

Jamie's
MINISTRY OF FOOD
AUSTRALIA

This manifesto explains a really effective way to empower the public to make short and long-term changes. I believe it will radically improve the health prospects and social welfare of the public, regardless of age and class.

When I set out to establish the Ministry of Food campaign, I wanted to dig into some issues which have been nagging at me since I filmed my *School Dinners* television series in the UK, the biggest ones being: why aren't people cooking at home anymore and why don't kids recognise everyday vegetables? I wanted to find out more about how people eat at home and why our diet is leading to a huge increase in obesity in so many countries around the world.

I wanted to see if I could find a way to get people cooking again, to give them the tools to help themselves by learning some basic food skills, to feel confident in the kitchen and enjoy eating their own meals. I then wanted to take it a step further by asking them to take this knowledge and Pass It On; sharing their newfound skills with other people.

Diet and health are massive social issues. In the UK, obesity already costs the National Health Service more than smoking: £4.2 billion vs. £2.7 billion per year. Over 9,000 people in Britain die prematurely each year due to health conditions caused by being overweight; cancer, heart disease, stroke and diabetes are the most common. This will be the first generation in which children are predicted to die at a younger age than their parents.

In Australia the figures are equally shocking. Figures given by the National Preventative Health Taskforce show that being overweight or obese affects over 60% of Australian adults and 25% of Australian children. Nearly one in three Indigenous Australian adults is obese. The total financial cost in Australia of obesity alone, not including overweight people, was estimated at \$8.3 billion in 2008. The most recent projections indicate that there will be an extra 6.7 million obese Australians by 2025. This frightening statistic clearly demonstrates an urgent need for action!

Recent UK government research into obesity found that "lack of knowledge, confidence and skills is the main barrier which stops parents cooking from scratch". But, despite this, obesity strategies rarely contain any measures specifically designed to address the root problem of obesity: a complete lack of cooking knowledge.

Cooking skills used to be passed down through the generations but now that chain has been broken. More women go out to work, fewer countries have compulsory cooking lessons at school, and we've now got about two generations of people who have not been taught the basics. In my Ministry of Food television series, and throughout the campaign, my goal was to help people tackle the obvious problems of lack of money and time. But I found I had to start by addressing the more fundamental issues like a lack of cooking ability and food knowledge.

But my team and I found that, armed with a little bit of knowledge and confidence, people very quickly started to change the way they were eating. On the Ministry of Food pages on my website (www.jamieoliver.com/jamies-ministry-of-food), we have provided what I think are some of the basic recipes, videos and kitchen advice to help get people on the first rung of the ladder.

One thing is for sure; if a better diet is one of the keys to sorting out our health and obesity problems, then governments worldwide urgently need to put cooking at the top of their agendas.

The original Ministry of Food, set up in the UK during the Second World War, was a great model. Set up to manage wartime rationing and food shortages, it is to me, a great example of how a government can quickly and successfully educate its people in times of crisis. It bombarded the population with help and advice, ensuring that people knew how to feed themselves properly and as well as possible until things were back to normal. They even went as far as sending cooks and advisors out into the community to give practical demonstrations and advice on how best to use the available resources.

Australia also had a wartime government department dedicated to food issues; the Commonwealth Rationing Commission. Limited rationing was introduced in 1942 and wartime recipes were circulated in magazines, pamphlets and on government-sponsored radio programmes alongside really down-to-earth, sensible advice on how to use the available ingredients. The Australian Government reportedly feared that rationing would result in deterioration in health on the home front but the outcome was positive. As in the UK, the period saw a dip in the numbers of people suffering from diet related problems.

These days the food crisis isn't about rationing, it's about people not understanding food, or cooking. It's time we got back to this idea of teaching the public by getting professional cookery teachers around the world trained up to teach their communities. They need to reach the people who don't cook, don't watch cookery programmes, don't buy cookbooks, and simply don't know about food. If they give it a try and people start to feel inspired about cooking, it could make a massive difference, and quickly. All it needs is proper funding and support from Federal, State or Local Governments, specifically the departments of health, skills or education.

So I'm asking governments across the world to help make this happen through a few simple steps:

1. SET UP A FOOD CENTRE IN EVERY TOWN:

These should be friendly, local walk-in centres, kitted out with the sort of equipment you'd find in homes, offering basic cooking courses for the local community. These centres can then be places where local people can meet professional cookery teachers face-to-face, get hands on experience with food, and take a course in basic cooking. They can also provide practical hubs from which public health trainers and other community workers can offer advice on healthcare or local government services.

