

FACE TO FACE



Ursula Arens

Ursula has a degree in dietetics and currently works as a freelance writer in Nutrition and Dietetics.

Our F2F interviews feature people who influence nutrition policies and practices in the UK.

Ursula meets:**GEORGINE LEUNG**

Food educator and nutritionist

Adviser to charity TastEd

PhD researcher in postpartum health



It is a great pleasure to meet Georgine. The weather is beautiful. The coffee is a volcano of aromas. The almond croissant is sweet and chewy. And a wonderful opportunity to consider fresh perspectives on the subject of 'nutrition education' from a master educator.

In fact, Georgine already had an interest in health education before leaving school. "A group of us got some funding to do a health education project with our peer pupils," she explained. Medicine could have been a career, but didn't feel quite right. Her first qualification was a BSc in Food and Nutrition at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

After graduation, Georgine worked as a Research Assistant: she helped coordinate a project on Hong Kong's first population food consumption survey. She came to realise that obtaining accurate descriptions of what people eat is difficult, needing to optimise the accuracy of data with both ease and speed of recording.

Georgine then did an MSc in Public Health Nutrition at Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh. Moving so far from home, she quickly learned to cope with linguistic Scottishisms, but getting used to different foods took a while. Like all Chinese students, Georgine immediately bought a rice cooker. But the concept of baked potatoes took a while to befriend. She really enjoyed the course and was particularly interested in the discussions and debates around the marketing of infant formulas. Her

eyes were opened to issues within the ethics of communications, and the sometimes perhaps patronising tone of health education. The feeding of infants and beliefs of pregnant and postpartum mothers is now the subject of her current PhD project...and her personal project: she is pregnant with child number three.

In 2008, she began working in the education group of the British Nutrition Foundation (BNF) in London. For six years she was part of the team behind the largest UK food education programme, *Food – A Fact of Life*, providing free information resources for primary and secondary school education on food and health. "I particularly enjoyed the fact that so much of the job allowed lots of travel within the UK, and meeting so many people," said Georgine. She learned all about UK nutrition and school policies and curriculums, as well as the importance of accurate and clear communication of nutrition science to teachers and young students.

Public speaking and writing-right were skills that were polished to a shine during her time at the BNF. In 2011, she authored the BNF briefing paper on *Diets of minority ethnic groups in the UK*. "It was an interesting project, and I learned so much about the diversity of beliefs and customs on food choices and health. We have become very disconnected from the seasonality and geography of food production: social and cultural beliefs are another layer leading to silos of different attitudes to food choice."



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Georgine left BNF following the arrival of child number one and became a nutrition lecturer at St Mary's University in Twickenham. "It was a huge learning curve, but as a module convenor, I was given independence and great support." Georgine managed to obtain a postgraduate certificate in Academic Practice. She also published a paper in the *British Journal of Midwifery* on infant feeding practices and beliefs among Chinese mothers in London. "The first month after childbirth is a time called 'Zuo Yuezi', meaning 'sitting the month', where mothers are given dedicated family support at home. There are also beliefs about the healing and strengthening properties of certain foods for new mothers," said Georgine.

She then completed an MA degree in Food Anthropology at SOAS University of London (School of Oriental and African Studies). The subject offers a wider understanding of food, culture, and society and the course at SOAS is highly respected, but Georgine agrees that food anthropology can be a very different terrain from nutrition science, telling me it's like learning a new language. She had noticed some confusion when she introduced herself as a nutritionist; other students were usually from social and humanities backgrounds. But she really enjoys the diverse fresh perspectives and opportunities the world of food anthropology offers.

During this time, she also worked as a freelance nutritionist on a wide variety of projects, from teaching and writing to nutrition analysis and menu design. She also began her PhD research project on postpartum practices

of Chinese women, at the Institute for Global Health at University College London.

She met food writer Bee Wilson who invited her to join her charity *TastEd* as an advisor (www.tasteeducation.com). The organisation offers sensory fruit and vegetable tasting experiences in primary schools. Fresh vegetables and fruits are brought into classrooms, and children are guided to describe what they can see, smell, touch and taste. The view is that children will develop their palate to enjoy the pleasures of a wide variety of fresh foods, when exposed to these in the classroom.

We discuss typical food choices in Hong Kong (compared with UK diets). Georgine said, "There is a focus on vegetables and tofu products as meats are more expensive, whilst seafood is prized and popular. I am always amazed at the large amounts of fresh and seasonal vegetables at the markets, which always seem to be sold at the end of the day. Stir-frying techniques allow quick cooking, and the addition of oil and the likes of soy and oyster sauces make vegetables delicious, but time and skills are needed for preparation."

Georgine comments that the future of nutrition education cannot be limited to the distribution of food lists bunched into traffic lights groupings. Reasons for food choices link to pragmatic economic and cultural reasons. These need to be deeply understood to find ways to provide clear and logical routes for better and healthier choices, and importantly, to develop a strong appreciation of foods that feed us. And I think, the words of a master-educator.