

# Nutritious food for thought

Catering colleges are updating their courses to reflect the nation's growing enthusiasm for healthy eating. By **ANNE GIACOMANTONIO**



**W**atching what you eat is not a new idea. From the latest campaign by Jamie Oliver to the delivery of organic fruit and vegetable boxes to our front doors, we are all aware of the message. However, this health kick hasn't greatly influenced the catering industry just yet: students who want to enter the industry are taught surprisingly little about nutrition.

There are specific courses that cover nutrition and diet – and many graduates of these courses advise within the industry – but should a culinary arts management degree or hospitality diploma address this change in nutritional tastes and trends too?

In places where people eat a significant number of meals over a long period of time – hospitals, prisons, armed forces barracks and school canteens, for example – caterers have a duty to offer a balanced diet. The nutritional responsibilities for caterers who provide for the general public are less pronounced, but allowances do have to be made for people with special dietary requirements; not only that, but it is also in caterers' commercial interests to accommodate them. According to the Office of National Statistics, the number of people eating out has significantly increased. An average of one in six meals is consumed outside of the house.

But Heather Hartwell, a registered nutritionist and lecturer at Bournemouth University, says not much has changed in terms of the teaching of nutrition since she wrote a paper in 2004. "My findings then

were that there is no requirement for anyone studying catering to be aware of the nutrition and dietary implications of the food they serve," she says. "Nutrition needs to be applied not just theoretically but also practically in course syllabuses, in order for new graduates in the industry to be able to work conscientiously on menus."

There are nutrition courses available for professionals already in hospitality. In London, people working within the catering industry can sign up for courses to increase their knowledge of healthy, sustainable food for schools, hospitals, care homes and prisons. Outside of London, the Food Standards Agency has taken up the cause of healthy eating in hospitality. They are encouraging companies to commit to healthier, more nutritious meals by producing practical guidance papers that can be accessed via their website.

Some of the advice they offer to contract catering teams, who between them serve approximately two million meals a day to workers across the UK, is simple: "You could increase the amount of cost-effective starchy food you serve, such as rice or pasta, and reduce the amount of sauce, which can be more expensive." They also have tips for caterers that have a student clientele: "Choose ingredients and their proportions carefully – because this can make a big difference to the nutritional content of a dish – and balance meals better by choosing healthy accompaniments."

The good news is that the hospitality and catering diploma, introduced from



September 2009, will also address nutrition, although, arguably, not as prominently as it should. In addition to maths, English and information and communication technologies, students learn the "life skill" of using fresh ingredients, according to the prospectus. Understanding the need to develop menus for special diets is also included, along with other skills such as money management, health and safety and food and beverage service.

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options for consumers. Courses have started to reflect the change in consumer attitudes and trends, but there is still room for improvement. Students have the opportunity to influence this by asking more from their training and recognising the need to have such information included in the syllabus. With the 2012 Olympics on the horizon and the world's eyes upon us as a result, the hospitality industry around the UK will have to be prepared to accommodate a range of dietary requirements to provide fresh, healthy, balanced meals – and not just to our own athletes.