

Peebles social enterprise makes its mark as MSPs agree that local produce is best

Bosco's cookery skills impress at Parliament

Kate Smail and David Knox

HE is quickly becoming Scotland's unlikely celebrity chef.

And this week, Bosco Santimano took his expanding cookery school to the chambers of the Scottish Parliament.

The 41-year-old from Goa arrived in Scotland almost a decade ago in a bid to become a journalist.

But his career path took him from an office post at the civil service to working as a porter for the NHS.

When he was eventually made redundant just over three years ago from a homeless project in Edinburgh he went back to his roots.

Taking inspiration from his Indian homeland, Bosco started his You Can Cook social enterprise company in his adopted home of Peebles, in the Scottish Borders.

Without any formal catering or cookery qualifications - except for watching his grandmother work her magic over a stove in Goa - he still became the hottest dish on the Borders dining circuit.

Colourful, healthy recipes using fresh local produce led to a



Bosco with South of Scotland MSP Christine Grahame.



Christine Grahame unveils the new You Can Cook logo.

word-of-mouth phenomena that has led to an endless stream of bookings.

Thousands of adventurous amateur cooks have already switched off their television sets and taken in live inspirational demon-

strations from the charismatic Goan chef.

For the past three years the ever-smiling Bosco has won major contracts with NHS Midlothian and NHS Borders to demonstrate the benefits of a healthy kitchen to

patients. He has taught meless teenagers to ditch takeaways and n on the hob. He has led vegetable harvts in remote vilages and cooked feasts with the produce. He has packed out Midhian miners clubs,

Berwickshire fishing halls as well as schools and colleges across the South of Scotland.

And on this week he took his healthy eating message to Parliament.

Bosco said: "When I worked in the NHS I was shocked to learn that Scotland has the highest levels of obesity in the world after the USA. I could see that people needed help to make the right lifestyle choices when it comes to food, and that's how You

Can Cook was born. I want to show people just how easy and fun it is to prepare fresh, healthy and tasty food.

"Good food doesn't have to be complicated or expensive - Scotland has one of the

best larders in the world and we just show people how to benefit from that.

"The beauty of You Can Cook is that we go into the communities we are teaching and bring them together. By making the classes fun and interactive people learn together and it breaks down barriers.

"After a few classes you begin to notice a change in the students as they grow in confidence - one young man who'd been in trouble with the law even went home and baked the whole class a cake to say thank you.

"Everyone thinks my food will only be Indian but it's not, we have dishes from around the world and we always use local, seasonal foods from Scotland."

Next month Bosco will cook for around 300 students at Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh before heading up to Perth to provide culinary demonstrations for sufferers of long-term health problems.

And his growing army of fans is leading to an ever increasing diary schedule.

MSP Christine Grahame is amongst his culinary converts. The SNP health spokeswoman said: "Bosco is a real inspiration. Roll over Jamie, Gordon and Nigella, we have a new chef to look up to.

"I witnessed one of his classes in Peebles and what struck me was how he was able to engage people. His classes reach out to sections of the community who are sometimes forgotten about; those with learning difficulties, the long-term unemployed and the elderly. Bosco's talent is not just cooking but knowing how to empower people.

"As the recession bites social enterprises are going to begin to come into their own. We have seen what fat cats and bankers can do, its about time we moved to a more ethical business model where companies give back to the community.

"And aside from helping communities, the man can really cook - I'm always cooking the roast vegetable soup that Bosco taught me because it's not only healthy, it's delicious."

As well as tempting the taste buds of politicians and business leaders on Tuesday, the Peebles chef also gave an insight into the benefits of social enterprises.

Around 3000 of the not-for-profit business ventures are currently operating across the country - 400 in the food and drink sector.

With benefits for the community heavily outweighing the profit sheets for directors, social enterprises are very much in vogue.

As well as You Can Cook, other social enterprises from the food sector were also on hand at Holyrood on Tuesday.

The Community Food Initiatives North East, which employs 22 people, Aberdeen Foyer, which has a staff of 13, Dundee International Women's Centre which provides catering training for women from 60 different countries, and Hebridean Chocolates which is based in Stomoway.

Conservative MSP for the Highlands Mary Scanlon said: "What Bosco and the other social enterprise people are doing is just fantastic. We can't have enough people growing their own food and supplying local businesses - the benefits are enormous to them and to the country."

Ayr MSP and farmer John Scott added: "Local food is both higher quality and healthier.

"Small enterprises don't have the capability to process food with salt and sugars. These types of social enterprise networks are fantastic for the country."