

MORE THAN A MEAL *School Lunch in Japan*

By Alexis Agliano Sanborn



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The children at Saitama Elementary School respond to the question, "Do you like your lunch?" Screen capture from Cafeteria Culture's documentary film *School Lunch in Japan — It's Not Just About Eating!* Directed, edited and filmed by Atsuko Satake Quirk, Cafeteria Culture's media director. All photos in this article are from the documentary, which is available on YouTube at <https://tinyurl.com/lohfeum> and on Vimeo at <https://tinyurl.com/lffxkrd>. Visit the *Cafeteria Culture* website at <https://tinyurl.com/lepwxvk> to learn more about their work.

For many children in school, little compares to the hunger felt waiting for lunch. Breakfast is a memory, and it is the promise of the midday meal that strengthens the spirit through the morning lessons. In some corners of the world, the lunch hour is considered a time of respite, a chance for students and teachers to enjoy a break from their classes, scarf down a meal, and socialize with friends. In Japan, by contrast, lunchtime is an important part of *shokuiku*, or food education. The midday hour becomes a daily lesson in manners, history, ecology, sociology, and nutrition.

Known as *gakkō kyūshoku* in Japanese, school lunch has become a vehicle that forges connections to the community and society, contributing to how students understand both themselves and the world around them. Although in operation for decades, the Japanese school lunch system garnered much of its prestige when the *Shokuiku Kihonhou* (Basic Law on Food Education) was enacted nationally in 2005. School meals are pervasive, available at 99.7 percent of public and 46.2 percent of private elementary schools, and 91.0 percent of public and 13.9 percent of private junior high schools, with cost to families ranging from US \$40 to \$60 monthly.¹

In achieving reliable standards in food quality and incorporating diversified curriculum content, the local and national government, nutritionists, school administrators, and staff have unintentionally created an important soft power. Since 2012 in particular, there has been a steady increase of awareness of Japanese school lunch and food education from around the world. It's not just academics and nutritionists who are taking notice. *The Washington Post* published a popular article correlating *kyūshoku* and *shokuiku* to decreased levels of obesity in school-age children in Japan.² While obesity is certainly not rampant, the fact that *kyūshoku* was attributed as a positive influence is striking. Meanwhile, in 2015, a YouTube video documenting the daily lunch ritual of Japanese schoolchildren went viral,

achieving over 10 million views. Japan is definitely cooking up something good, and the world is taking notice.

For the most part, the *kyūshoku* meal is cooked from scratch daily, using fresh ingredients as much as possible. Depending on the proximity of farms or distributors, the vegetables may have been picked just that morning. This connection between school and agriculture is by design, the government promoting "local production and local consumption" in the community and especially in schools. In 2010, the percentage of local ingredients used per school meal was upped to 30 percent. Considering Japan's food self-sufficiency rate may hang at a meager 39–40 percent, *kyūshoku* is a reliable consumer and economic bright spot.³ The byproduct of this public-private partnership is the pride of fostering strong connections between schools, community, and the local economy. School meals arguably become a representation of a town, its industry, and citizens.⁴

The lunches are based on the *washoku*, or traditional Japanese meal structure, which includes rice, soup, and *ichijūsansai* (three side dishes) composed of a balance of carbohydrates, protein, and fiber. At school,

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You will plant potatoes next March

The homeroom teacher eats with the children in their classroom. Here he is telling students that the mashed potatoes they are having for lunch came from their school farm and that they will plant the next crop in March. © 2013 Atsuko Quirk



school farm

Small section of the school farm where produce is grown, harvested and used in the lunch program. © 2013 Atsuko Quirk



5 cooking workers cook 720 meals

School cooks peel and wash the potatoes that were grown on the school farm.

