

Sarah Allen

The Vine Inter-Church Primary School

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I've been working at The Vine school since 2006 when the new school building opened. My background is in retail not catering but as a parent (my children go to The Vine School) and a keen home cook it was the perfect opportunity for me. The school had opened the previous year in temporary buildings so there had not been a proper school dinner service for me to take over. It was a clean slate and I arrived to a wonderful new, well equipped, school kitchen with my well thumbed Jamie Oliver and Jeannette Orrey cookbooks at my side and began the journey of creating The Vine Café.

The journey has been extremely exciting although there have had a few bumpy times! However I have been overwhelmed by the generous support and practical help offered by members of our community including health and safety guidance, NVQ training, recipes from parents and general enthusiasm and encouragement from everyone I've met.

Finding suppliers to support the vision has been an ongoing task and I've met some wonderful local suppliers and producers along the way. Every day the Vine Café bakes bread using organic wholemeal flour from Glebe Farm, just down the road. We also use free range eggs from a nearby

farm, all our fruit and vegetables are from within 50 miles from the school and our meat is from East Anglia. Our meals only use freedom farm chicken, outdoor reared pork and Marine Stewardship Council certified fish.

When we carried out an audit of the kitchen in preparation of the food standards we found that the only item we had that did not meet the standards was some milkshake mix. Everything else in the school was fresh and colourant and additive free – hurrah! The hard work was recognised in April 2009 when we were visited by environmental health who awarded the kitchen the top level five stars.

Last October came the exciting news that the pupils had nominated me for the 'Dinnerlady of the Year' Food and Farming Award. I was so proud that the pupils had thought to put me and the team forward and it was a great way to celebrate all our achievements so far. I spent a very happy day in London mixing with food activists such as Prince Charles and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and with a host of local suppliers and producers.

The development of our school garden has gone hand in hand with the Vine café. Our gardener Jack Waterfall worked with parents and pupils to

transform an area of clay and builders rubble into a flourishing garden. Jack worked with parents and pupils to transform an area of clay and builders rubble into a flourishing garden. So far we have had brilliant harvests of pumpkins, courgettes, garlic, tomatoes, beetroot, potatoes, runner beans, strawberries and lettuce. In the success in growing our own food has led to the doubling of the garden in 2008 with room to grow more fruit a priority; we have also built a herb garden outside the kitchen door so us cooks don't have so far to go!

After just 3 years The Vine Cafe has certainly grown and flourished and our school lunches have become a vitally important part of our school day and the life of our school family. Lots of people are interested in our story but when they ask us how we started, so often their questions focus on the rules and regulations, the finances and the challenges of running our own school kitchen rather than on the key question, ‘Do freshly prepared, healthy, tasty school lunches make a difference to our children?’ At The Vine School we know that the answer is ‘YES!’