THE EVOLUTION OF CONSCIENTIOUS CATERING

Darwin College takes a truly progressive approach to university catering

Founded in 1964, Darwin College is one of 30 constituent colleges at the University of Cambridge. Not only was Darwin the university’s first graduate-only college, but it was also the first to admit both men and women.

Less formal than some of the other colleges at Cambridge University, Darwin is a community for graduate students, researchers and fellows. Although the college is located in the city centre, Darwin residents can enjoy the grounds and beautiful garden which offers a quiet space to reflect or study as well as a more busy dining hall and exuberant bar.

Each college at Cambridge University acts as a community that crosses disciplines and is responsible for welfare, providing accommodation and a social home, while both the university and colleges have joint responsibility for academic performance.

Darwin has 65 Fellows who hold faculty or research positions in the university and associated institutes and about 650 students who come from the UK and around 70 other countries. Students study for PhDs and master’s degrees in disciplines spanning the whole spectrum from Anglo-Saxon to Zoology.

The egalitarian approach to university life means that there is a real sense of social cohesion with students and fellows regularly meeting and talking at academic get-togethers and seminars, over meals and at social and sporting events.

PROGRESSIVE APPROACH

When it comes to dining, Darwin is more progressive in its approach to meal times with students and fellows eating together, unlike other colleges where fellows sit at a high table or even another room to eat.

“We currently have over 750 students at the college which is very modern in comparison to the others at Cambridge University,” explains Ivan Higney, catering manager, Darwin College. “The dining space encourages a relaxed, communal atmosphere, with large refectory-style tables, and the master sits with students for lunch.”

When Ivan first joined Darwin College five years ago the food uptake wasn’t great, with only 80 lunches served and just 20 of those to students. Having shaken up the foodservice offering Ivan and his team now serve around 250 meals a day with around 190 to students.

“Lunches are subsidised through the college,” explains Ivan. “Some colleges have KFC (kitchen fix charge) where students pay a termly fee to use the catering facilities, but we don’t have that system because students are post graduate. However, we have to keep prices low because we want students to come in and have lunch here rather than at their departments.”

The Darwin catering ethos focuses on cooking fresh food from scratch and this is achieved by cooking 20 portions at a time. Following behavioural research carried out by a PHD student looking at choice architecture, all menus have plant-based food positioned at the top to stand out. The theory is that the way choices are presented to consumers can impact consumer decision making, therefore allowing operators to influence them.

“Research has shown that if consumers make a healthy first choice then they will continue on that vein,” explains Ivan. “We wanted to offer students a choice, but we also hoped to encourage them to choose more plant-based food for environmental and health reasons,” he continues. “So,
instead of taking away meat options we give them more choice.”

Ivan and his team have spent the last two years visiting vegan and vegetarian restaurants to ensure that they could fully get to grips with the cuisine. The team has visited Vanilla Black, the popular gourmet vegetarian restaurant, for a study day organised by TUCO and has attended vegan cookery workshops run by the University of Cambridge Catering Managers’ Committee, which Ivan chairs.

“Courses and workshops are invaluable to give our chefs the skills and enthusiasm they need to create stand-out, well-presented dishes,” says Ivan. “The shift towards vegan and vegetarian dishes had a huge impact, with a 25% increase in uptake on plant-based food amongst fellows, staff and students.”

**EXTRA CURRICULAR**

As Darwin is only host to postgraduate students, the catering team doesn’t cater for conferences, so it can focus solely on the day-to-day dining. Many students remain in the university accommodation
throughout the holidays, writing up their theses and dissertations, so food provision is still needed.

To keep students entertained Darwin runs several events which includes international food festivals as well as wine and food tastings. For the international food festival students of a variety of nationalities go into the kitchen to cook their national dishes. The students are judged on how they work as a team in the kitchen and how the final dishes look, as opposed to how they taste, with one team crowned the winner.

“We host food and wine tastings from a variety of different countries with butler, Giancarlo Salmeri, and head chef, Matt Turpie,” explains Ivan. “They are held at the college and we bring in local experts such as the Cambridge Wine Academy to talk about the wine.”

