

Invisible Food: What Difference Do We Want to Make?

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We want to enable people in our community to **reach their full potential** and we help to **increase skills, self esteem and social and environmental awareness** to build **stronger community networks for a more resilient, happier, connected community**.

We have been providing community building, creative, environmental workshops (in the form of a walk and a feast) in the disadvantaged

Coldharbour ward of Brixton since 2008. For us, Invisible food refers to everything that sustains us that isn't ordinarily visible or easy to spot. The 'food' has a literal and practical interpretation; the 'food' is the wild foods such as nettle, elderflower, chickweed, dandelion that, once we've learnt how to identify, we can harvest and learn how to use. There is also a deeper, more soulful and humanistic interpretation, as that which sustains us emotionally and spiritually, such as friendship, a strong community, a connection with the earth, and a belief in social justice. It is this combination of elements in Invisible Food that creates a successful model for our community work.

Invisible food trains people from disadvantaged communities in urban, inner city areas, to gain skills in foraging, plant identification, wildlife awareness, food-related climate awareness, non-violent communication, and community

organising. We break down barriers of participation that ethnic minorities, women, recent immigrants and people with mental health issues experience so that a wider variety of people are inspired to create environmental change, starting with their immediate environment.

What we want:

We want to become healthier and connect to each other and our environment:

This project enables people to see their natural environment in a different way, recognising potential food sources in the green spaces around them as they walk around town. We take families and young people to green spaces in their immediate environment that they might not have visited before, broadening their horizons and coming together in a shared event. The project encourages people to walk by giving them a task to do while they walk. Searching for wild food is akin to a treasure hunt, you have to enter into an attitude of play. The walks are an opportunity to play, for adults and children alike.

We want to become more aware:

Participants benefit from a greater awareness of local and global issues around food and waste, especially around food waste recycling, composting, food packaging, and energy use in transporting food. Participants benefit from being listened to and having a space, that is sensitive to cultural and religious issues, to voice their difficulties, questions, doubts and concerns around these issues.

We want to improve our urban environment:

This project encourages participants to walk, to be outdoors in all weathers, to create a group of people walking together and interested in their environment. This kind of intervention into the natural, urban environment could have an indirect impact on anti-social behaviour. Seeing people interested in their environment raises motivation and aspirations for an area. Becoming aware of the natural resources in your immediate area is the first step to caring for it and defending it from rubbish, wilful destruction and neglect.

Long term – We want to have better chances in life:

There will be long term benefits which manifest as increased confidence and greater skills for work. There will be opportunities for participants and volunteers to gain skills in working with groups and learning about issues of food hygiene, risk assessment, cooking, and planning events.

A bit of background to the project:

Invisible Food began out of a necessity for environmental education and to encourage a stronger community network on the Loughborough Estate, Brixton, London. In 2008 Ceri Buck was a resident on the Loughborough estate and a new mother. She received a commission from arts organisation Artangel to explore the notion of 'play' in a socially engaged way. She

chose to explore plants and began walking with neighbours, with baby in a pushchair, to explore the local green spaces for wild food potential. There was so much interest that the walks, which began as 1-2-1 intimate conversations, then became small group outings. Since August 2009, the events have turned into a monthly ritual of community feasts, comprising various arts and cultural activities, attended by 30-50 people each month.

Invisible Food is an innovative, holistic project. We innovate with the wild plants that grow in London and toss them together with the culinary skills of residents who have settled here from all over the world. We create recipes made with unusual and yet common plants on everyone's doorstep. Invisible Food works on many levels in a holistic way; we are about environmental education, strengthening communities, opening a space for creative expression, improving communication skills. It is an introduction to an accessible ritual, open to all regardless of cultural and religious background. We approach our task of bringing people together with common sense and love of collaboration.

Invisible Food works closely with local community groups to increase opportunities for BME groups to contribute their environmental knowledge and experience to the reskilling process that London communities are undertaking. We work with food to tackle difficult issues around racial and cultural understanding, so we explore foods from around the world to represent and explore the ethnic diversity of people on the local estates. The cooking sessions are concerned with discovering new and original ways to cook the wild plants found on the walks, particularly in ways that reflect the social and ethnic diversity of Lambeth.

Who benefits from the work that Invisible Food does?

Since we began activities in 2008 we have succeeded in running regular activities in a disadvantaged and fragmented neighbourhood. We have developed a framework by which we deliver a monthly walk/community feast open to all, with unlimited numbers. We also run outreach projects to diverse community, cultural and religious groups and to target young people and other people who might not come to the walks of their own accord. This outreach work is documented in our publication, [The London Salad](#). Through our own passion and longing to learn, we have been successful in getting an urban population to reconnect with the earth and wildlife. This is what most people say that they get from the events in our evaluation process. Participants also consistently ask for this project to take place in other parts of London so we set up a training programme to enable other people to deliver this work in other areas.

Participants benefit from getting out of their flats, meeting their neighbours in a relaxed and respectful way, and increasing their social networks, leading to improved self-confidence and self esteem. These are the foundation stones for learning new skills. The majority of local residents don't have cars and many new and recent arrivals aren't proficient in finding their way around London by public transport. Many residents suffer from overcrowding, social isolation, mental health issues, lack of education, and a tense, fearful environment due to high crime rates locally.

The feast is largely self-organised by participants who bring food to share, help set up and cook and clear away. This practice has developed over the months and participants come highly motivated to join in. This ethic of self-help is key to the project, which is actually run on very few resources. There is a core group of around 10 participants who come every month and who have benefited from increased confidence to get involved with other local gardening and social projects. The fact that they keep returning month after month, even after getting involved with other initiative shows how Invisible Food is still a support and educational resource for them.
