



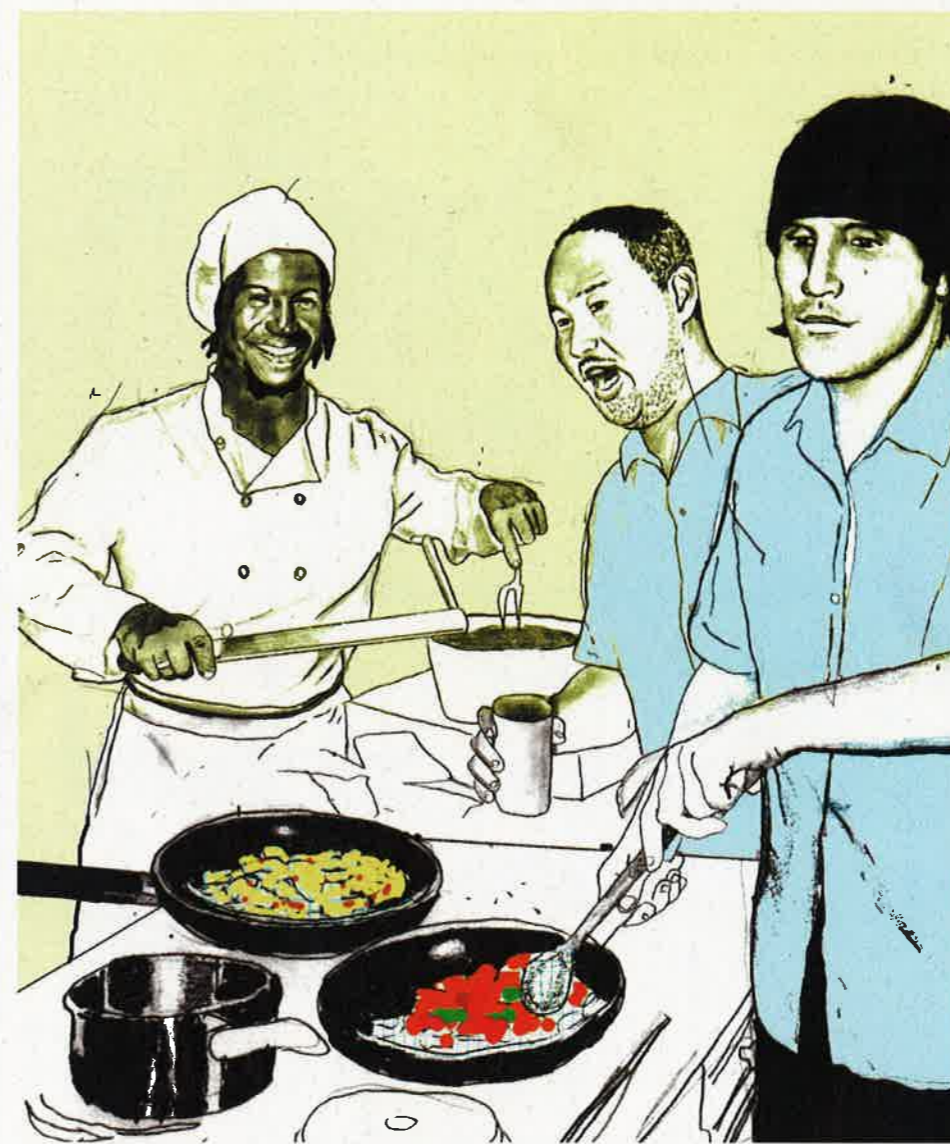
You'd be forgiven for thinking that you had just walked into any London eatery – people of all colours, all nationalities, and from different walks of life – eating African food together. The location is, in fact, Portland Young Offenders Institute (YOI), and the occasion is part of the YOI's celebrations for Black History Month (BHM).

Set in the rural backdrop of Dorset with its largest neighbouring town being Weymouth, the town of Portland is hardly a pretty picture of racial integration and cultural diversity – you'd be lucky to see one person deviating from the white, middle-aged mould. The non-white population of Dorset accounts for 1.2 per cent of the total, with 75 per cent of those concentrated in the most populated region of Poole and Bournemouth.

