

School Meals on the Menu

Studies on the Practices of Children's Catering

ANIKÓ BÁTI* 

Institute of Ethnology, HUN-REN Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungary

Received: October 3, 2023 • Accepted: November 27, 2023

Published online: February 12, 2024

© 2023 The Author(s)



Meals outside the home take place in a different setting than usual. Often, there is no choice, and the menu might not consist of our favorite dishes, or the flavoring, serving, time and way of eating, or even the group of co-diners are unusual for us. Together and separately, these factors can affect how people experience their meals: whether they leave feeling satiated and content, or hungry and frustrated. The memories of these impressions, tastes, and smells can leave a mark in the deepest layers of memory. These memories work even when we do not think about them. Basically, in the long term, they can determine the consumer's opinion of food. In fact: their taste, their stance, even their attitude to the form of the meal. This is how, for example, old experiences of school meals can influence people in adulthood when assessing the canteen as a parent.

In Hungarian ethnography and historiography, meals outside the home are most often approached and described in relation to travel, hospitality, and work. However, there is not much Hungarian literature with a social science focus on certain forms of public catering (alimentation of soldiers, prisoners, hospital in-patients; the eating habits of seasonal agricultural workers, factory workers; children's catering). Kindergarten and school catering is primarily one of the disciplines of life and nutrition sciences. These almost exclusively address the issue from the perspective of healthy eating and quality assurance. Research on the needs of consumers has been mainly carried out by sociologists, with relatively few analyses focusing on the relationship between diners and food. This kind of approach has received little attention to date, apart from research on the physical properties or physiological effects of food.

Meals are at the heart of ethnographic research on food culture. Meals are the organizational element around which individual food items are arranged on a daily, weekly, or yearly basis. This is where — with or without seating arrangements, using a specific material culture, and accompanied by habitual acts — they emerge in everyday and festive settings to transform eating as a biological need into alimentation as a cultural feature through customary systems. This

* Corresponding author. E-mail: bati.aniko@abtk.hu

The article type and the CC license were incorrectly published in the early access version of this article. In this version the mistakes are corrected.

complex set of criteria is the most comprehensive way of looking at all meals (including those provided by the public catering system).

In 2018, researchers from the Institute of Ethnology of the HUN-REN Research Centre for the Humanities and the staff of the National Institute of Pharmacy and Nutrition, led by Anikó Báti, set out to explore children's public catering from the consumer perspective. An interdisciplinary research team of ethnographers and dietitians has been formed in the framework of the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund of Hungary project called *The Social Embeddedness of Children's Public Catering. Issues and Opportunities* (project no. 129825 K-18). This form of professional collaboration — the examination of the topic with an ethnographic focus — is still relatively new in Hungary, but it is already an established practice in Northern and Western Europe and can greatly facilitate the combined application of the findings of social and life sciences (MORGAN – SONNINO 2007, 2008; MATALAS et al. 2012; MIKKELSEN 2013; HART 2016). The collaboration was a series of learning opportunities for the participants: the harmonization of the approaches and methodologies of ethnography/humanities and dietetics/nutrition science was a mutually exciting and edifying process.

The key aim of the research was to highlight the aspects of the public catering system that have to date received less emphasis, enjoyed little to no awareness, and were therefore not included in official investigations either. Among other things, they directed our attention to this to emphasize the role of the canteen in schools, and also to map the family food culture of the children, learn about the relevant views and experiences of all those involved in public catering, and the operating mechanisms and conditions of public catering in the selected sites.

Eating habits within the home — from the point of view of public catering — have not yet been the subject of real research and have so far been mostly presented in stereotypical explanations of the perception of canteens. Through different methods of research and interpretation, the results that emerged from the collaboration between researchers from the two disciplines paint a complex picture of children's public catering in the settlements studied. The extensive database built from over five years of research documents a specific slice of Hungarian food culture in nine settlements: the eating habits of today's school-age children and their families, their perceptions of healthy eating, and their food purchasing practices.

At the beginning of the research, the experts could not have foreseen how the image of public catering would eventually be associated with a significant and special period. Their work and conclusions were decisively periodized and structured by the management of the state of emergency caused by Covid and the subsequent recovery. The pandemic affected the research as a whole. But the extraordinary nature of the situation also provided them with a special opportunity. The emerging picture of canteens is a snapshot, yet it is far from static. They were able to compare the situation as assessed before spring 2020 with the measures taken during the state of emergency as well as the consolidation period, when the impact of food price inflation was already being felt. The data is therefore also very valuable for the functioning and changes in nutrition, social care, and public catering.

The questions and insights of the investigation revealed elements in the local practices of institutions, schools, canteens, and sometimes municipalities that have fundamentally determined the success and acceptance of canteens. It was clear, for example, that the design, layout, and furnishings of the lunchroom can be an even stronger determinant than the food itself. And so is whether there is enough time for consuming the food. What emerged was that consumer expectations of food include mainly the following: choice, variety, relatively large portions, and



well-seasoned food. To their surprise, the researchers also found that in all the locations surveyed, overall, children who eat there have a much better opinion of the canteen than their parents, who have little direct information and experience of it.

