Global flavours, local friendships

Emma Foster talks us through the successes and challenges of Lancaster's lively International Lunch Club.

Every Wednesday, you'll find a bustling, vibrant café at The Cornerstone in Lancaster, a weekly pop-up of global flavours and friendship brought together by the Global Village Café @ The Cornerstone. This is the story of how it came about and how it's going.

Global Village Café started in 2018 and is a non-profit-making company run by volunteers. The café's simple aim is to bring people together through food – all the chefs are refugees or asylum seekers who want to share their culinary traditions and skills. The café provides training, volunteering, and employment opportunities and attracts customers who are looking for something delicious that also benefits the local community. You may have seen us featured on *The Hairy Bikers Go West* (episode 3 on iPlayer). In 2023, we needed to find a new kitchen and found our way to The Cornerstone just on the off-chance there might be room for us. The Cornerstone is run by Lancaster Methodist Church. We found a hive of activity in the heart of the city and a massive welcome. So we made a new home and the conversations started.

The Cornerstone café had never really recovered after the pandemic and was city centre potential going to waste. As a number of charities are based at The Cornerstone and it is a place of welcome for many, this seemed such a pity. So we set about joining forces to revive the café.

Luckily for us, the Pots of Possibilities grant scheme was just being launched. These 'pots' are available to fund community projects that will meet a need, build community resilience, reduce waste, and promote regeneration. We have to admit that seemed daunting! To add to the pressure, the funding process requires you to present your bid at a public meeting and be put to the vote! We put together a fearless trio of Simon, Ali, and Caitlin who pitched a proposal to start a weekly free lunch for asylum seekers and refugees and a series of community cafés open to all at weekends. We would be reviving an underused space, providing free/affordable, nutritious food, and bringing people together in friendship. We pledged to use as much surplus food as possible, linking with Eggcup and growing projects. We hoped money made at the community cafés could fund the Lunch Club in future years. We asked for a grant of £10k to get us started and keep us going for our first year. What a buzz when we not only won the full grant but also received the highest number of votes! Then the hard work began.

We opened the Lunch Club doors in April 2024 with a Syrian main course of *mujadara* and roasted (Eggcup) vegetables with salad followed by a donated cake. 12 people came (after much lobbying and networking) and we were delighted. Numbers grew steadily and now we regularly serve 60+ – don't be late or it's all gone! Originally we had planned to run the lunch clubs for asylum seekers and refugees and the community cafés for everyone. We soon reflected that this separation was unhelpful. The Lunch Club is a great place to bring people together. Our customers praise the food but they also love the chats and connections and learning new things from each other. For asylum seekers and refugees it is an opportunity to learn more about local culture, housing, jobs, etc. So now the Lunch Club is every Wednesday at 12.30, open to all.

What's cooking.

Cooking at The Cornerstone for the International Lunch Club.

The Lunch Club menu is very varied. We have featured chefs from Syria, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Sudan, Bangladesh, Kurdish Iran, Kurdish Iraq, Vietnam, Kuwait, and Iran. We try to combine the skills and traditions of our chefs with seasonal produce (the more available it is, the cheaper it is!). A great example is Maryam from Iran cooking *khoreshteh rivas* (rhubarb and kidney bean stew) and a beetroot and rhubarb salad using 6 kilos of rhubarb donated from a local allotment. It was delicious, healthy and prompted much conversation about rhubarb as a vegetable!

Word seems to be spreading about our joy at receiving gluts of fresh produce – we have now benefitted from seasonal gifts of rhubarb, spinach, chard, apples, and courgettes, so please get in touch if you have more than you can handle.

As the year progressed, it became clear that income raised from community cafés was not going to be enough to fund the Lunch Club in year two. But we couldn't give up! We have been asking for a minimum donation of £5 if you can afford it and whilst this helps, it doesn't cover our costs and the suggested donation will need to increase a little. In an effort to keep the Lunch Club affordable, we looked again at how Global Village Café works. We decided to channel profits made from our outside catering bookings into the Lunch Club to help to keep it going. We like to describe it as 'paying it forward'. When you book catering for your party, wedding, etc with Global Village Café, you know the food will be amazing, from a community enterprise with profits going back into the business, running a fantastic lunch club, and bringing people together in friendship.

Emma Foster *volunteers as a director of The Global Village Café.*

Find out more

global-village-cafe.co.uk

Facebook: **tinyurl.com/mtbxfzbk**

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Lunch Club is Wednesdays from 12.30 at The Cornerstone, LA1 1PX.