The YOI is a different matter – almost half of the inmates are from ethnic minorities, and nearly 20 per cent are foreign nationals. They are enjoying a month of celebrations throughout October, based around eating food from different

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Inmates and staff in a Dorset prison are celebrating **Black History Month** by trying something new – each other's cooking. Melissa Thompson tucks in



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good first step and next year it's probably going to be even better."

Nineteen-year-old Femmi, from Peckham, agrees: "This allows us to go back to our roots for a month – we get to think about our history. Rather than just look at black heroes in the past, this is more direct – connected straight to us.

"It makes you proud everybody's enjoying the food, and everyone is learning something new about different cultures. People end up asking about the food and we get a chance to tell them about it, about something we know.

"I've never tasted some of this food before, so it's a chance for everybody to try something different and experience something new – everyone seems to like it."

Gordon Knowles, a member of the YOI's Independent Monitoring Board (formerly known as the Board Of Visitors), the body responsible for maintaining standards in prisons, says that while Portland doesn't have a pressing problem of racial tension, more needs to be done in the wider prison service: "This celebration is about social integration, something that the prison service is not good at. If you place too much emphasis on black heroes then it can be exploited by prisoners and staff, both black and white – people have ingrained prejudices about what the heroes represent that can cause them to react badly when they're being used for celebrations like this. Racial awareness can be achieved through positive social integration, something again the prison service gives little pro-active thought to. These celebrations allow people to share experiences of diversity.

"From the discussions I have had with the prisoners, they have enjoyed the food, and I'm looking forward to the next one!"

The celebrations are more about the future than the past explains officer Thompson. "Martin Luther King had a dream but I don't think it is for us to wave posters of him in people's faces. While BHM is a celebration that we, as black people, are still here today, I believe that we can only get on by educating each other and moving on." Celebrations for BHM are going on all over the country, including photography exhibitions, black history trails, a look at unsung black heroes and more. For information about what's happening in London and nationwide go to: www.london.gov.uk/mayor/bhm/events.jsp

parts of the world in an attempt to educate inmates and staff about different cultures, while entertaining them at the same time.

The organisers wanted to celebrate BHM in a way that would get everybody involved. Prison officer Viv Thompson, one of only two non-white staff at the prison and the main organiser of the event, explains why they decided to embark on a culinary-themed celebration: "We wanted to do something for BHM that wasn't in everybody's faces or too racial. We wanted a celebration that people will look forward to next year.

"We didn't want to go down the road of looking back at Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and so on. Although they are very important, we thought it would be more inclusive to try out each other's cookery and find out more through different sources."

The celebrations involve trying authentic food from different ethnic backgrounds, and using traditional recipes – so no raisins in the curries. In the first week of October, the food came from the Caribbean, the next week Africa, then India and east Asia. As more people have taken an interest, a didgeridoo player and an African storyteller have also been scheduled to get involved with the events.

The YOI's governor, Stephen Twinn, says that the celebrations are for the staff as well as the inmates: "This is something fairly new in Portland culture, mainly because of where it is – in the white retirement capital of England, which is not sensitive or attuned to these issues.

"This is the first celebration of BHM in Portland's YOI. I've worked in Brixton prison

before this and they had similar events. Although the inmates' ethnic break-down is similar, as many prisoners come from London, there are only two ethnic-minority staff here, whereas at Brixton there are many more.

"There were people who wondered why we were making all this fuss – I think you would expect that as there are different levels of understanding about why there should be such a thing as Black History Month and why it should concern us.

"I think it's important that we take this slowly. Food will never be the end of things but it makes a good start – I think you could argue that one of the biggest factors in increasing racial awareness in this country has been the proliferation of Indian and Chinese restaurants, which has brought the issues of people from different ethnic backgrounds into every town and village in the country. Food is inextricably tied into culture and history, so it makes a good vehicle for advancement."

The inmates certainly view it that way. Charles, 19, originally from Brixton, says: "The food is the prison's way of allowing us to take part in BHM, and I don't think there would be any other way to celebrate it in here. It's helpful because food's probably the best way I can celebrate in here while I'm not able to experience BHM on the outside.

"I think this is a step forward, where people can experience aspects of black culture firsthand that they might not have done otherwise. It's chance for us to show our way of life and different styles of culture and cookery. This is a