

SCHOOL FOOD HEAVEN

One of the unexpected fringe benefits of studying the reform of school food in Europe was an invitation from the Mayor of Rome, Walter Veltroni, to sample a Roman-style school meal. Along with my colleague, Roberta Sonnino, we gladly accepted what turned out to be the most memorable day of our school food research project.

The Mayor had organised a press conference on Capital Hill in the morning, where he had arranged for us to be interrogated by the Roman media, all curious to know why we had travelled so far for the sake of a school meal. Having earned our crust, we departed for Rio de Janeiro – a primary school in the Monteverde district of the city.

As a matter of courtesy we were introduced to the school dinner ladies, all dressed in hygienic white uniforms. They told us that two hours before lunch all children in Rome are given a Fair Trade chocolate bar as a mid-morning snack (the proceeds from which were used in the Dominican Republic to build a school).

Entering the dining room we were struck by some very unusual sights – nicely laid tablecloths; children trusted with silverware; and, most shocking of all, teachers sitting and eating with the children. The teachers were surprised to learn that this didn't happen in the UK because, as one of them said, 'eating is a pedagogic moment'.

The food itself was the high point of the occasion. The first course consisted of pasta with a freshly-made tomato sauce, simple but delicious. The second course was freshly-made meatballs with a mixed salad, followed by seasonal fruit as a third course. The biggest shock for Brits was the absence of choice – a term that did not resonate at all in Rome, making healthy eating much easier to organise. After finishing their meal, children were invited to dispose of their leftovers, some of which was destined for the city's animal shelters.

The Soil Association in the UK would be green with envy to learn that 70% of the meal was organic. Where the ingredients were not organic, they were certified – the meatballs were made from PGI-certified Welsh lamb for example. The bread was freshly made because regulations specify that it must not be more than six hours old. The parmesan cheese (Parmigiano-Reggiano) was required to be freshly grated each day too.

The hallmarks of the Roman system are quality ingredients, freshness, lack of choice and a social environment which fosters the idea that food is pleasure not fuel. Walter Veltroni, the mayor, is immensely proud of the city's school meals system – a system of social justice in action.

Rome's school meals system is not perfect. The reforms to date have focused on *quality* provision, not necessarily local provision. Re-localising the food chain to ensure that local food is good food is the next big challenge. If Rome is not yet school food heaven, it's damn close.

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