# Jamie Oliver improves Huntington, W.Va.'s eating habits

By [Jane Black](http://projects.washingtonpost.com/staff/articles/jane+black/)

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Jamie Oliver cooks with Huntington, W.Va., residents during a taping of "Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution," a series on ABC. (Holly Farrell/Associated Press)

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It's happy-ending time for Huntington, W.Va.: Six-year-olds can now distinguish between tomatoes and potatoes. Cooks are tossing apple-cucumber salads with honey dressing for the lunch line. College students and parents are learning to make omelets and soups in free cooking classes. And Jamie Oliver, the crusading British chef who arrived last fall to help change habits in "the unhealthiest town in America," has apparently won the hearts, minds -- and stomachs -- of the locals.

With the finale of his ABC program this Friday, "[Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution](http://www.jamieoliver.com/campaigns/jamies-food-revolution/)" has officially been televised. But can the six-part, prime-time series help a real revolution take root?

"Reality TV . . . it's like junk food, really. It's a quick fix and it usually has zero depth and it ain't going to help you much in life," the 34-year-old chef said in an interview at Dulles International Airport, where he was en route to London after his final day of filming in West Virginia last week. "But the TV route is so important in this country. TV to this very day is the most important communicator of everything."

As far as Huntington is concerned, Oliver appears to be right. Anyone who has watched the show knows that town officials, parents and students were initially skeptical about Oliver's project. West Virginia, a poor, rural state, is already the butt of too many national jokes, as the locals see it, and they feared they would once again be singled out for ridicule. But residents now say they have embraced Oliver's message. The public schools have made permanent many of the celebrity chef's recommendations. By June, most of the processed food in the district schools will be gone, replaced by Oliver's from-scratch menus, which include dishes such as barbecued chicken and brown rice with carrots, raisins and orange dressing. (Spoiler alert: According to one local official, even Oliver's TV kitchen nemesis, Alice Gue, now "is the number-one proponent" of from-scratch cooking.)

In the broader community, the growing interest in healthful eating has helped spur investors to open a grocery store in the once-down-and-out city center, advocates to form a state food council, and residents to pack a new restaurant, Huntington Prime, that sources its ingredients locally. "There were already things going on. What's happened is that a lot of those things have gained momentum," said Phoebe Patton Randolph, an architect and president of the board of [Create Huntington](http://createhuntington.org/), a nonprofit community group.

Oliver has made notable progress. But the hard work, compromises and setbacks continue after the cameras have disappeared.

The flavored milk that Oliver reviles and banned from the lunch line because it contains four teaspoons of sugar per serving is back, thanks to a ruling from the West Virginia Department of Education's Office of Child Nutrition. (Sugar was deemed a lesser evil than the possibility that students would miss out on the nutrients that milk provides.) And though the goal was to rid school kitchens of all processed foods, some will remain. This year, the source is a freezer full of chicken nuggets, pizza and other items that were ordered long before filming began and must be used up. But there will be more next year, too. Like many school districts, Cabell County, where the program was set, relies on donated foods from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which does not offer many fresh ingredients. To break even, the district will have to use some processed and canned products, said Rhonda McCoy, director of food services.

The biggest challenge, though, will probably be finding money to continue to fund new programs. Jamie's Kitchen, where Oliver offered free cooking lessons last fall, has been taken over by a local health-care organization and renamed [Huntington's Kitchen](http://www.emohealth.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=61&Itemid=73). So far, it has raised $50,000, but annual expenses are expected to reach $130,000, said Yvonne Jones, the executive director of Ebenezer Medical Outreach, who is overseeing the project. The kitchen continues to offer about a dozen classes per week and is now asking for a suggested donation of $10.

Schools face a similar funding gap. West Virginia Gov. Joe Manchin is dipping into his contingency fund for about $50,000 to pay for new equipment needed to continue the program, such as food processors, salad spinners and storage containers, a spokesman said. But McCoy also needs about $30,000 to complete the training of all her cooks and $66,000 to cover the cost of hiring new cooks who are necessary to produce the more labor-intensive menus.

Fresh ingredients, which generally cost more than their processed counterparts, will be an ongoing expense. During filming at Central City Elementary, meal costs more than doubled, McCoy said, and the production team picked up the bill. To make ends meet, the schools already have axed expensive items such as the hydroponic vegetables and antibiotic- and hormone-free ground beef that Oliver insisted upon. But even conventionally raised meat will boost prices. A whole cooked chicken, for example, costs 10 cents more per serving than the processed nuggets previously on the menu. It's a significant increase when the total budget per meal, including labor and equipment, is $2.85 per student.

"We don't have all the answers at this point. But we're very proud to be involved in the project," said Jedd Flowers, Cabell County Schools director of communications. "We have started a national conversation in terms of what can happen."

What can happen is quantifiable, Oliver said. Since 2005, when the chef's first exposé of school food, "Jamie's School Dinners," was broadcast in England, the British government established the first-ever nutrition standards for school food. It also allocated about $1 billion to help pay for better-quality ingredients, new kitchen equipment and cafeterias, and staff training.

