

Mange-Tout kids' club



The kids learn food is fun

Can encouraging your kids to kiss cauliflowers really get them to eat their greens? Time Out goes to investigate.

In a small upstairs room in Battersea Arts Centre, a group of apple-cheeked young children in matching blue tabards are being asked to identify a knobby yellow fruit by a vivacious young woman clutching a stuffed anthropomorphised pea pod. 'Who knows what these are?' she cries. Three tiny arms shoot up. 'Lemons! That's right.' And what about this? A tomato! Great! Now lets see how many we can find hidden around this room...'

The youngsters race off and come back with armfuls of red and yellow fruit which they then go about sorting into appropriate containers. Next it's time for a song. 'Cauliflower is good for me,' the children sing to what I can just about discern to be the tune of 'Old McDonald'.

This is Mange-Tout, the latest kiddie craze to sweep through the more bourgeois enclaves of south London and I have dragged Max (aged two and a half) along to test its core philosophy: that by encouraging children to play with their food they'll grow to love, even eat, fruit and vegetables.



Lucy and her ingenious fruit 'n' veg based games

Started by 28-year-old Lucy Thomas last August with a few trial sessions in Clapham, it already hosts classes in Clapham, Battersea, Dulwich and Putney, with others planned in Sheen and Fulham. The empire won't stop there. Longer term there will be cookery classes; a touring group to go into nurseries; a book of songs, advice and recipes, due to be published at the end of the year; and, if that all goes well, an organic café for parents and kids.

'I was a nanny for ten years,' says Thomas, 'and spent a lot of time being paid to feed children. I realised there wasn't anything in the market that helped parents.' Unlike some best-selling parenting guides, the Mange-Tout approach is not about making already stressed parents feel guilty about their shortcomings, but takes the

grown-ups' side. The songs, games, and baby talk may be aimed at the 18- month to four years bracket, but the nutrition sheets, recipe suggestions, newsletter and general camaraderie are about providing advice and support for parents.

'So many parents feel that they are failing in their battle with their children and food. Busy mums don't have time to sit and sift through recipe books, and it's all very well saying things like "get your children involved in the cooking", but a lot of parents don't have time. Mange-Tout is trying to offer simple approaches that aren't going to take up the whole of the day.'

I confess to some scepticism about this miracle cure for obstinate children. I only know two children, siblings, who actively enjoy eating vegetables. 'Oh, asparagus! Our favourite!' they exclaimed when I served it up for adults at lunch. That's clearly not normal.

Thomas admits there are no guarantees: 'We have some children who have a complete aversion to fruit and take months to try something. We had one boy who refused to eat peas but once we started playing a game with them he started shovelling them into his mouth by the handful. Just getting them to try it is half the battle. Even if they don't eat it the first time, more than half will go back and try it again.'



Encouraging kids to play with their food

'Adults underestimate how much children like strong flavours. They wouldn't think of offering them lemon or grapefruit or balsamic vinegar, but children love it.'

Yet according to eminent food scientist Professor Sir John Krebs, interviewed in these very pages on the occasion of his 2005 Royal Institution Christmas lectures, humans are programmed to avoid bitter foods and only learn to enjoy them as a cultural development. 'Well, we had cranberries at Christmas, and brussels sprouts, and the children all gave them a try,' counters Thomas.



Lucy teaches a child to make fresh lemonade

At a table covered in a fabulously fruity tablecloth, a box of raw cauliflower is handed round and the children are encouraged to take a floret and lick it or rub it on their lips. 'Does it feel knobby? Is it tickling you?' Thomas asks. Next she hands round the cooked version, and suggests, with less success, that the children suck out the juice. Slices of tomato follow, and Celia gets a round of applause for being the first to suck the pips out. Thomas bites a smile out of a corn cracker and encourages the children to copy her and dip theirs into a sauce she's made of sieved tomatoes; Oliver dives straight in.

Today the children also learn how to make lemonade by squeezing a lemon into a cup and adding fizzy water. Parents, meanwhile, are advised that fizzy water is not good to drink every day (it fills them up with gas and the carbon monoxide can leech important nutrients from the stomach) but that warm water and a squeeze of lemon works wonders on a tummy ache.

'Walk to the shops,' the children sing in the final round of games as they march round pretending to buy fruit. 'Six juicy lemons growing on a tree/Adam came to pick one, then there were five,' they chant as one by one each child comes up to pluck a sticky picture from a velcro tree. And finally the closing song to send Mr Pod, the much treasured stuffed green pea pod made by Lucy's mum, 'back to sleep'.

Before we leave, parents are issued a sheet with nutritional information, health benefits and ideas on how to incorporate the food into meals. I read that you should cook the leaves of the cauliflower as well as the florets, that lemons are good for mouth ulcers, and that hollowed-out beef tomatoes are great as an edible bowl for rice or pasta. When I corner the other mums they say that, yes, there has been a marked improvement in their child's eating habits since joining Mange-Tout though one that's been built up over a term. What keeps them coming back, though, is that their children have fun.

Max, however, is less convinced. Having cried for the first ten minutes, sulked for the next ten and spent the rest of the time disrupting the games, in the end the only way to tame him is with a chocolate digestive.

Child's Ploy

Lucy Thomas's tips on getting your kids to eat healthily

1. Try to sit down with your child for five or ten minutes while they're eating. Grab something healthy to munch on like a bit of fruit; they are often more interested in what you're eating than what's on their plate.
2. Have a 'sweet treat box'. Fill an airtight container with dried banana, papaya, raisins, and things to make the box seem exciting and fun. Allow them to choose something from it when they've been good.
3. Try not to say 'just eat it!' and try to dissociate 'taste' and 'eat'. Make it fun. Get them to tickle their tongue with it or pretend to brush their teeth or just 'kiss' it to feel it on their lips. Encourage them to feel the texture in their mouths.
4. Try to prepare different fruit and vegetables in different ways. If your child doesn't like cooked carrot, they might like it raw.
5. Smoothie drinks are a good way of getting children's fruit and veg intake up in a surreptitious, but pleasant, way.

For details of current and upcoming Mange-Tout courses call 020 8672 2400 or visit www.mangetoutkids.com. Classes cost £100 for a ten-week term. They can also be hired for parties.