Pick of the crop

Sarah Cruz, co-founder of local foodie initiative Abundance, gives *Absolutely* the low-down on the fruits of her labour

In a nutshell, what is Abundance?
We are a community project and we harvest seasonal surplus fruit and provide to local restaurants and grocers. We typically get contacted by local residents, for example an elderly couple or family who may have an apple tree in their back garden who need help picking the fruit. Hundreds of fruit trees a year go unpicked and within Chiswick alone we've picked over a tonne of fruit per year since 2010. A group in Sheffield originally started the name Abundance and they're pretty similar to us; they map all the local fruit trees and they harvest them. There are Abundance groups in Leeds, Manchester and several in London. We just loved the name – it really says it all.

How long has Abundance been running for?
We started in January 2010 but before that I started a scheme called Chiswick's Local Produce back in 2008. I partnered up with Karen Liebreich, who was running the Chiswick House Kitchen Garden. I came along to help make use of some of their surplus fruit and veg and that's how we got started working together and the two of us decided to form Abundance.

Can you tell us about your work with primary schools?
We're the only Abundance group in the country that works with schools. We currently work with six in the local area with lots more waiting to sign up. Basically a teacher is assigned within the school to run the project and a volunteer goes out with them on a weekly basis to pick in their catchment area. The children have experience of harvesting the trees and taking it back to the school. I don't see why there shouldn't be an Abundance programme in every school in London.

Do the kids enjoy it?
Yes, it doesn't matter how tired I am or how grim the day, it all fades away when you see these kids arrive at the garden. We discuss the different shapes of the fruit and explain that just because it has a blemish doesn't mean it's unusable. It's educational but fun, that's why the teachers are so keen on it.

What kind of fruit do you harvest typically?
The bulk of what we produce is apples and pears but I'm really interested in mulberries – the restaurants go mad for them because you can't get them commercially. Quinces are also hard to come by and expensive and we get fantastic quinces locally. We also pick cherries, figs and lots of different types of plums.

Are all the trees privately owned?
They tend to be on private land but we do pick local street trees too. We now have a database of 100 or so tree owners, but we know there are lots more out there and we get contacted all the time.

What restaurants do you supply to?
Sam's Brasserie, Charlotte's Bistro, Annie's... The Roebuck was probably the first one I worked with and Outsider Tart are huge supporters too.

What kind of events do you do?
We hold workshops throughout the year and as Abundance is all not-for profit, we have to put on events to keep us going. Last year we put on The Edible High Road to coincide with the Chelsea Flower Show Fringe. This year we're doing the Herbal High Road, which will be made up of herbal planting like lavender and rosemary bushes. We're doing a big launch party on 18 May at the front of Union Jacks, with herb bread making and lots of activities for kids.

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