

Healthy

Good fellas

As child obesity levels in the UAE soar, a host of Italian chefs are tackling the problem by teaching families how to cook easy, healthy recipes that taste great, too. Colin Drury meets them

Celebrity chef Alexio Pasquali is getting hot under the collar. It's a designer one - Ascots & Chapels at that - but it's not fashion he's discussing so passionately. It's food - Italian food to be precise, and the war it can wage on the UAE's biggest problem: obesity.

"No one needs to be fat," he says. "If you eat well and exercise every day you won't have a weight problem. People who are obese are risking their health but it's easy to lose weight and get fit. You just need to know how, and be motivated.

"Most people here are too busy to think about their family's health, we're all so busy and time-poor, but you could spend as little as 10 minutes a day cooking healthy and tasty food.

"It's actually easier to make a nutritional meal than call for a take-away delivery. By the time that junk food arrives you could be sitting around a table with your family

protecting yourselves from all sorts of health problems while licking your lips because it tastes so good."

Alexio, a *Foodshala* judge and regular on *Friday's* food pages, is Italian, more than 180cm tall and reed thin. "I care about my health so I eat a well-balanced diet."

He means a predominately Italian diet, which was voted by CNN as the best cuisine in the world last year.

'I saw doughnuts, crisps and chocolate - how can a child be healthy with junk like that for lunch?'

It's also incredibly healthy as it's based around olive oil, tomatoes, fresh vegetables, grains and seafood, all of which are known to reduce the risks of developing obesity, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, cancer, high blood pressure, Parkinson's disease and Alzheimer's.

"Italian food tastes delicious and is so simple anyone can learn some classic dishes. It's criminal to feed your children junk when it's so easy to eat well if you make the effort."

The Dubai-based chef is on a mission and will be driving home the anti-obesity message next month at Italian Cuisine World Summit, which runs across more than 20 restaurants in Dubai. Alexio, along with a host of Michelin-starred chefs including Thomas Arrigoni, from Milan, and Salvatore Bianco from Naples, will be proving you can create simple but tasty family meals that are nutritious and inexpensive.

Alexio, along with a host of Michelin-starred chefs including

can cook a healthy Italian dish like cacciucco (fish stew) or cappon magro (seafood salad) in the time it takes to make a greasy burger," he says. "There's no reason why anyone should be feeding their kids deep-fried everything when they have such an easy alternative.

"There's a real culture of unhealthy eating here, which accounts for one of the highest obesity rates in the

world. Yes, people work long hours, and sometimes it's difficult to exercise in the summer but these are excuses. A lot of people don't eat well and give a bad example to their children.

"My six-year-old daughter takes a packed lunch to school and not long ago there was some confusion over bags and she came home with someone else's lunch box. I looked in it and there were crisps and chocolate wrappers and the remains of a doughnut. I was shocked. Who is sending a child to school with that? How can we expect children to concentrate and learn and be healthy with that junk for their lunch?"

That obesity is an issue in the UAE - especially among children - there is no doubt.

One in three children is overweight or obese and at risk of early diabetes and hypertension, a study just last year showed. Researchers studied 1,440 children and teenagers here aged between six and 19 and found 14.2 per cent were overweight and a further 19.8 per cent were obese.

