

# Cracking Community Cafés

## Getting the food right

These fact sheets are produced by [Ethical Eats](#), [Making Local Food Work](#) and [Greenwich Co-operative Development Agency](#) to help new and existing community cafés get to grips with the basics of running a successful enterprise.

This fact sheet looks at your menu and the ingredients you use. It takes you back to basic principles and suggests ways to serve up delicious, local and sustainable food whilst keeping your prices affordable. Sustainable food can be approached in small steps or as a big project. We simply scratch the surface here, introduce you to the key issues and recommend further reading if you want to go into any issue in detail. (As a starting point we'd suggest looking at our *Good Food Guide for chefs, caterers and culinary students*, which is downloadable from the [Ethical Eats website](#).)



Unpackaged café, bar and shop, Hackney

# Your menu

## Taking a closer look

➔ Your menu is hugely important. It affects what equipment you'll need, how many staff and what skills they should have, and how you serve your customers. It's also probably your biggest marketing tool – your food should sell your café!

### Back to basics

Once you have established your café's aims, the next step is to revisit your menu to ensure it reflects what your customers want:

- Have you already done research or questionnaires with your existing or potential customers? Does your menu meet their needs?
- What skills, knowledge and interests do your staff have? Can you capitalise on these?
- Do you have a fixed menu or one that changes daily? Are your customers the same each day, or different?

See also the 'Promoting your café' fact sheet.

### Plan to succeed

When you're busy, it can seem easier to plan your menus on the day or the day before – nipping to the supermarket to pick up last-minute bits and pieces. However, this will invariably cost you more once you have factored in your time – and doesn't give you a chance to cost recipes properly. Planning menus in advance will save you time and money. Here are some ideas:

We'll be looking at costing in our next fact sheet.

- By planning a three or four-week menu cycle you can order and get your pricing done in plenty of time.
- Don't pin yourself down to using certain ingredients as prices can vary dramatically. Use terms like 'seasonal veg' and 'daily soup/special/salad' to give you flexibility if you have printed menus. This way you can use leftovers too. For ideas visit [www.sustainweb.org/ethicaleats/recipes/](http://www.sustainweb.org/ethicaleats/recipes/).
- Keep an eye on prices – talk to your suppliers to get the best deals and shop around (see also 'Identifying local and ethical suppliers' below).
- If healthy eating and/or sustainability are important for your café and customers – plan this into your menus.
- Keep it simple. Fewer menu items mean fewer complications and less waste.
- Sort out your storage. Ordering in bulk can save money (as long as you rotate your stock and don't let things go out of date). Making food in advance and freezing it can save time. Space is often an issue for small cafés so try to be inventive – use benches with lids, build a raised platform, and keep it tidy!

Use the [Eatwell Plate](#) to base your meals around healthy eating.

Give the illusion of a broader menu with a small number of menu items by e.g. using olives or hummus in salads, mezze plates, or main meals

- Write out detailed production plans. Look at your menu to see where you can double up the prep. For example, do you make a lasagne on Monday, Bolognese on Wednesday, curry on Friday and soup every day? Then prep all your onions and garlic, make your tomato sauce and freeze in batches.
- Test your menu items and get feedback. If people don't like an item or never buy it, change it.
- Use changing menu items to engage your customers – hold a competition to decide new items, ask customers to suggest things or vote for one of two possible new dishes.
- Train your staff so they know and understand the menus, recipes and portions, and what you want them to do. Your café's success rests on them so it is important to invest in them.

We'll be looking at staff training in a future fact sheet.

### Doing it for the kids...

With kids' menus, you have two options: either offer half portions of some or all of your meals, or have a dedicated children's menu. We would suggest half portions – it is simpler for you and it spreads the message that kids can eat what adults eat. However, if you have lots of young customers, put some extra thought into what they like (and what their parents like them to eat) and offer healthy snacks just for them. [Recent research](#) shows that kids are more likely to eat fruit and veg if accompanied by a tasty dip – try vegetable sticks with hummus or pesto, or fresh fruit with yoghurt or (for a treat) chocolate dipping sauce.

### Using your menu as a marketing tool

If you get your menu right, it's what will bring people to your café and keep them coming back. Use it to communicate who you are and what your ethos is. Try the following to get the word out:

- Include a short paragraph within the menu on you and your principles so people understand you. If you use locally sourced/organic/free range ingredients then shout about it!
- Have a menu in the window and make sure prices are clear.
- Have a chalk board or two on which to write up specials. A chalk board behind the counter with the full menu is also a great idea if possible.
- Get yourself on Twitter and Facebook (see 'Promoting your café') and update regularly to let people know what your specials are – a picture is even better!
- Print copies of your menu with a special offer and distribute to local workplaces and community centres so they know what you sell.

