

FACE TO FACE



Ursula Arens
Writer; Nutrition
& Dietetics

Ursula has a degree in dietetics, and currently works as a freelance nutrition writer. She has been a columnist on nutrition for more than 30 years.

Ursula meets:**JAMIE BLACKSHAW**

**Public Health England Team
Leader for Obesity and
Healthy Weight**

Registered Nutritionist

Competent cook and caterer



**Ursula meets
amazing people
who influence
nutrition policies
and practices
in the UK.**

Jamie was waiting for me at the offices of Public Health England (PHE), which are near Waterloo Station in London. I was late; traffic etc. Jamie was reading the cover feature of the newest issue of *New Scientist* magazine, which pronounced that, 'Everything you know about nutrition is wrong.' My lateness and the crushing critique of our profession by *New Scientist*, was not the best start to our meeting.

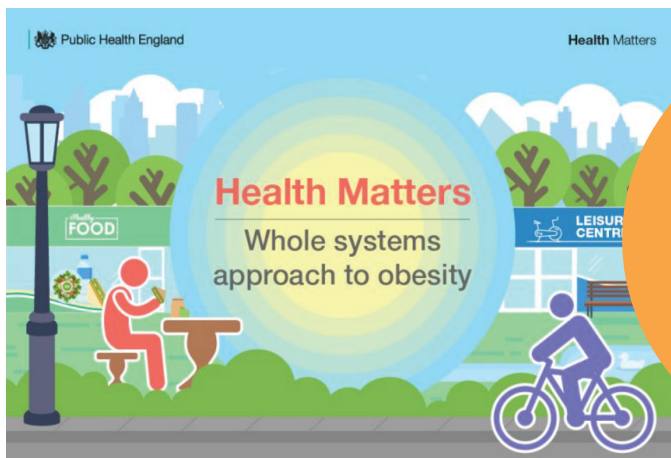
But Jamie has the calm and courtesy of a diplomat. He began by telling me that he left school at 16 years old and Catering College offered a trade and a skill. To qualify for the BTEC National Diploma in Catering and Institutional Operations, he had to complete a maths qualification at night school and any spare time he had was filled by a part-time job in a restaurant. A short basic module on nutrition was the spark that lit the hob flames of his post-kitchen career. "I was so lucky, in that my local polytechnic in Huddersfield offered a degree with both catering and nutrition," he said. "I worked really hard, and even won a couple of awards." It was a four-year course and during this time, Jamie enjoyed a 10-month placement with community dietitians in Leeds.

In 1995, Jamie graduated with a BSc (hons) in Food and Nutrition. He considered the option of a full-time post-grad Dietetics course, but chose instead a part-time Masters in Human Nutrition at the University of Sheffield, balanced with a job as kitchen manager

of a restaurant. "I went to Indonesia to collect data for my dissertation on rural versus urban breastfeeding practices, but then got caught up in the political unrest of May 1998. Unfortunately, I had to return to the UK and do my fieldwork in Sheffield and from data collected by colleagues in Indonesia," explained Jamie.

His first job was scientific officer at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF). He was in the dietary surveys team and worked on secretariat and technical support for M&W food composition, the NDNS surveys and the National Food Survey. Two years later, his job was the same, but administrative reorganisation meant a move to the newly formed Food Standards Agency (FSA).

Next, a transfer to a new team, 'Nutrition Advice and Behaviour Change' and, in 2005, a promotion to senior scientific officer. Jamie worked on the development of the FSA's schools-related work programme, which he described as "brilliant-amazing-fantastic". Educational resources were framed around the Food Competency framework, which supported schools as part of the then National Healthy Schools Programme. Jamie started listing the many projects he had led or supported: my pen scribbled, and "Yes, Chef" echoed in my ears. Other than healthy eating and curriculum resources for young people, Jamie contributed to many projects: the nutrition advice underpinning the School Food



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Standards, the Change4Life campaigns, technical aspects for the Government Buying Standards for food, folic acid fortification discussions, a review of salt reduction, and Chief Medical Officer advice to healthcare professionals on preparation of infant formula. And much more.

No longer the breadcrumb-dry civil servant, with careful and cautious comment, Jamie now showed the fizzing passion of a TV celebrity chef (the 'other' Jamie?). "I have always worked really, really hard, and I feel so lucky and proud to be a part of government decisions that support better public health in so many different ways."

In 2010, Jamie moved to the Department of Health and during this time, he also completed a Masters in Health Policy at Imperial College London. His project was an investigation into the views of directors of Public Health on priority actions on obesity. He passed with distinction and his contribution was recognised when awarded the Nutrition Society Public Health Nutrition Medal in 2015. "It was the pinnacle of my career," he smiled. "So humbling for my work to be recognised by the most senior UK policy makers and academics within nutrition science."

Jamie has enjoyed several short secondments during his career, which have been great ways to learn new skills and meet other colleagues. He worked in the transition team during the establishment of Public Health England (PHE). And he especially enjoyed supporting the prepare-for-the-worst planners of the London

Olympics in 2012, as a member of the Emergency Preparedness team. Had his years of restaurant cheffing left him with some need for adrenalin boosts, I wondered? "Perhaps," Jamie answered calmly.

He is currently the leader for the Obesity and Healthy Weight Team at PHE. The team support the government delivery of policy to tackle and prevent obesity, which spans ministerial briefings, supporting local authority programmes, and developing health service tools for NHS staff. The current themes are whole system approaches to obesity prevention to address the many complex interlinked promoters of societal weight gain. The team supports actions to be controlled and embellished locally, rather than just distributing general identical policies. And of course, PHE also contributes to the explosion of digital approaches, which help to support families with tailored and personalised diet and lifestyle options. Jamie collaborates with academia, third sector, local public health planners and healthcare professionals, and he is aware of many of the excellent community projects undertaken by dietitians.

We said goodbye in a mirrored lift. And I noticed that Jamie had two faces. The conscientious and considered civil servant and the confident combatant, fighting to make healthier choices easier. Perhaps he is the only nutritionist I have ever met who could also put on a chef hat, fire up the flames and literally 'feed the four thousand'.