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white rice is served three to four times a week, alternating with pasta or bread. Rice is a particularly versatile foodstuff, with nutritionists mixing in ingredients such as barley, seaweed, vegetables, and meat for added vitamins and nutrients. A vegetable soup of some sort is almost always present. The side dishes usually fall into two categories: meat and vegetables. Meat sometimes is served separately, but is often incorporated into bite-size vegetable side dishes. Vegetables include salads, boiled greens, simmered dishes, and stir-fries. The inclusion of dessert is rare—perhaps only once or twice a week, and usually something relatively healthy such as fruit, jellies, or puddings. A typical washoku-style meal for early September may include simmered pork and fresh-picked eggplant, barley cooked with newly harvested white rice, miso soup with new pumpkin and mushrooms, lightly pickled greens and lotus root, and a frozen mandarin orange as a refreshing finish. Seasonal and balanced meals that follow the washoku formula may appear simple, but much thought goes into their planning.

Viewed from a historical perspective, the story of school lunch is undoubtedly one of modern Japan, as its development parallels the country's transition from premodern to Western notions of modernity. Compulsory elementary education had begun in 1872, finding children in the classroom and parents with one less hand on the farm. While education may have done much to fill the mind, it did little for the stomach. The Buddhist monks of Tsuruoka City, Yamagata Prefecture, began providing simple meals consisting of pickles and rice for their students. Local school lunch efforts proliferated in the 1890s as meals to entice and nourish school-age children.

The meals and lunch system evolved with each successive decade. In 1917, the first “nutritional,” not just caloric, lunches were introduced in some schools. In the 1920s, bread-based meals were introduced in Tokyo.⁵ As the Japanese Empire expanded, the government grew more interested in the power of school lunches to provide for the next generation of able-bodied citizens. The leadership desired citizens physically able to uphold Japan's regional supremacy and imperial agenda. At the School Health Specialist Conference in 1926, the Ministry of Education officially endorsed school lunches, providing them with a national subsidy in 1932. Throughout the interwar years, schools continued to receive funding; funding became limited to major cities only in 1944 due to dire food shortages.⁶

In the postwar period, the school lunch system was heavily restructured by the United States and under the direction of General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP). Lunches came to center on bread and milk rather than the traditional rice-based meal structure. Milk was believed to be a liquid source of fat and essential vitamins, touted as a wonder drink capable of supplying much-needed calories

for growing children, many of whom had been malnourished during the war. Meanwhile, lunch staff was trained to bake bread, which acted as the

primary source of carbohydrates. Promoted by the Agriculture Division of SCAP, bread was seen as an immediate fix for guaranteeing adequate nutrition for children. Japan joined the International Wheat Agreement (IWA), purchasing wheat at a stable price for an extended period. Progress continued throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s as nutritionists, staff, and educators found their footing and rediscovered what lunchtime could be. New mandates and goals were passed in 1954, and mealtime officially became a period of learning.

A wave of nostalgia swept Japan in the 1970s and 1980s, evidenced in part by a nationwide longing for bygone times before tradition had been cast aside for the allure of the West. Now, with an economy to rival the United States, the bleak days of the postwar era were over. Japan was No. 1. A pride in “traditional” culture was rekindled, which made its way onto the school lunch tray. Beginning in 1976, bread began to be replaced by rice, and rather than the endearing *sufooku* (spork), chopsticks slowly returned as the default eating utensil. In the 1970s, as now, rice production was subsidized by the government, but with decreased consumption, the country was in the midst of a rice surplus. Serving rice in school was a practical solution—it created demand year-round and reacquainted the next generation with their native culinary traditions. The 1990s and 2000s brought the blossoming of *kyūshoku*. Schools and farms further embraced local partnerships. Teachers and school lunch nutritionists helped guide the curriculum and incorporate food education into subjects such as science and social studies. These activities culminated in 2005 with the passage of the Basic Law on Food Education.

