warmed up in the microwave. Isy Hughes, 20, of the University of Winchester's Slow Food group, says it is important to buy in bulk if you want to remain solvent and eat well. "Base meals

on pulses: they are so cheap and can be made really tasty. Huge packets of things like rice and pasta can make meals much more affordable in the long run," says Hughes, who studies event management. Her society is hosting a series of dinners next term based on the Channel 4 reality television show *Come Dine with Me*. Everyone takes turns to invite people to their homes and cooks a meal in a mini competition to find the best host. Eating together can also drive down costs and dishes do not have to be complex, Hughes insists. "You see the chefs doing amazing things on TV but it doesn't have to be like that. It can be a lot simpler." You may not have to be Heston Blumenthal to enjoy slow food but you do have to think carefully about the food you buy and eat. The slow food movement was launched in 1989 by Italian farmers who wanted to preserve and promote local food and culinary traditions. It now has more than 100,000 members internationally who aim to eat sustainably and "combat the incursion of fast food into our diets." The on campus version also operates at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU), the University of Plymouth and Leeds Metropolitan University. Students who want to set up a group at their university are supplied with a starter kit and help from a student co-ordinator if required. Alex Armstrong, a third-year home economics student at LJMU, set up a group last year and began selling bags of fresh vegetables to students and lecturers. "We made a list of veg that was in season and that we could buy at the local farmers' market," she says. "People filled in an order form and we would go and buy the items and bag them up for them." The group sells about 40 bags of produce a day for two days a week, keeping costs low to encourage take up. "The lecturers in particular like the convenience of it," Armstrong says. Back in Winchester, Hughes agrees that making slow food more accessible is a good way to get people interested. "Pick one or two of the principles of the slow food movement because buying Fair-trade and organic can be expensive," she advises. "If you pick one or two essentials, such as buying British, you are doing the right thing."



James Green, left, and Henry Cullen share produce they grow at Brookes with other slow food enthusiasts

Green-fingered plan takes root

One university is at the forefront of a growing trend, reports **Joanna Sugden**

James Green's allotment is only small but it is a start. He and fellow supporters of the Slow Food on Campus group at Oxford Brookes are growing "good, clean" vegetables on plots in the university's new kitchen garden. "We have grown onions, herbs such as parsley and potatoes," says Green, who was given the seeds by his mother, an avid gardener. "We shared out the produce among everyone who was involved so they could enjoy it." Waiting lists for allotments in Oxford run to 13 years but the university allowed the students to create the plots on its Wheatley campus. "It's a really brilliant project. Other

campuses have struggled to get their universities to allow them to do the same but Brookes has been really forward thinking in getting it going and supporting us," Green says. "It also let us share the tools and the water supply." Green, 25, recently graduated from the university with a degree in hospitality management. He adds: "Young people are out of touch with their food and where it comes from and the processes involved. It's important that we try to get ourselves back in touch." While the group's venture has a serious point, the students are also in it for the fun. "It's nice to do something that isn't about grades; to go down to the garden with a few mates, have a few beers, chill out and grow some veg," Green says.