Critics continued to balk, however. After the new standards banned hamburgers and french fries from the menus, students complained, and participation in meals dropped off. In the town of Rotherham, in northern England, several mothers began passing contraband junk food through the school gates. (Oliver responded by filming a new television series in Rotherham, "Jamie's Ministry of Food," where he set up a kitchen that offered free cooking lessons to residents.)

But meal uptake, as it is known in Britain, is again on the rise, according to the latest national figures. Oliver's case that school food matters was bolstered in December 2009 by a report from Oxford researchers that revealed that in the borough of Greenwich, where "Jamie's School Dinners" had been filmed, absentee rates dropped by 15 percent and the number of pupils passing standardized tests in English and science improved by between 3 and 8 percent.

It's a process that takes time, Oliver said. "Kids don't want to learn English or math, either. They want to play Nintendo. All I can tell you is that it takes six to eight months. . . . There's no on-off button. I could have put foie gras and oysters and langoustines in there, and you would have had issues with students liking it or not liking it."

Oliver's post-series strategy in the United States is similar to the one he followed in England. He has launched an online petition calling for better food in schools and programs that will "keep cooking skills alive." Already, he has gathered about 365,000 signatures; "We'll get up to a million," he said, "don't you worry." Oliver said he hopes to present the document to the president and to [Michelle Obama, who has launched her own initiative, Let's Move](http://voices.washingtonpost.com/all-we-can-eat/food-politics/obama-its-time-for-a-wakeupcal.html), to fight childhood obesity.

Among other things, Oliver is drawing up a blueprint for a franchise of cooking centers, like the one in Huntington, across the United States. He also has raised money for a mobile kitchen to travel the country offering cooking lessons. (Famed restaurant designer David Rockwell has signed on to design the truck.)

With help from [TED](http://www.tedprize.org), a nonprofit group that this year awarded Oliver its $100,000 annual prize for an exceptional idea, he plans to develop a series of marketing campaigns. The first will aim to educate families about healthful eating. Others will be designed to challenge corporate food companies, which he believes are too quick to blame obesity on sedentary lifestyles; health-care companies, which he believes should invest in preventive medicine; and the government, which he believes should spend more money on good food for children.

"The amount of money being injected into the system is embarrassing and dangerous," Olilver said, referring to the additional $4.5 billion that Congress has proposed to improve child nutrition programs over the next decade. "This is America's darkest moment in health. And that's all you've got?"

Speaking in such blunt, politically unconstrained terms may well end up being Oliver's main role in the U.S. campaign once the show is over. Think of him as Michelle Obama's evil twin.

She told the Grocery Manufacturers Association: "All of you come to this with the right heart and the right vision and the right passion. My only urging is that we go faster, we go farther together." Oliver said: "They're all about margin and quirks and jingles. But I do think they'll start paying attention. Not because they care about the kids, to be frank, because they don't. But because they care about the dollar."

Obama has said: "Our kids didn't do this to themselves." Oliver said: "Parents can be the most positive, powerful force in a country or they can be disgusting, backstabbing traitors. When little Johnny comes home and says, 'I didn't get my nugget today,' it's wrong to say 'Oh, all right, darling,' and give him some [expletive] horrible Lunchable and a pack of potato chips and a luminous drink."

In the end, Oliver said, he will do whatever is necessary: "One thing you have to learn about me is that I do not think I am a superman. I do not think I'm special. I'm in a position that I'm using. I believe in people. I believe in local ambassadors of change. I genuinely think there is an energy right now. It's the time to put some common-sense things in place."

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**Q&A: Jamie Oliver, on the Food Revolution**

I almost felt like I knew Jamie Oliver when I met him for the first time last week in United’s first-class lounge at Dulles International Airport. He was just like he is on TV: spiky, just-rolled-out-of-bed hair, trademark rumpled T-shirt and the charming Essex accent that allows him to call you “darling” or “babe” without it being the least bit insulting.

  
Jamie Oliver's prime-time TV series is only the beginning of his campaign for healthful eating. (JamieOliver.com)

The 34-year-old celebrity chef looked tired. He had just completed his last day of filming in Huntington, W.Va., for his first American TV series, “[Jamie Oliver’s Food Revolution,](http://www.jamieoliver.com/campaigns/jamies-food-revolution)” in which he tried to make over the eating habits of one of America’s most unhealthy cities. To read about the strides he's made thus far, read my ([story](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/20/AR2010042001181.html) in today’s Food section.)

Exhaustion didn’t stop him from being forthright and feisty about all the work left to be done. (“Your destiny is predicted by intelligent people, and your destiny is not good,” he said, referring to the nearly $150 billion the United States spends annually on obesity-related diseases.) In a nearly two-hour interview, Oliver talked about why he came to the States, the parallels between our country and England, and why he wants to be Michelle Obama's best friend.

