

What, no chips?

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By Gary Stokes of Ashlyns Organics

School dinners have been making headlines recently, but one farm in Essex has been leading the way in providing pupils with affordable, organic meals.

Ashlyns Organic Farm is part of WWJ Collins a family run partnership which farms 1,500 acres near Ongar in Essex. In the mid 1990s, disillusioned with conventional farming, the Collins family decided to convert a small area to organic production. With the ethos of supplying local food to local people Ashlyns created a box scheme delivering fresh fruit and vegetables to the surrounding areas. This soon grew from 75 boxes a week to well over 1,000. The organic farm proved so successful that more land was converted into organic production and in 2003 the decision was made to convert the remaining 1,000 acres to organic production. The farm now grows a wide variety of combinable crops including wheat, barley, oats and beans together with potatoes, onions and more than 40 different types of vegetables. Ashlyns also has a Lincoln Red suckler herd, rare breed Essex pigs and 500 laying Black Rock hens.

The idea of direct retail to the consumer led to the decision to build the first farm shop at North Weald which opened its doors in September 2002 enabling Ashlyns to sell a lot of its own produce together with a wide variety of products sourced as locally as possible. The second shop at the Van Hage Garden Company in Ware opened in November 2004 and in March of this year the third, and biggest, of the Ashlyns farm shops opened at Bluegate Hall Farm in Great Bardfield, Braintree, complete with an in-store bakery and restaurant.

Ashlyns has two education officers based at the farm shop at North Weald who conduct tours of the farm for schools giving them the opportunity to explore the farm and learn more about sustainable agriculture, organic farming and the benefits these have on the environment. This provides an ideal opportunity for the children to experience where their food comes from whilst enjoying a fun day on the farm.

#### Getting through the school gates

The farm regularly attends farmers markets and this is where it first got involved with providing food for schools when it was approached by Ruth Watts, a school cook from Barking. After a lengthy discussion with Gary Stokes of Ashlyns it was decided to hold a conference for head teachers and Ashlyns soon realised that there was a great demand for locally grown produce although the logistics of delivering and severe need for education and training soon became apparent.

In March 2004 Essex County Council made the decision to return the responsibility of catering budgets back to the primary schools. This proved to be an ideal opportunity for schools to be able to source local, fully traceable products and improve school meals. Ashlyns Organic Farm is a Demonstration Farm for the Soil Association which has been campaigning for many years to improve the standard of school meals through its "Food for Life" project. Its Schools Meals Policy Advisor Jeanette Orrey, who is currently enjoying huge success with her bestselling book "The Dinner Lady", has first hand experience having transformed her school to provide local fully traceable and, where affordable, organic meals to the children of St Peter's Primary School in Nottinghamshire.

#### Feeding Our Future

Having witnessed the standard of meals within the local schools Gary was determined, with the help of Jeanette Orrey, to make a difference, not only providing organic and local produce to the schools but offering training and support to schools which wanted to provide their own in-house catering service.

This was going to be a ground breaking project for Ashlyns Organic Farm and to be able to provide the training facilities and form a co-operative of local producers was going to be a huge financial undertaking. Gary approached DEFRA in February 2004 to explore the possibilities of assistance in setting up such a huge project. On the advice of DEFRA an application was made for a Rural Enterprise Scheme Match Funding Grant. Although the process was an emotional rollercoaster the grant was finally approved early this year.

For the past year Gary has been supplying seven local schools with organic fruit and vegetables. With the backing of the Collins family and the funding from DEFRA Gary and Jeanette can now realise their project aptly named "Feeding Our Future".

Ashlyns is now in a position to supply organic and local produce through its own farm and the members of the newly formed co-operative. Jeanette Orrey is a major part of the project and is committing a huge amount of her time setting up and running the training centre for cooks. She will be teaching the cooks how to prepare traditional meals whilst helping to design menus to meet nutritional guidelines and stay within budget. Although the kitchen is primarily focused on the day to day running of a school kitchen Jeanette will also be running classes for anyone who would like to learn more about catering including basic food hygiene. The kitchen will also act as a

preparation area for the washing and peeling of vegetables to be delivered to the schools reducing the amount of time spent in the school kitchen.

#### Co-operating regionally

Gary with the help of Abacus Organics is setting up a farmer led co-operative to guarantee continuity of supply for the schools. This offers a 38 week supply window with a guaranteed price for their product. Unfortunately whilst the average uptake of school meals within a school is currently below 50 per cent the need for alternative markets is paramount. The co-operative will be able to offer a branded product that is synonymous with its regional origin. All members will be audited so as to provide complete traceability and strict protocols covering animal and staff welfare. The idea of this is to increase consumer trust by providing an informative label that can be traced back to its origins through the co-operative's website which will offer details on each member.

Although Ashlyns is concentrating on the schools in Essex at the moment it is hoped that the success of the project will eventually roll out across the country. If studies prove conducive to improving the health of the children in Essex along with tackling other physical and social disorders then maybe key decision makers within the Government will realise that increasing the budget for school meals will eventually save them millions in healthcare in the future. Now is the time to be proactive rather than reactive.

If you would like to find out more about this project or being part of the co-operative, please contact Gary Stokes, telephone 01277 890821 or e-mail [gary@ashlyns.co.uk](mailto:gary@ashlyns.co.uk)

#### Consultancy service

To help increase the uptake in school meals Ashlyns will be offering a consultancy service that will cover everything from staff training through to budget control and auditing. It is not the intention to become the next Scholarest but to offer assistance to the schools that show an interest in supplying their own in-house catering service. There will be a fee charged to the schools for this facility although Ashlyns will work very closely with the schools to ensure that all budgetary restrictions are met. It is hoped that any money made by the schools will be reinvested to improve their healthy eating campaign. Schools which are already receiving products from Ashlyns have noticed an increase in the uptake of school meals and have expressed an interest in employing Ashlyns to realise their full potential. This will obviously create a bigger market place for the co-operative.