# Waste

## Keeping a lid on it

➔ Up to half the world's food supply is wasted between the farm and the fork. Do your bit to turn the tide (and save cash) by following the tips on planning above, and try some of the ideas below:

- Make your menu flexible, e.g. use some of the same ingredients in different dishes to make it easier to use up leftovers.
- Prep basic ingredients simply so that they can be used in a variety of dishes (e.g. blanched spinach can be used in Eggs Florentine for breakfast, but is also lovely in mashed potato or in a pie with goat's cheese and onions).
- Train your staff in knife skills to maximise use of vegetables and meat.
- Use parts of the vegetable we often throw away: use young beetroot tops in salads or blanch more mature ones, or roast vegetables with their skins on. (See overleaf for nose-to-tail tips)
- Store salads undressed and they will keep longer.
- If you have room, buy a freezer to store prepped ingredients and cooked food – make sure you use separate sealed bags or containers and label clearly with item and date.
- Keep an eye on your fridge, freezer and storeroom and rotate your stock - and work with suppliers to make sure you're getting sufficient shelf life on their products.
- Monitor plate waste to check portion sizes and whether anything is regularly uneaten (garnishes are prime offenders).
- Serve slightly smaller portions and tell customers that they are welcome to ask for seconds (if you adopt this policy, make sure staff communicate it clearly).
- You will always have some unavoidable food waste. Check whether your council can collect it for composting or anaerobic digestion, see whether a local community garden can take your veg waste, or get your own compost bin or wormery. Cooking oil must be treated separately (and definitely not thrown down the sink) - you may be able to have it collected for free to be recycled into biodiesel.

## Turn waste food into your menu

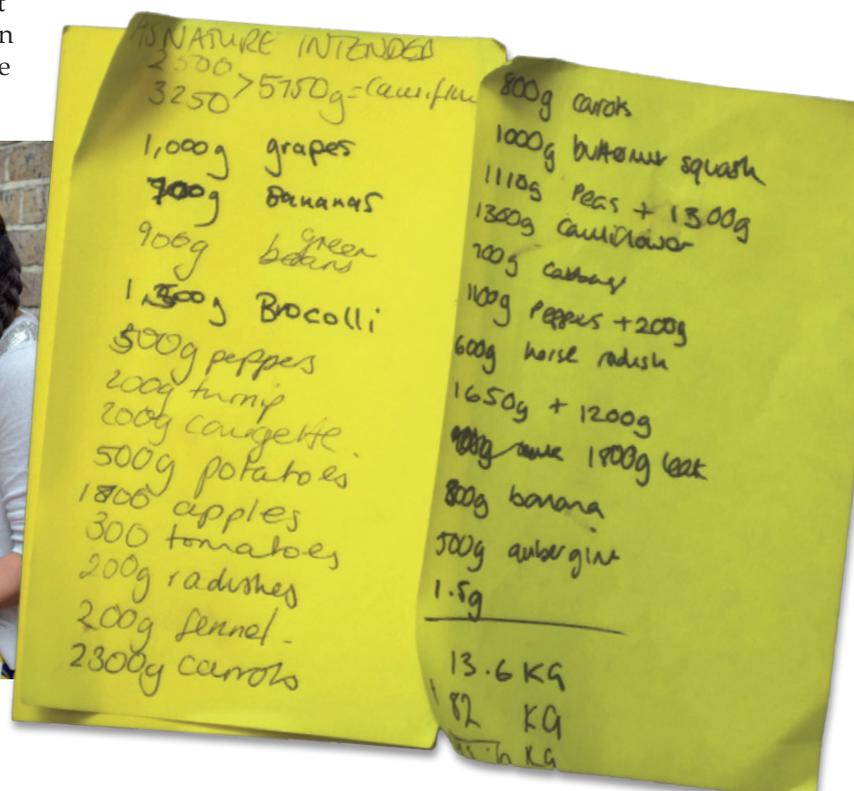
Community cafés serving low-income communities may even be able to base their entire menu around food that would otherwise have been wasted. We got some tips from [FoodCycle](#) and [Brixton People's Kitchen](#), who get the majority of their food this way, donated from food businesses with surplus food.

- As a starting point, try your local greengrocer, street market or farmers' market – they may have unsold produce at the end of the day or week that they're happy to give you.
- Check out the food safety side of things with your Environmental Health Officer. Legally you can use food after its 'best before' date, but not after its 'use by' date. Steering clear of meat and fish makes things much more straightforward and less risky.
- Try [Fareshare](#), a national charity that redistributes surplus food to those in need – they charge a small handling fee, but it's still much cheaper than buying the stuff! [Filling the Gap](#) café source most of their food in this way.
- [Plan Zheroes](#) connect businesses with surplus produce with people that can use it via their online map.
- Communicate the project's mission to potential food suppliers. They will be more motivated to donate if they know how the food will be used and who it is going to benefit. Keep a good relationship with them, e.g. collecting at regular agreed times is key!