-- Jane Black

Edited excerpts:

**You’ve got your hands pretty full in England. Why did you come here?**

A couple of things, really. I think ultimately you could say, ‘Oh, he wants to break America.’ But I’m beyond the fascination with breaking America. I love the country. I have many friends here. There is incredible excellence, and I always learn something. My life is really so much based in England. I have a lot of staff, a lot of kids and, like, you say, I have my own stuff to deal with back home.

I guess the best way to explain it is to say it’s my pleasure and honor to do it. I think sometimes in life having a foreigner come in is really important. The first three months in Huntington was really hard. They’re lovely people. They’re really lovely people. A lot of them are really religious so there’s not that much room to be horrible or vicious. But like if you’re not accepted that can be just as tough. Ultimately, I found being a foreigner really powerful and useful for perspective. I do think that a lot of Americans are baffled by bull[expletive]. And I think they are baffled by their own. Sometimes I look at something differently.

For example, something that was very big for me but is very small for you is the fact that there isn’t any [cutlery] in the schools. You could say, 'So bloody what?' Or you could have the institution saying, 'No, no, we don’t give them knives because it’s dangerous,' which is [expletive] patronizing to kids. Because 99.999 percent of kids are not horrible, ferocious bastards. They’re beautiful sparkly-eyed kids. You know.

So I can look at that and say, ‘Well, okay, all of English kids are taught to use knives and forks.' And not having [that] completely underpins the problem in America. If you only design menus that are essentially junk or fast food, the whole infrastructure supports junk. By not having [it], you are endorsing junk for your pretty little 6-, 7- and 8-year-old kids. So I mean that’s me getting pissed off about one little thing. I thought that was really important.

When they are all debating about whether they should do it, I can say: 'France. Spain. Italy. Finland, England. Denmark. Sweden. They all have knives and forks, guys. What are we debating here? Give your kids a bloody knife and fork and let me put some fresh food in front of them they can eat.'

**When you arrived in Huntington, you got lots of criticism for coming in and telling people what to eat. Did you experience the same kind of reaction when you started your campaign for better school food in England?**

Same [expletive], different country. Absolutely. Regardless of how much it got cut in the show. I kept saying it’s the same back home. The intensity is more so here. You know, I think the important thing to say is, you know, this show is meant to be a provocateur.

**What kind of an impact do you think the show has had so far?**

In a way, this is just the tip of the iceberg. The fact that we got on ABC in prime time. To be honest, we’ll be genre-defining. Now they’ve let us do it. Now it’s rated and our slot ratings are the best in three years [in that time period], Now that’s happened, commissioners around the whole American platform will commission [new shows like this.] You have a look at what will come out in the next six months.

**You’ve essentially made this program before. How was making it in the States different than in England?**

Look, this is not being a bitchy thing. This is the most sensitive TV I’ve ever made. There’s more blurring and bleeping and cutting out of brands and logos and litigious stuff than I’ve ever experienced before. In England, you’re allowed to have an opinion -- as long as it comes out of your mouth. If it’s not true or if it’s debatable, then yes, it’s good journalism to make sure the other side is shown. But if it’s true and it’s your opinion then it goes in the cup. No one can take that off. Channel 4 [Oliver's network partner in England] is a commercial channel and we never worry about advertising. It’s not the done thing. I know it’s different than over here.

**Your program came on just as Congress is getting ready to reauthorize childhood nutrition programs. Did you plan it that way?**

Total fluke. But really, this child nutrition reauthorization is the most profound piece of work that will be done in the next 20 years in this country. The only way we can get change is if parents believe this makes a difference. We have independent research in the U.K. that shows that students with good food in school see their test scores go up. It’s not rocket science. And my interest in it is not because I’m a food lover. Food touches everything. If you’re worried about the cost of the health service, you should be worried about this.

**The Obama administration asked for $10 billion more over 10 years for childhood nutrition programs. Congress has proposed an extra $4.5 billion. Is that a step in the right direction?**

The amount of money being injected into the system is embarrassing and dangerous. People will baffle you with bull[expletive]. We’re talking about $4.5 billion over 10 years.

Basically, we’re arguing about [expletive] and [expletive]. I think the amount of money I was looking for -- for meaningful change -- was $36 billion. That was a tangible chunk and it would inspire it to be spent in a meaningful way.

**Michelle Obama is working to get more money and to spotlight the problem of childhood obesity, too. What do you think of her efforts?**

Michelle is basically on the money.

**Have you met with her?**

I met her once when I cooked for her once at the G20 [summit]. I told her what I was doing in Huntington, and she said she was going to be doing stuff herself. She probably doesn’t even remember me. And certainly it was a pleasure. I am a supporter of the Obama administration.

But she’s a busy lady, and she’s fairly guarded. I would be like her best friend, know what I mean? I’ve got no arguments with the lady. I’m impressed and inspired by her and I completely support her. And in a way, even though no one ever said it, the point of the show is to get the parents out there to support her in Congress.

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