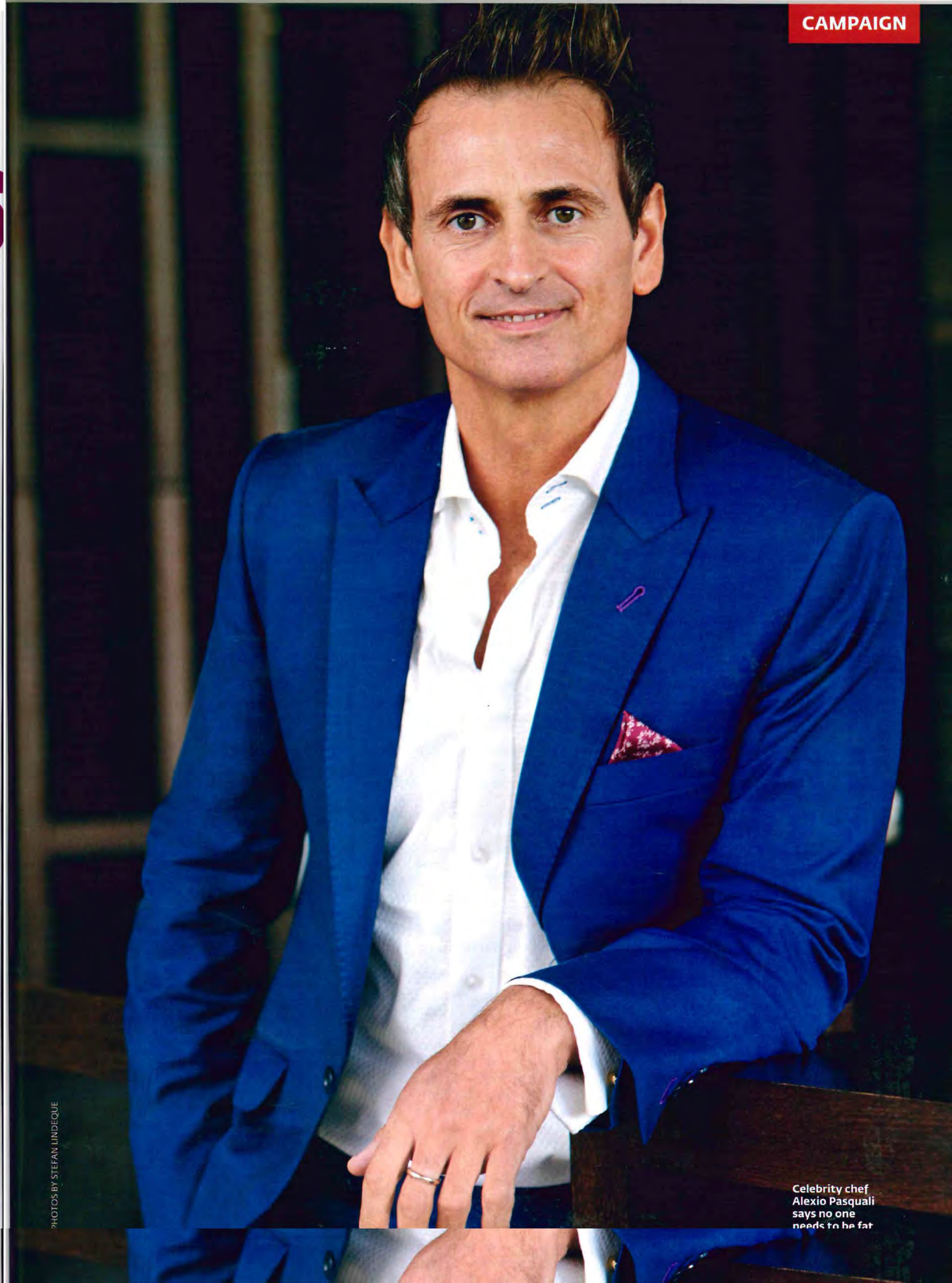
Most of the children studied were Emirati, however a small percentage were expatriates, suggesting it is a problem across all communities. They were categorised by their body mass index, a calculation that uses height and weight to estimate body

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Summit organiser Rosario Scarpato, flanked by chefs Andrea Mugavero (right) and Alessandro Miceli

Summit organiser



Celebrity chef Alexio Pasquali says no one needs to be fat



Alexio says kids can teach their parents to cook healthier food

fat against a child's growth chart. Problems were especially acute in children aged 11 to 15, of whom 40 per cent were overweight or obese, and 16 to 19, of whom 39 per cent were overweight. In the six to 10 age group, 22.8 per cent were overweight or obese.

As the children grew older, the likelihood of obesity increased, said Dr Abdulla Al Junaibi, consultant endocrinologist at Zayed Military Hospital and the study's main researcher. He said obesity trends were similar to those in North

Figures published by WHO last year show the UAE as the world's fifth most obese country

America where obesity rates in children have tripled over the last 10 years.

A survey conducted by Dubai Municipality in 2013 showed that at least 40 per cent of schoolchildren are overweight. Additionally, nearly three-quarters of 5,000 students surveyed in the UAE do not exercise or exercise for less than an hour a day.

Figures published by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2013 – as reported in *Gulf News* – show the UAE was categorised as the world's fifth most obese country. An alarming 40 per cent of women and 25 per cent of men here are overweight. The report notes that an average adult in

the UAE consumes over 3,000 calories per day, almost 20 per cent above the average. The recommended daily calorie consumption for adult men is 2,500 calories, while women should consume 2,000 calories per day.