The meal guidelines are surprisingly autonomous. Nutritionists and school staff are often left to their own devices. As long as they meet basic nutritional and caloric requirements, and core teaching components, bureaucracy doesn't get in the way much. These mandates of the food education law have sparked an amplified degree of creativity and dedication by cooking staff. Menus tout their varied, seasonal, and specialized items reflecting local products and traditions. Regional and national lunch competitions are popular. Schools compete for titles like “Most Delicious School Lunch” or “School Lunch That Best Uses Local Ingredients.” A delicious school lunch has become a local and regional hallmark of pride. Magazines flourish, cookbooks are published, and the industry continues to develop. Students are learning about food and food culture in new and improved ways, including testing on nutrition and food culture, as well as homework assignments that include food education components. Sometimes, students are challenged to design a calorically and nutritionally balanced meal to be served at school. A few times a year, students have the opportunity to eat something that they helped design, encouraging a sense of ownership and interest. There is a tangible excitement in the air when they get to taste their efforts.

In addition to the quality of ingredients and planning, there is a service component to school lunch implementation: mealtime student participation. Beginning in first grade, students are expected to participate in the daily lunch distribution process. The following description is based on my observations of student participation in school lunch at various schools. At the start of the lunch hour, rotating student captains transport food from the preparation room to their classrooms. Lifting heavy loads of soup and bins of rice is an arduous task—especially if your classroom is located on the third floor. Although assisted by teachers and aides in the lower grade levels, by the time students are fourth- and fifth-graders, they are responsible for successful conveyance with little-to-no oversight. Meanwhile, the remaining classmates prepare the room and themselves for the lunch hour, including



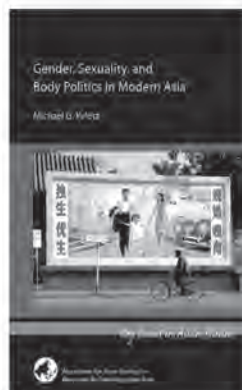
The young students carry their lunch from the kitchen to their classroom. Heavier items, like dishes and pots of food, are also delivered by the children on carts. © 2013 Atsuko Quirk

Regional and national lunch competitions are popular. Schools compete for titles like “Most Delicious School Lunch” or “School Lunch That Best Uses Local Ingredients.”

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The classroom desks are arranged for lunch by the children to seat groups of four to six. Each child brings their own chopsticks, placemat, hair cap, smock, toothbrush, and cup to use when they brush their teeth after lunch. The teacher brushes his teeth along with the children.

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Brushing teeth at table, then rinse at the sink

After lunch, the children brush their teeth with their teacher.

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2nd grader's hallway

After lunch, the children work in teams to clean the classroom and hall. The children also break down their paper milk cartons into a flat piece. The flattened cartons are then washed, dried, and bagged for recycling.

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moving desks, washing hands, and setting up equipment as needed. Similar to the transport and distribution component, after a certain period of time, students are expected to fulfill these daily rituals with no assistance. Meanwhile, the lunch captains have returned to the classroom and begun to distribute the food to their fellow classmates. Through these regular exercises, rotating lunch captains learn hand-eye coordination, portion size, and judgment, to name a few. Once all students are served, a word of gratitude begins and ends the meal, followed by a rigorous cleanup. These daily exercises teach the importance and appreciation of labor and effort in everyday lives. Additionally, students learn practical skills such as sweeping, cleaning, and serving. Mealtime habits such as washing hands, brushing teeth, using chopsticks, and even what order to eat the dishes have become elements of the ritual and habit. Through repetition, these exercises teach responsibility, respect, and maturity.

While the government gives nutritionists and schools considerable freedom, the students themselves live within the confines of a limited culinary world. When it comes to lunch, there are usually few to no options—no menu A, menu B, menu C. For the most part, staff and students alike eat the same lunch and are expected to entirely finish their meals. The constraint on individual choice is both the beauty and curse of Japanese school lunch. Students with food allergies are typically provided with the same meal as everyone else, but with the exclusion of the allergen component or the entire dish in which the allergen is present. A bright spot in this regard are school lunch centers, which prepare and distribute en masse. Operating in large quantities, school lunch centers are able to develop lunches for children with allergies more easily than a small-scale operation. Alternatively, depending on the school and the severity of the allergies, children might bring their own lunch from home instead. The system in regards to children with allergies or other dietary restrictions is still very much a work in progress and one guided by traditional washoku meal structure and ingredients.

