

Reportage:

A taste of home

Reporter:

Rebecca Huntley

The first time I visited the Matthew Talbot Hostel, in the inner-Sydney suburb of Woolloomooloo, was Christmas 2005. My husband had received a thirteen-kilo ham from his boss. As I'd already ordered a five-kilo ham, we thought we'd give the larger chunk to the hostel. Walking down the alleyways towards the entrance, I recall tensing up as I spied downcast men sitting alone or in groups on the footpaths. I forgot for a moment where I was going and what I was doing, and felt like turning back. But I didn't, and dropped the ham off to a worker sitting behind a desk protected by glass. He said it would be much appreciated by the guys. I wondered how the residents felt about eating off-cuts from the tables of the over-catered.

Four years after the ham drop, I returned to the same spot, albeit to the Ozanam Learning Centre, a sleek \$20-million institution run by the St Vincent de Paul Society, and connected to the hostel by a walkway. Food was bringing me back, but this time I was there to observe one of the centre's cooking courses for homeless people.

My taxi pulled up just past the door, at a smallish courtyard where groups of men and some women sat, surrounded by bags of possessions and the odd shopping trolley. 'This is where you want me to drop you?' the driver asked.

I presented at the front desk, a nicer version of the hostel's reception, with the same security glass in place. Jamie Lehn, Ozanam's activity officer and my host for the day, happened to be arriving as I asked for him. I had chosen a busy time to visit; they were launching Missing Persons' Week that morning.

We headed up in the lift. The cooking class I was there to observe was due to start in half an hour. 'I think you'll be surprised,' Jamie told me.

In 2007, Black Inc. published my book on food and inequality in Australia, *Eating Between the Lines*. Its central premise is that the way we eat, our relationship to food and cooking, reflects social trends, particularly social inequality. One of the omissions from the book was an analysis of the diet of homeless people. As part of my general reading on food and inequality, I came across the work of Sue Booth, who has done some of the more in-depth research on Australia's homeless people

and food. In 'Eating rough: food sources and acquisition practices of homeless young people in Adelaide' (*Public Health Nutrition*, 2006), Booth describes the food intake and sources of 150 homeless youths. She found that eating three meals a day was unusual: most said that they ate only once a day. When they did eat, it was a limited diet, lacking in foods from the five food groups, especially fruit and vegetables.

Almost three-quarters of the young people Booth spoke to reported going to sleep hungry once a week or more. Stolen food was as popular as food distributed by welfare agencies or acquired through begging. Booth found some of her interviewees used jail or overnight detox facilities as a source of relatively high quality food: the chance to eat stews, lasagne, and fish and chips under a roof, at a dinner table.

In November 2008, Adele Horin wrote for the *Sydney Morning Herald* about the opening of the Ozanam Learning Centre, with much fanfare, by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. A photo of Alan, a star pupil in the centre's cooking course, accompanied the story. Horin described how important it was for the long-term homeless to learn basic living skills such as cooking before moving into a flat or group home. For someone like Alan, cooking could also help rebuild self-esteem and confidence after long periods of struggling to survive. Here was a stark example of what I was trying to explore in my book: how food and eating reflect social disadvantage, but also how engagement with food can enhance social connections and social capital. After reading Horin's article, I was determined to understand more about Ozanam's course and the impact it was having.

Before Jamie could give me the tour of the centre, I had to sign in and get a personal alarm. If something untoward happened, I would trigger the alarm and an unbelievably large security guard would come to my aid. Jamie assured me that it was simply a precaution. 'Ninety-nine per cent of the people here are good people. The other one per cent, they have problems, but you can understand why.'

Behind the reception desk I could see an open recreation area with rows of computers, a ping-pong table, and coffee- and tea-making facilities. Jamie gave me the tour of an extensive art and craft room, a lovely little library and rooms for one-on-one tuition, therapy classes, and the centre's movie and book clubs. In one of these rooms, a man practiced guitar. Upstairs there were recording studios and various instruments.

The centre provides services for both the housed and those living rough. They were almost exclusively men the day I visited, although Jamie told me the centre was doing all it could to get women involved, including starting a special women's group.

As I entered the computer lab, a tall and imposing Islander with a backpack and heavy boots spied me. He did a double-take and greeted me with a perky hello. He returned later to give me some sage advice, whispered in my ear: 'Don't take a poor man home with you' – advice my mother gave me on more than one occasion.

Finally, Jamie showed me the kitchen, the venue for the cooking classes, where at the centre's opening the Prime Minister had been photographed stirring pasta with the students. It was small but well equipped, light and clean, with a window onto the industrial backstreets of Woolloomooloo; a simple table with chairs at one end of the room, a sink for hand washing, two ovens, two stovetops and white melamine benches.

The class was full, as they always are. It took a while to kick off, with Jamie having to round up those who had already signed on to participate. People began to gather: mostly men, but there were two young women as well, a tall brunette and an older redhead. As we began washing our hands, one of the centre regulars, 'Dave', started to cross-examine me. Why was I here? Was I coming back?

I told him I was writing a story about the class. He replied that maybe I should get involved with the women's group, help run the book club or start a writing group. I guess he'd seen lots of people like me come, stickybeak and go, and was determined to recruit at least one of us into an ongoing relationship with the centre.