When only Emiratis are considered, that figure, according to a 2012 WHO survey, jumps to 67 per cent of men and 72 per cent of women being overweight.

Official UAE Health Ministry figures are more conservative but still alarming. They calculate that 44.6 per cent of Emirati women will be obese by next year.

According to one survey quoted in *Gulf News*, UAE residents eat out a staggering 11 times a week on average. That's more than half of the 21 meals they consume over the week. All of these calories have a devastating effect on our health, putting obese and overweight adults and children at risk of type 2 diabetes.

The International Diabetes Federation estimates that 20 per cent of the adult population in the UAE is diabetic – that's nearly two million people in the country suffering from this disease. It is the second highest national prevalence in the world behind Nauru, an island nation in the South Pacific. Treating the condition currently costs between 13 and 40 per cent of the national health budget, depending on which estimate you come across.

Perhaps the most accurate gauge of the problem is the effect expanding waistlines have had on healthcare spending in the region as a whole.

Gulf Cooperation Council member states (UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman) have all seen huge hikes in medical budgets driven by a transformation in demand. In 2011, GCC spent around \$28.9 billion on healthcare. By 2014 that figure will be \$44 billion and by 2025 it will rise to \$60 billion, as those fried chickens come home to roost.

"It's worrying to think that children's health is being put at risk like this," says Alexio as we talk in Roberto's, one of the restaurants taking part in the Summit. "It just takes a little education and a tiny bit of effort to make sure they eat healthier." That's why he's held

workshops with children before, teaching them how to make healthy Italian recipes. "If you teach children how to make healthy food they will show their parents how to make it, so by educating them you are creating healthier families and tackling the problem," says the father-of-two.

"I want to go into schools to show them how to cook Italian food because I know this will have a massive effect on health and obesity. Children love to cook, and they take on board healthy messages. I've seen first hand how they tell their parents to ditch the junk and cook something healthy."

He'll be showing how to cook a variety of healthy recipes during

Why Italian diets are so healthy

Even the tastiest Italian dishes come packed with super-foods.



FISH A good source of protein and omega oils that are so good for the heart and the brain.

EXTRA VIRGIN OLIVE OIL An effective force fighting cancer, stress and heart problems.



BROCCOLI, ASPARAGUS AND SPINACH Full of vitamins, minerals and iron that help hypertension, prevent asthma and improve bone strength.



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live demonstrations at the summit's Piazza Grande Food Show, a two-day mini festival at Dubai Polo and Equestrian Club on November 14-15.

This year is the second time the summit has been held in Dubai after director Rosario Scarpato brought it here from Hong Kong. Some 37 Michelin-starred cooks from across the globe – including Cesare Casella from Ristorante Rosi in New York and Mario Caramella from In Italy in Singapore – will cook in the Dubai restaurants over two weeks from November 7 to 20. These include Bice Mare in Souk Al Bahar and Frankie's – owned by Marco Pierre White and Frankie Dettori – in JBR.

"Italian food is health-conscious and always has been," says Rosario. "Italians were among the first people to see the food on the table as a form of curing ailments. There was a famous 16th century chef, Bartolomeo Scappi, who used to be the secret chef of the Pope and he wrote one of the first books about this – how you should use food you enjoy to also stay healthy."

"We're aware that child obesity is one of the biggest problems in contemporary society, particularly in Dubai. This summit we want to make a contribution to fight it."

That's why he's asked 10 of the Michelin-starred guest chefs to prepare easy, healthy recipes. "This little collection will be made available for home cooks, mums and dads." Alexio is co-ordinating the recipes, and is looking forward to passing on his expertise.

"There's no doubt that Italian food is one of the healthiest in the world," he says. "But more than that it's the healthiest and easiest option for home cooking. You don't need to be a chef to make a tasty, healthy meal for the family."

Italian cuisine world summit

The sixth Summit will be on in Dubai from November 7 to 20. The extravaganza will see 37 Michelin starred chefs spend a night cooking in the kitchens of 21 upscale city restaurants. A special two-day Grande Food Show will also take place at Dubai Polo and Equestrian Club with live demonstrations by Alexio Pasquali of healthy recipes for all the family. Restaurants hosting them include Alta Badia (Emirates Towers Hotel), Cavalli Club (Fairmont Hotel, Sheikh Zayed Road) and Ronda Locatelli (The Atlantis hotel). Visit www.italiancuisinesummit.com. 