Despite these stumbling blocks, thus far, *kyūshoku's* success lies in uniformity. By preparing the same dish for everyone, nutritionists and cooks are able to operate with speed, frugality, and efficiency, all the while maintaining astonishing food quality. Yet, as the numbers of those with dietary restrictions increase, change must surely come.

Despite the challenges, these meals are more socially important than ever. Hot, homemade, and satisfying, they have come to represent stability, comfort, and care. As adults rely more and more on precooked options at the convenience stores, restaurants, or supermarkets, *kyūshoku* may be the closest thing to home-style cooking some young people may know in their childhoods. These meals also serve the same function they always have to ensure a certain degree of equal opportunity. By having lunch regularly provided, albeit with a nominal

fee, students are guaranteed at least one nutritious meal a day. Everyone, no matter their background, has an equal footing at schools, receiving the

By cooking kyūshoku-inspired meals at home, parents know that their creations are balanced, appropriate, and, most importantly, delicious.

same treatment by eating the same meal. As most everyone partakes of a school meal, there is no associated stigma of eating the provided meal, which in countries like the United States can sometimes be seen as “uncool” or embarrassing for students.⁷ Indeed, despite the image of middle-class splendor, the reality is that some Japanese live at or below the poverty line, calculated in 2015 at 16 percent. That translates to roughly one in six children.⁸ This level of poverty impacts kyūshoku as well: many families find it hard to afford the school lunch fees. Teachers and administrators are also troubled by this trend, as local municipalities increasingly foot the bill. As such, the funding model of school lunch, whether it is funded by parent, town, or state, is a matter of debate with no resolution in sight.⁹

Despite these issues, the school lunch system and the staff that support it remain resilient in the face of adversity and are an inspiring international model. There is no better example of its dexterity than during the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami in March 2011. Despite broken equipment, limited and irregular food supply, and a lack of the most basic of supplies, many school lunch programs rallied and became a beacon of hope for the community. A warm meal—even as simple as hot rice and miso soup—was a sign of recovery. Some programs, such as in Minamisōma in Fukushima Prefecture, were able to provide a bare-bones ration lunch a little over a month after the disaster, improving menu items week after week. With food lines disrupted, equipment and facilities damaged, and many living off humanitarian foodstuffs, the ingenuity, spirit, and dedication of school lunch staff and the community to the reinstatement of school lunches was proof that the region could overcome adversity. School lunch in Japan continues to lead the way through disaster preparedness and training, tackling challenges that might flummox many school lunch professionals elsewhere around the world.

On a personal level, the legacy and impact of kyūshoku lives on beyond the classroom as children become adults. It is not forgotten or relegated to the memories of childhood. Nostalgia and pop culture keep kyūshoku very much alive in everyday society. There are restaurants and bars that feature school lunch-themed meals and drinks. School lunch-themed merchandise is bought and enjoyed by adults. Most recently, there has been a very popular Japanese drama on the subject. There are even cookbooks about Japanese school lunch. Indeed, the meals are by no means “kiddie” food. Meals produced during the past two decades in particular are just as delicious and nuanced in flavor and structure for adults as they are for children. By cooking kyūshoku-inspired meals at home, parents know that their creations are balanced, appropriate, and, most importantly, delicious. They are continuing a legacy.

Kyūshoku is an ever-shifting and complex program, borrowing from the past, adapting to the times, and continuing to innovate its systems, models, and flavors. For students, school lunch provides the means by which to connect the home to the nation. For outside observers, it is a system both uniquely Japanese and a model prime for international expansion and growth. What will be the next phase of lunch? It's difficult to say. Whatever it is, it will most likely be delicious. ■

NOTES

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