



Gill Watson on her Soap Box

# A Great Place to Cook

It's been a busy old summer. In-between large gin and tonics I've been scaring small children at sustainability conferences, ranting about the sugar tax on the radio and serving up risotto made from food rejected by the foodbank to hundreds of folks at The Real Junk Food Project in Manchester. All being well, I'll be back there again this week, filming with Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall.

One of My favourite days of the summer was spent cooking up Egyptian pizza stuffed with weed pesto at the fabulous outdoor kitchen and wild garden site in Brierfield. This wonderful space began as a seed of an idea in the crazy head of Kerry Morrison, the environment artist at In-Situ arts group who are based in Brierfield library. Kerry approached Great Places Housing Association who owned the land adjacent to its Burton Gardens estate. It had previously been the garden of a tenant but he'd become too old to manage it so Kerry knocked on doors and asked residents if they'd be up for the outdoor kitchen and wild garden idea.

Great Places stumped up £15,000 to build the site which has proved to be a good investment on their part as it's already been featured in the BBC film about what I get up to and the Tweets about it were picked up by The Guardian. But the best thing is that the residents love it. It makes me very happy to see the kids from the estate picking wild garlic and sorrel to make pesto for the pizza and elderflowers to make cordial. Next year they'll be able to pick apples and pears from the trees Kerry has planted and gooseberries and raspberries from canes I rescued from the bins at Lidl.

The support from Great Places has opened my eyes to some of the brilliant work done by housing associations. Until now I thought they were just rent collectors but some of them go way beyond their duties to look after their tenants. I had lunch with someone from the Bolton at Home Housing Association this week and he was telling me how they pay for some of their tenants' funerals from their hardship fund. They also work



*"It makes me very happy to see the kids from the estate picking wild garlic"*



with a local charity making hundreds of sandwiches through the summer holidays to make sure the children in their properties have a packed lunch every day.

Here in Colne, the Peter Birtwistle Trust provides bungalow accommodation for the over 60's. It also has a community centre where tenants can meet to play bridge, do a craft session over tea and cake or tie themselves up in knots at the yoga class. They have a Christmas party with a buffet every year and work with a local nursery to provide Christmas food hampers for the tenants. How brilliant is

that?

All we have to hope now is that housing associations will be able to survive the budget ruling saying they must reduce their rents over the next four years. But surely that must be good news for tenants I hear you cry? Well no, not if it means the banks decide not to lend any more money because the risk is too great. Because if that's the case then there'll be no new building of affordable homes, no more on-site community centres and no more lovely outdoor kitchens like ours. Then what would I do?