For these "Ministry of Food Centres", we've put together a set of simple set of recipes that cover the basic food skills: chopping, frying, roasting and baking. These recipes are inspiring and affordable. After a course of lessons, most people will know how to follow a recipe and be able to transfer what they've learned to other dishes and ingredients. And they'll have those skills for the rest of their lives.

Here in the UK, we estimate a food centre costs approximately £150,000 to set up. If a government were to set up 150 across the nation, this would cost approximately £22.5 million. A small price to pay when you consider the rising cost of obesity. Running costs could come from local government and public health budgets. There should also be a commitment to support any new centre for a minimum of 3 years to allow it to "bed into" its community and for the scheme to have a sustained and sustainable long-term effect on the health and well-being of the population.

2. MAKE SURE THE CENTRES ARE STAFFED BY TRAINED FOOD TEACHERS:

These individuals – who will ideally be from the local community – will be trained in my Ministry of Food cookery course. They'll teach basic food skills like how to shop for ingredients, how to use kitchen equipment, how to make the most of local and seasonal food, and how to make good simple meals on a tight budget.

3. PUT COOKS OUT IN THE COMMUNITY:

If we look back at the original Ministry of Food's wartime model, it is clear that we've got to get cooks out into the community to spread the message by working with charitable bodies, community groups, local services, and businesses. Sending people out to teach in the community or to Pass It On, requires only a set of cooking equipment, some mobile gas burners, ingredients and wheels to get there. Governments should therefore encourage, and seek to fund, the training of a new wave of home economists to work within communities. Properly qualified teachers working in schools and the community will deliver rapid change.

4. SUPPORT BUSINESSES TO SPREAD THE CAMPAIGN:

Our Ministry of Food Centres are often contacted by businesses who want to initiate cooking lessons for their workforce and their families. They see it as a great way to promote employee health, team building, community relations, and also as a tool to break down the barriers separating departments in big businesses. Offering tax incentives to businesses that are prepared to invest in the health of their staff through cookery would encourage many more to take part and could make a significant contribution to the long-term health of the nation's workforce and economy.

5. INVEST IN MOBILE FOOD CENTRES FOR DEPRIVED NEIGHBOURHOODS AND REGIONS:

In the UK a group called Focus on Food runs a small fleet of cooking buses. These buses visit schools and introduce cooking to kids, parents, and teachers. This is a fantastic scheme for communities in the remote parts of the country, or those in very deprived inner-city neighbourhoods with little access to facilities. The visits inspire people to keep cooking long after the bus has left and are a fantastic marketing tool for cooking. Operating flat out, a bus could run over 11,500 sessions a year. They've got great reach and are so popular that I strongly believe mobile cooking classrooms should be introduced in other countries. This sort of scheme would be hugely beneficial to larger countries, like Australia or the US, where people are often spread out across great distances.

6. FUND ADULT COOKERY CLASSES:

Over the last few years, I have consistently called for better food education for young adults and parents because it's this group of people who have been left behind. Sure, there are cookery courses out there, but the majority of them are for people who already know quite a bit about cooking and want to take it further. If you don't know how to boil an egg, roast a chicken or chop vegetables, it's pretty difficult to find a course for adults at that level. This is especially true for people on low incomes or in areas of high deprivation. Our governments need to recognise cooking as an essential life skill and a key part of adult learning, and start funding courses at Food Centres, and further education colleges.

People working in the community on health and obesity need this training too. Knowing how to make food fun and cooking appealing would help them get better results. Without a doubt, investing in food skills now would save millions in healthcare down the road.

7. GET KIDS COOKING PROPERLY

Government research in the UK already acknowledges that kids who get a chance to cook at school often end up changing the way their family eats at home (for the better). So it makes sense to put proper cooking lessons on the school curriculum to ensure kids are learning about food and how to cook as early as possible. Teacher training courses also urgently need to include cooking. Like a lot of young adults, young teachers are unlikely to know how to cook themselves. How can we expect them to teach cooking lessons if they don't know anything about food themselves?

Getting food education into schools does cost money, but if supermarkets were encouraged to adopt their local school they could then provide ingredients for free or, at least, at cost. Not only would they be doing something wonderful, they'd be educating potential future customers.

There's a serious lack of knowledge about food and cooking, and the result is the modern-day epidemic of obesity and bad health we are currently facing. I believe if the actions I've mentioned above are carried through they will represent a major step towards tackling these problems once and for all. We simply can't wait any longer.

Jamie Oliver
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