These tasting evenings cost between £10 and £14, are held at the college and are subsidised. The taste of France evening, for example, offered guests around 12 wines to sample alongside a range of food including cheese, cassoulet, pâtés and French breads. Darwin is also host to alternative food-tasting evenings which have proved a great success. An insect evening attracted 30 people game enough to try bug-based food.

Following this theme a four course, formal dinner was held with each course containing insects of some kind. Dishes included mealworms on toast, buffalo worm risotto and a selection of cheese with cricket crackers, followed by bee pollen and honeycomb for desert. “Although these functions seemed wacky they really helped to push the sustainable cause,” says Ivan.

“It sent out a strong message that we take our responsibility to create sustainable menus seriously. As a service provider we have always wanted to be ahead of the game, so we offer ethical and sustainable food so the students can make informed choices and they support that.”

The college catering team also host large events such as weddings, private dining, christenings, weddings and funerals. These events are chargeable at market cost which helps to offset the cost to the college as the subsidised food provided to students means the foodservice offering runs at a loss.
ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY
Darwin ensures its commitment to providing a sustainable food offering by reviewing its policy annually. This is then passed through a meals committee which is made up of students, fellows and senior catering staff.

“Our policy is long and detailed and is viewed as a minimum standard that we work to as well as our long-term aims,” explains Ivan. “We have just achieved our aim of serving vegan dishes every day to reduce ruminant animal use, all food waste goes to be composted and we are just starting to provide metrics for it. All waste is recorded so it can be reviewed and reduced further.”

Ivan explains that sustainability is getting higher on agendas, with the aim to have zero waste to landfill in just two years’ time. There has already been a move to compostable packaging; nothing is sold in plastic packaging and the use of single-use plastic has stopped.

“To reduce our impact on the environment buy yoghurt in bulk and decant into compostable packaging,” explains Ivan. “Water is an extra 17p per bottle more, but we don’t charge any more for that; for the college that is worth the cost. Within a year we won’t sell water – we will just offer refill points and give all students a refill bottle. We hope that this will be the norm in years to come for most catering outlets.”

Darwin’s egalitarian ethos when it comes to catering creates a well-rounded experience for students, staff and fellows and its commitment to sustainable catering is to be commended. So, will insects become a staple part of Darwin’s menu in the future? Only time will tell but it’s certainly causing a buzz!

SERVING UP POSITIVE CHANGE

The University of Cambridge’s commitment to environmental endeavours extends across all its sites, starting with the University Catering Services (UCS) introducing motivators in cafés, such as a 25p charge to customers who use a disposable cups.

“Now there’s a flat rate for the hot drink and a ‘cup tax’ if the customer wishes to use a disposable cup,” explains Paula White, area catering manager at the University of Cambridge. “This scheme seems to be working well, with the number of customers using their own coffee cups increasing.”

Since the introduction of KeepCup in 2013, over 21,000 cups have been sold and an impressive 121,000 discounted hot beverage sales received. Discounted hot beverage sale units increased to 9% of total hot beverage sales throughout the UCS.

The UCS also made the decision to cease sales of single-use plastic bottles in April 2018 and have replaced these with glass bottles, cans and biodegradable plastic bottles. This move has successfully saved over 50,000 plastic bottles from reaching landfill a year.

“The UCS is also selling Blue Tap flasks, which are stainless steel with an authentic bamboo finish,” adds Paula. “Blue Tap was founded in 2016 and has developed technology to allow more people to have access to clean water in low-resource areas. They created a chlorine injector, which cleans water in household systems to make it high quality, safe drinking water.”

All of the initiatives that the university has introduced, in addition to the use of Vegware disposable plates, cutlery and cups, have prevented over 2.5m disposable items from entering landfill – instead the products are composted. The Cambridge Food Hub collects coffee grounds from all the UCS units and recycles them into briquettes and biofuel pellets, adding to the university’s eco credentials.