The FoodCycle cafés get a lot of produce from supermarkets, but this is trickier as it usually requires a relationship with the supermarket's head office.



Brixton People's Kitchen plan their menus around food that would have been wasted - in one day they served meals made from 130kg of food saved from the bin.



# Food with values

## Sourcing and sustainability

➔ We believe that sustainable food should be for everyone. We've put together some tips and tricks for incorporating as much sustainably produced food into your menu as possible, while keeping costs in check and prices affordable. It can be done!

### Identify local and ethical suppliers

- Cultivating good relationships with your suppliers is essential, particularly with your fruit and veg supplier – they can tell you what's in season or going cheap (e.g. because it has blemishes that mean it's acceptable for catering, but can't be sold elsewhere).
- If you're in or around London, search for suppliers on [The Local Food Finder](#), which allows you to search by distance from your business and by ethical accreditation schemes.
- If you're outside London, contact your nearest local or regional [food group](#).
- To be sure you're happy with how the food you buy has been produced and traded, you can do one or both of the following:
  - look out for accreditation schemes such as [organic](#), [LEAF](#), [Freedom Food](#), [Marine Stewardship Council](#), or [Fairtrade](#).
  - get to know your producer and ask lots of questions (some small, ethical producers work to high standards but can't afford accreditation).
- To find a supplier of additive-free bread, search the Real Bread Campaign's [Real Bread finder](#).
- Don't forget to tell your customers – on menus, posters, leaflets on tables, or chalkboards – about the local and ethical provenance of your food. This may increase your customer loyalty or prompt a rewarding conversation. Everyone likes to hear good news stories!

For more information on these accreditation schemes, as well as tips on using local and seasonal produce, less but better meat and sustainable fish, see the [Good Food Guide for chefs, caterers and culinary students](#).

### Local and seasonal produce: your building blocks

Basing your dishes around local and seasonal fruit and veg (along with plenty of grains and pulses and – if you like – a small amount of meat, fish and dairy) makes sense in terms of health, sustainability and cost.

- Use [seasonality charts](#) and your veg supplier's weekly produce list as starting points when thinking about your menu.
- Running out of things to do with cabbage? The internet is a fantastic source of ideas for new ways to use seasonal vegetables – box scheme websites often have great recipes.
- You may be able to buy some herbs, salads and veg from a local community growing space – or even grow your own (see box).

### Go ultra-local

Being able to put ultra-local produce on your menu – whether grown in your own urban kitchen garden or by a local community group, or made by a local food producer – is a real selling point.

- If you're in London, contact [Capital Growth](#) to find a growing space near you – they can also help with training.
- If you'd like to have a go at growing your own, you need to consider:
  - \* Is your outside space (which could just be a windowsill) sunny enough? Three hours per day should be OK.
  - \* Do you and your staff have the time, interest and commitment? Starting small is a good idea. Can you involve your whole team in a watering rota?
  - \* If you're short on space you can grow in containers – perhaps reused containers such as cooking oil cans from the kitchen?
  - \* What do you want to grow? Easy crops like cut-and-come-again salads, radishes, cress? Unusual things like edible flowers or exotic herbs? Remember to plan these into your menus!
  - \* You can grow from seed – but maybe buy a few plug plants as well just in case your first attempts at seed sowing aren't a great success.
  - \* Especially in a kitchen garden, it's worth growing food organically, to keep your food pesticide free, and to encourage wildlife such as butterflies and bees.

The Garden Organic website has great advice on organic food-growing – check out their [growing cards](#).



## Meat: less is more

Livestock production has a huge environmental impact. Eating too much meat (especially processed meat such as sausages and bacon) is also bad for our health, and cheap meat often comes from animals that have been reared in miserable conditions. So use less, and buy the best you can afford.

- Think of using meat as an ingredient rather than a centrepiece – many top chefs are now making vegetables the stars of their dishes:
  - You can reduce the amount of meat and bulk up with veg and pulses in lots of dishes without having a negative impact on flavour or texture.
  - Grate extra veg into meat sauces and pie fillings, add grains or pulses to stews and braises...
- Think nose-to-tail:
  - Buy whole chickens rather than chicken breasts, roast them for sandwiches and salads and use the carcasses to make stock for soups, stews and risottos.
  - Consider cheaper, slower-cooking, flavoursome cuts such as pork cheeks, lamb's neck and oxtail.
  - Offally good: We're often a bit squeamish about innards, but patés and terrines are popular, cost-effective and can be simple to make. You can add chicken livers to pasta sauce for extra flavour (and nutrients), and some suppliers sell mince that contains ox heart (heart doesn't have a strong flavour).

