



Fresh is best Volunteers cook up a storm at Manna's headquarters in Victoria Park, delivering more than 200 meals a day, six days a week, to Perth's homeless and disadvantaged in Weld Square.



PICTURES IAIN GILLESPIE

## FULL

*plate*

Volunteers are the heart and soul of Manna's kitchen. **Julie Hosking** joins the Thursday crew.

**T**he place is buzzing when I walk in just after 9am. Three women are slicing and dicing like pros, crates of fresh produce by their side. Another is at the sink washing tomatoes. At the other end of the kitchen, divided by commercial stoves and bratt pans – huge rectangular trays that enable cooking on a large scale, I see a young man and two even younger girls among a group peeling potatoes.

Team leader Brett takes me through a quick induction before I'm able to make myself useful with a knife. He arrived earlier to plan today's menu and, as always, was guided by what was in the pantry and fridge – and any headstart the Wednesday team had been able to give them (a large portion of today's potatoes are for tomorrow's team). There's also the produce that can arrive at any time from the likes of OzHarvest or Food Rescue, which are doing their bit

to ensure good food does not go to waste. Not when there are so many people who otherwise would not get a proper meal.

For this isn't any commercial kitchen. It's the heart and soul of Manna, a not-for-profit group that started with one caring couple and a few bowls of soup 20 years ago and now serves more than 90,000 meals a year to Perth's homeless and disadvantaged.

Six days a week, teams of volunteers work out of this Victoria Park kitchen, preparing a three-course meal that would do many restaurants proud. On today's menu? Tomato soup. Seafood stew served with roasted tomato and potatoes. A green salad. Yoghurt and fresh fruit.

On the stove two huge pots of vegetable curry simmer away, the seductive scent of spices wafting through the air. Delivered earlier by Indian Express in Joondanna, which regularly donates freshly cooked meals, it will be today's vegetarian option, with potatoes added for bulk.

Everyone has input as the dishes come together. When someone points out that the ratio of sauce to seafood is a bit high, tofu is tossed through the creamy stew. And when the salads have been made and there's still a huge tub of fresh spinach, we add handfuls to the curry for extra nourishment.

As I'm slicing yet another cucumber, a man walks in with a bag of fresh parsley. "It's from our garden," he says simply, "thought you could use it." People are always dropping by with similar offerings and all contributions are gratefully received.

When Manna's chief executive Nicki McKenzie showed me around the previous week, volunteers were unloading crates of leftover food from a conference – small trays laden with packets of

crackers and cheese, salad and chocolate. They would go back out that afternoon as an extra for the "streeties", Nicki tells me – such donations are never a substitute for homemade.

"We're all about preparing fresh, tasty and healthy meals," says Nicki, who started with Manna as a volunteer four years ago. "And we get as many vegetables into those dishes as we possibly can!"

I can attest to that, having chopped my way through a mountain of tomatoes, cucumbers, spring onions and mushrooms – and that was just for the salad. But I'm a ring-in; the people alongside are Thursday regulars, some have been volunteering for years. There are retirees and part-time workers, husbands and wives, mothers and daughters, ordinary people giving up something very valuable for strangers – their time.

When I ask them why, the answers are invariably the same. "I just wanted to give back." "I like to cook and I wanted to help." "I heard Bev and John give a talk – how could I not come down after that?"

Bev and John Lowe have that effect on people. On seeing a group of homeless people in a park on a cold May night in 1996, Bev told her husband she was going to go home and make soup for them. At her recent 75th birthday celebrations, John told Manna's many supporters he'd agreed with his wife because he didn't think she would follow through. But she did, and the inspiring couple have been rallying people to the cause ever since.

Twenty years on, with the help of more than 200 volunteers, Manna now cooks more than 200 meals a day for the homeless and disadvantaged. The charity also runs a school breakfast program and a winter uniform drive. Bev and John have not long





"retired", though they drop in on an errand while I'm in the kitchen and I don't doubt they will continue to help until they are physically incapable.

Nicki, one of only a handful of paid staff, is determined to ensure their legacy becomes sustainable. Manna doesn't receive government funding, relying on the community for support. It's a constant battle but every little bit helps. Nicki pops into the kitchen to check on the progress of new screens being installed courtesy of one of Manna's corporate supporters, Jason Windows. "Times are tight and all not-for-profits are really feeling it," she says, "but people are extraordinarily generous. When they can't give money, they will give what they can."

It's a spirit of generosity that is alive in this humble kitchen – "we really need one twice the size," says Nicki, who has had plans drawn up for her dream kitchen – where people just get on with the job while chatting amiably about everyday life. There are more than a dozen here this morning, and there will be a similar number the following Thursday when our photographer heads down to capture the team at work.

No one stands idle for long; if there's a job that needs doing, someone is doing it. Washing an endless stream of pots, pans and bowls; wiping down benches for the next course; stirring pots; cleaning floors. A plate of cheese and biscuits is offered around as sustenance but there is barely time for a cuppa. I notice a man with a hearing aid carrying trays of food; language is clearly not an

insurmountable barrier. One of the women tells me he is a refugee who spent time in a detention centre and struggled when he came out. Manna has helped him, it would seem, as much as he is helping now.

The pace is brisk but the mood is bright. It's just gone noon; the past three hours have whizzed by. Food is gradually being packed – giant eskies for meals that need to be kept cold and collapsible crates for the rest – and loaded into the waiting "bus", a beast of a van I'm glad I'm not driving.

As we start spooning donated cartons of mango yoghurt – Barambah Organics, no less – into little tubs, the tall young man I spied earlier reveals he's a nursing student clocking up some of his required community hours. He appears to be enjoying himself and readily puts his hand up to head to Northbridge's Weld Square. I'm told the two girls are also joining their mother at the park and I can't help thinking how beneficial it would be for all young people to spend some time in this kitchen (they have to be over 14 to help out).

The teams work out who will go down each day. Some prefer to stay in the kitchen, finishing prep for the next team or washing floors; others say they enjoy the interaction and seeing the difference the food they have spent so much time cooking makes.

Someone needs to be comfortable driving the van, and at least five others are needed to help serve. There is also security in numbers. Although there have been few incidents since September last year

when Manna switched from providing dinner to lunch – partly to assuage residents in the area – volunteers are advised not to approach anyone on their own. Alcohol and drug abuse leave their mark.

I follow the bus down to Weld Square, where a queue has already formed, snaking back from the corner. There's a sign on the bus "no backpackers" but none of the volunteers questions anyone's circumstances. Many are not homeless – they may have a place to crash but not enough money to eat – but Manna is there to feed them, simple as that.

"The streeties know we don't provide counselling, we can't get them a place to stay, we won't give them money, there are other services that do all that," Nicki says. "They know that Manna means food – and it's good, fresh food – and that we will be here at 1.30pm every day six days a week."

Susan, who runs Manna's school breakfast program, is nominally in charge today, though everyone seems to know what to do. Hi-vis vests are donned and trellis tables are set up around the van, with entree, main and dessert fanning towards the back, where I'm dispensing cold water into plastic cups. It's a warm day and I'm barely keeping up with demand. Men, women, young and old. Some carry plastic bags, others just the clothes on their back. A few chat, others say nothing. The two most common words I hear for the next half-hour: "Thank you."

Today, I'm told, is a quieter day and those still in the park are welcomed back for seconds. The leftovers will go to Shopfront, a hostel in Maylands. "No kids today," Susan says as we pack up the bus. "It's always great when we don't see kids."

**Help Manna raise \$250,000 (50,000 meals) at Homeless for a Night, Gloucester Park on May 14. See [manna.org.au](http://manna.org.au).**

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