

## FACE TO FACE



Ursula Arens

Ursula has a degree in dietetics and currently works as a freelance writer in Nutrition and Dietetics. She enjoys the gifts of Asperger's.

Our F2F  
interviews  
feature people  
who influence  
nutrition  
policies  
and practices  
in the UK.

**Ursula meets:****SUE BAIC**

Nutrition author and writer

Work Ready dietitian

Cruise speaker



Spring has sprung and the newspapers are already full of cruise holiday promotions. But no longer is sitting on a sunny deck with a fruity cocktail enough. Essential ingredients for these pricy holidays are now celebrity speakers such as authors, actors and academics, all fighting to be listed. And so it is with great pleasure that I get the chance to speak to Sue Baic about her dietetic career, including her skills as a cruise speaker.

Her decision to become a dietitian was arrow straight. "I have a dietitian career information sheet I must have photocopied as a young teen," said Sue. She completed a degree in Zoology and Psychology at the University of Bristol, continued to a Master's in Nutrition at Queen Elizabeth College (now King's College) in London, and finished with a postgraduate diploma in Dietetics.

Her first job as a dietitian was at Queen Mary's Hospital in Roehampton, London. "I soon specialised in paediatrics, but after a few years, jumped the age spectrum and worked in the community supporting care of older adults." After a few years, Sue took a year's unpaid leave and did six months overland across Africa and six months across South America. "I learnt Spanish and, yes, I did try roast guinea pig." She also became a good-enough cook, as every few days she scoured a local market to cook meals for the 20 or so fellow travellers on the mega bus.

Sue returned to the UK and worked as a dietitian for the United Bristol

Healthcare Trust. She did a mixture of community projects, and particularly enjoyed the specialist lipid clinics. She also did some work for private hospital chain The Priory, supporting the care of those with eating disorders. In addition, Sue did some work for local media outlets, communicating healthy eating messages, which continues to this day in her role as a BDA media spokesperson.

In 2001, Sue saw a newspaper advert for a nutrition lecturer at the Centre for Exercise and Health Sciences at the University of Bristol. She had no experience as an academic lecturer but applied anyway, and so started a new career. "It was a steep learning curve for the first two years," she told me. Delivering lectures to large groups of smart Master-level students required lots of preparation and performance. Learning to supervise and assess projects was also a daily challenge. She supported a large research project comparing different diets on weight loss (published in *The British Medical Journal* in 2006), and also guided many student dissertations to publication. But after 10 years, Sue moved onto work entirely as a freelancer.

"For many people, food-at-work is a large part of their diet," said Sue. She is keen to discuss and promote the BDA initiative 'Work Ready'. "It's a fantastic training scheme to encourage and support dietitian-led projects for employers." On completing the training course, dietitians are encouraged to link with companies looking to



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improve the mental and physical health of their employees, and they have access to great materials and resources from the Work Ready programme. Sue has done lots of presentations and employee health consultations, reporting that commissioners are always enthusiastic in project evaluations.

One freelance project has been writing on nutrition themes for the *For Dummies*® range of books. “I wrote three books together with dietitian Nigel Denby on low-glycaemic diets, on general nutrition and on gluten-free diets. These were fixed-fee projects and perhaps more work than expected.” Not a way to get rich quick, but they were all door-openers to future projects.

Sue’s other freelance projects include working at HM Prison Bristol and also with a Bristol-based food charity, The Matthew Tree, where she is now a trustee. Many food distribution services have limited scope to select most nutritious foods, and Sue has worked hard to promote healthier selections for those on low incomes. “It is really important to give practical advice. Often preparation facilities are minimal, and oven usage would be too expensive.” Sue gives nutrition and cookery classes and promotes Eatwell Guide concepts and quick-and-easy recipes. She has also set up malnutrition screening in the food centres so those at risk can be supported and given extra foods.

Sue loves adventure and travel and the last four years have been particularly exciting. A relative planted the seed of an idea when she enthused about her cruise holiday and the exciting array of expert lecturers on board. Sue thought, “I could do that.” So she contacted various cruise lines and offered nutrition infotainment. This was a new idea, and there were many interviews, auditions and detailed discussions, followed by a two-week trial cruise to the Caribbean, during which she presented lectures on a diversity of topics, assessed by both colleagues and passengers. Sue has now been on more than 20 cruises all around the world. “You are part of the ‘entertainment’ staff. I do one or two lectures every sea-day, which is then also shown on the ship TV channel,” said Sue. “And of course passengers recognise you and come to discuss foods and diets. But you enjoy the many pleasures of being on a cruise, including port stops in the most exotic places.”

Sue has had such an interesting and varied career. What advice would she give to a young dietitian? “It is funny you ask that. A young dietitian has just made the comment that my social media presence isn’t as strong as it could be.” Could low Twitter likes and shares really link to career assertiveness? Could you be influential without being an influencer? Perhaps less so in the future. But for now, Sue has shown that adventurousness does not just relate to travel.