For inspiration, try these recipes: [www.sustainweb.org/ethicaleats/recipes/](http://www.sustainweb.org/ethicaleats/recipes/)

## Sustainable fish

This is a slippery subject. We're told that eating fish is good for our health and that we should aim to eat two portions a week (one of which should be oily) – but at the same time we know that many wild fish stocks are dwindling, and a lot of fish is either caught or farmed in an environmentally damaging way. Do your bit by following these rules of thumb:

- Look out for the [Marine Stewardship Council](#) (MSC) 'fish with a tick' logo – particularly if you use frozen or canned fish.
- If you use tinned tuna, go FAD-free (which avoids the worst sort of tuna-fishing) or ideally pole-and-line caught (check the label) to minimise the harm to other marine animals such as sea birds, turtles and dolphins.
- Steer clear of the usual suspects and try low-cost, underutilised and healthy species such as sardines, herring and mussels.

Fish carrying the MSC ecolabel is guaranteed to have come from a sustainable, well-managed fishery.

Check out the Marine Conservation Society's list of 'fish to eat' for more ideas.

### Reading this on a computer?

Click on the underlined links to find out more.

### Reading a printout?

Check out the 'useful links' box below.

## Useful links

**Ethical Eats** – a network of restaurants, cafés and caterers interested in sustainability: [www.ethicaleats.org](http://www.ethicaleats.org). You can find useful hints and tips for your menu planning under Advice and Tools: [www.sustainweb.org/ethicaleats/adviceandtools](http://www.sustainweb.org/ethicaleats/adviceandtools), or simply download the *Good Food Guide* below.

*Good Food Guide* for chefs, caterers and culinary students – this straightforward guide sets out the issues, ideas for what you can do and useful sources for more information. Download from the Ethical Eats website under Publications (or go to <http://po.st/7AI8H3>).

**Making Local Food Work** – a project supporting community food enterprises, with a range of how-to guides: [www.makinglocalfoodwork.co.uk](http://www.makinglocalfoodwork.co.uk).

**Greenwich Co-operative Development Agency** – supports co-operatives, community initiatives and social enterprises: [www.greenwich-cda.org.uk](http://www.greenwich-cda.org.uk).

**Local Food Finder** – an online directory of producers and suppliers in and around London: [www.localfoodfinder.org](http://www.localfoodfinder.org).

To find other local and sustainable food directories nationwide, see: [www.sustainweb.org/foodlegacy/local\\_and\\_sustainable\\_food\\_directories](http://www.sustainweb.org/foodlegacy/local_and_sustainable_food_directories) or [www.bigbarn.co.uk](http://www.bigbarn.co.uk).

**Capital Growth** – the food-growing network for London, run by Sustain: [www.capitalgrowth.org](http://www.capitalgrowth.org).

**Garden Organic** – helpful advice on organic food-growing: [www.gardenorganic.org.uk](http://www.gardenorganic.org.uk).

Food accreditation schemes to look out for include: organic certifiers such as The Soil Association ([www.soilassociation.org](http://www.soilassociation.org)), Organic Food Federation ([www.orgfoodfed.com](http://www.orgfoodfed.com)) and Organic Farmers & Growers ([www.organicfarmers.org.uk](http://www.organicfarmers.org.uk)); LEAF (Linking Environment and Farming - [www.leafuk.org](http://www.leafuk.org)); RSPCA Freedom Food for animal welfare ([www.rspca.org.uk/freedomfood](http://www.rspca.org.uk/freedomfood)); Fairtrade ([www.fairtrade.org.uk](http://www.fairtrade.org.uk)), Marine Stewardship Council for wild-caught fish ([www.msc.org](http://www.msc.org)) and Aquaculture Stewardship Council for farmed fish ([www.asc-aqua.org](http://www.asc-aqua.org)). For more advice on sustainable fish see [www.fishonline.org](http://www.fishonline.org), and for more information on sustainable food in general go to the *Good Food Guide* above.

**The Real Bread Campaign** – Sustain's campaign to fight for better bread - see its Real Bread finder at [www.sustainweb.org/realbread/bakery\\_finder](http://www.sustainweb.org/realbread/bakery_finder).

**Fareshare** – a national charity redistributing surplus food to those in need: [www.fareshare.org.uk](http://www.fareshare.org.uk).

**Plan ZHeroes** – an online map connecting businesses with surplus food with organisations that can use it: [www.planzheroes.org](http://www.planzheroes.org).