The dish of the day was vegetarian lasagne, a recipe from Victoria Hansen, the course creator and co-ordinator. Jamie pulled out the ingredients and the pots and pans as the students surveyed the recipe. And then, quietly and seamlessly, people got to work. The redhead started off the béchamel sauce and the brunette assisted. An older man, with Elvis-like slicked hair and cowboy boots, chopped the zucchini and garlic. Another guy, tall and quiet, began the tomato sauce. I introduced myself to 'Sam', who pounded some salt and pepper in a mortar and pestle. He told me he liked to cook but often forgets the ingredients for recipes and hence what he needed to buy to make them.

As the students worked, I stood to the side, determined not to ask too many questions, just to help out and be part of proceedings. The conversation focused on everyday challenges: the politics of group homes, Sydney's high rental costs, the police. Each student's difficult history, recent and long-gone, sometimes edged into the conversation, then faded away. Like the brunette, who told me she was eighteen (she still had braces on her teeth): we started talking about how to cook spaghetti. I told her I was Italian; she said she was as well, but on her father's side. 'After he died, that's when I left home.' I found out the guy making the tomato sauce was her partner, 'Ian'; he was thirty. I went over to talk to him, to ask him what he enjoys about the cause. His response was blunt: 'I prefer to make this than eat over at the hostel.' I asked him if his mum was a good cook. 'Sure. She was. I haven't seen her since I was seventeen.'

As the students started layering the vegies, sauces and pasta sheets, I talked to 'Kim' and 'Susan', older women who arrived at the class late. We talked about the challenges of cooking for one, their frustration that shops don't offer small sizes of things, especially vegetables such as pumpkin. They worried about wasting food

and trying recipes that didn't work. Kim believed that if she learned some cooking skills she'd be able to eat well on less money. Susan was sceptical. 'I went to Hungry Jack's last night and had a whole meal for five dollars. I couldn't cook that meal myself for that amount.' I asked them if they ever watched cooking shows. Susan liked *Huey's Cooking Adventures*, but couldn't attempt the recipes. 'He cooked a dinner for two with salmon the other day. He used twenty dollars' worth of salmon for one dinner. I can't afford that.'

Once the lasagne was in the oven, the class dispersed and a few of us were left with the washing up. Sam struggled with the flick mixer. 'There's no hot water left.' I flicked it to the left and he started to dry the dishes as I scrubbed.

The prep done, the dish baking, Jamie and I sat down to talk. Why are the classes, held each week for eight weeks, so popular? Along with cleaning, budgeting and other household skills, housing applications require skill tests in cooking. Learning to cook helps homeless people 'move up the ladder', as Jamie put it. But more than that, it gives them a 'taste of home'. I had seen that. I wondered how many home-cooked meals Ian and his girlfriend had enjoyed in the years since they left their families.

I said goodbye to Jamie, promised Dave I would return and left my personal alarm at the centre's reception. I was starving, and walked a few blocks towards the trendy East Sydney restaurant area on the other side of William Street. I spied a busy noodle bar. Outside, well-heeled office workers were lining up to pay fifteen dollars for salmon and chilli stir-fry and rice-paper rolls. I forked out almost twenty dollars for my lunch.

A few weeks after visiting Ozanam, I talked to the chef and teacher Victoria Hansen, who designed the course and runs its introductory class. She became involved when Jamie contacted her after seeing her no-nonsense publication *First Principles: The Basic Cooking Handbook* (VLH Enterprises, 2003). Hansen jumped at the chance to teach people with few skills and few resources a love of cooking. 'I felt there was so much out there being taught by celebrity chefs that wasn't touching on the fundamentals of cooking, and there are a lot of people out there who don't even know how to boil an egg. People have lost the art of how to prepare food.' Hansen's approach to the course is to teach the fundamentals – meals that are simple, inexpensive and nutritious – and then suggest variations. The biggest barriers to cooking, she believes, are fear of failure and the expense of cooking something new and different. She advocates foolproof recipes, so students won't waste time and money.

At Ozanam few, if any, pictures of food are shown to the students. 'You first teach how to master the preparation, so they can see that it tastes good. The next stage is how it looks on the plate. People who don't know how to cook don't want a picture. If it doesn't turn out like the picture, it's discouraging.' The aim is to

encourage people, to teach them to fend for themselves. 'Making stuff from scratch gives you courage,' Hansen tells me.

I asked her what she thought the students get out of the course. 'They want to make a go of their lives, do something different. A lot of them are there too because they just want a meal, which I totally understand. Once they have tasted – the look, the shock, that something so simple can taste so good. It's fulfilling for me to see them transformed. They do go away and give it a try.'

More than that, Hansen believes learning to cook gives students a greater sense of connection to others. 'It's taking your life into your hands when you start to prepare food, because it is the thing that sustains us. The meal is the one place all human beings come together.'

At the beginning of my tour of the Ozanam Learning Centre, Jamie had told me I would 'be surprised'. I was. I expected that the issues homeless people face in learning how to cook would be different to those that the rest of us face over food and cooking. But they are the same, even if the barriers are greater for people like Dave and Ian and Kim.

Without resources, skills and incentives, cooking seems a waste of time and money, something that other people do. A five-dollar dinner at Hungry Jack's seems a better option than cooking our own lasagne. And yet, when we master the basics, food and cooking can provide us with more than a meal: greater fulfilment, the chance to move up the ladder and, for some, a taste of home. ■