



Arts group Metal host modern take on pagan harvest festival

Peterborough plays host today to The Meal – an art installation that is also tasty and filling

Nick Clark | @MrNickClark | Sunday 20 September 2015

A group of 500 Peterborough locals will break bread in a modern version of a pagan harvest festival. What they may not realise, as they tuck into fare that includes cakes baked by inmates at the city's prison, is that they have become living sculptures.

Harvest Festival, organised by the arts group Metal, is a modern take on the ancient pagan tradition that celebrated a successful harvest with feasting, music and dancing. It hopes to bring the community together, promote locally produced food and celebrate the city's proud agricultural heritage that has led it to be dubbed the "breadbasket" of England.

The centrepiece of the event is an outdoor midday meal for 500 people. But this is no ordinary lunch: rather it is the latest incarnation of a work conceived by artists Lucy and Jorge Orta, who have staged similar meals in 38 countries.

As well as giving the locals a hearty feed it was "sculpturally and conceptually interesting", said Ms Orta. "Our creative and intellectual quest is not satisfied until we are convinced that the art has become a living sculpture, where the public is no longer a passive spectator and where the art has been generated by the community."

The couple hope's "ploughman's lunch style" meal, of soups, bread and cheese prepared by local chef Lee Clarke, will bring strangers together to discuss local issues. If the conversation flags, diners can turn to the "provocations" that have been baked by Clarke into 85 loaves. Devised by the playwright Aisha Zia and printed on cards by Eloise Moody, a local milliner, these conversation-starters are a key part of the work.

Ms Orta said the Peterborough version of The Meal – or 70 x 7 The Meal, Act XXXIX, to give it its full title – was inspired by the Anglo-Saxon Lammas festival. The title is a reference to the invitation process, which begins with the artists asking seven people to the meal. Those seven people invite seven more guests, until every seat is filled.

Mark Richards, the director of Metal in Peterborough, said: "We want to look at the themes of food production, distribution and consumption. Some [guests] may not get it but it doesn't really matter if they don't. People can just engage with the discussion and eat the food. That's fine."

Ms Orta, who is from Sutton Coldfield, founded Studio Orta Paris with her Argentine husband Jorge in 1991. They staged their first "meal" in 2000 in Innsbruck and have organised similar events around the world.

The meal includes ingredients provided by local farmers, city allotments and community growing projects. Guests have a choice of roasted Jerusalem artichoke soup with truffle oil, chilled tomato soup with herb pesto, and vegetable broth with crispy sage-infused croutons.

As part of the festival, a farmers' market will open for business this weekend. "We hope this could instigate the rebirth of a regular market," Ms Orta said.

"Art can be a fantastic tool. It can bind people unobtrusively." ●