In their feedback, many were struck by the quantitative data from the study material, which objectively showed the strong, long-term, and fundamental influence of the family environment and parental patterns on children's tastes and eating habits. The results proved that teachers and kitchen staff play a major role in the success or failure of canteens. Once the work has been summarized and organized, their experience can be utilized in day-to-day practice. Their use can be first implemented at the local level, for which several examples can be cited already. The investigation may also influence the most comprehensive, national framework for the operation of canteens: the recommendations have been submitted to the authorities working on the amendment¹ of the Decree on nutrition and health regulations for public catering.

A number of professional nutrition forums have already been organized to discuss the state of public catering. The research outlined here sought to continue and, indeed, through an exciting diversity of participants and perspectives, even renew the series of discussions with an interdisciplinary conference, *The Social Embeddedness of Children's Public Catering*.² The broad view of the presentation of public catering and canteens and the broad spectrum of it that emerged in the conference presentations is a novelty in Hungarian academic discourse. The range of invited speakers also represented the diversity of the research and its various connections. The conference featured knowledge-sharing and dialogue between ethnographers, dietitians, heads of nutrition authorities and professional organizations, historians, anthropologists, economists, food managers, food bloggers, food designers, and ceramic designers.³ The current thematic issue of *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* is a selected collection of these studies.⁴ The presentations that are included in this thematic issue will be only briefly discussed here, as seen in the table of contents, but it is also instructive to review the full range of presentations of the two-day event.

In the opening presentations, representatives of the nutrition and health authorities that oversee the public catering system, the National Center for Public Health and Pharmacy, Chief Administrative Officer Richárd Schmidt and Department Head Dávid Tóth spoke about the objectives of their inspections, among other things, in addition to interpreting the legal framework: the most important being the monitoring of compliance with the decree on Public Catering,⁵ and controlling the factors that affect the quality and sustainability of public catering, such as kitchen equipment and the quality of raw materials used.

Dietitian *Erika Greiner*,⁶ a member of the research team, presented a summary of the official work supporting the operation of children's public catering, developments in the field, and their

¹37/2014 (IV. 30.) EMMI decree.

²The conference was held on June 21–22, 2022 in Budapest, at the Research Centre for the Humanities.

³The entire material of the presentations is available on the YouTube channel of the Research Centre for the Humanities at the following link: https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLO4IEQZa_8XNfcm5BvkPvzDr9vU-koszW (accessed June 21, 2023). The materials of the presentations are published in a separate volume by the cooperating partners (see *BÁTI* 2023).

⁴The authors' names are in italics.

⁵37/2014 (IV. 30.) EMMI decree.

⁶OGYÉI (National Institute of Pharmacy and Nutrition), chief scientist.



historical background. Ethnographer and lead researcher *Anikó Báti*⁷ presented their fieldwork methods, the course of the work in the primary schools involved, the challenges associated with contemporary research, the first results of the data analysis, as well as the ethical issues of their usability. Afterwards, the members of the research team reviewed the results of their joint work in a roundtable discussion.

From the humanities and social sciences, historian *Laura Umbrai*⁸ presented her pioneering research on the history of folk kitchens in the Hungarian capital, Budapest. Social historian *Tibor Valuch*,⁹ focusing the history of consumption in the second half of the 20th century on eating habits and public catering, pointed out that, in parallel with changes in lifestyle, along with workplace catering, children's catering also became generally accepted at the time. The state became the key player in the functioning of the system that had just been established. The political regime change in 1989, however, brought with it the dismantling of the corporate catering system and the market-based reorganization of public catering, while the latter still retained its role as a social welfare provider. "Children should have at least one warm meal" — opined one of the informants. *Tibor Valuch* looked at the integration of public catering into everyday life in Hungary in four major time segments of food culture in the context of social change. During World War II, in the few years after the war, and then in the Rákosi era, food security was a huge challenge for families. From the 1960s onwards, new social tensions were also triggered by the entry of women into the workforce, the emergence of the two-earner family model, the decline of self-reliance, as well as collectivization. By the 1980s, the food supply had become balanced and stable. This meant that fewer people were at risk of starvation, while ill health caused by overeating also emerged, affecting a wider range of age groups. Since the regime change, the picture has become even more polarized: society has also become segmented in terms of eating habits. Ethnographer *Réka Vira Nickel*¹⁰ presents the history of the canteen from the mid-20th century to the present day, based on archival data and fieldwork — mainly using examples from Northern Hungary.

Cultural anthropologist *Gábor Kapitány* analyzed the symbology of food, the symbolic meanings and dichotomies associated with them.¹¹ The presentation of ethnographer *Katalin Juhász*¹² outlined the act of eating as a ritual, citing school practices as examples, while her present study compares the role of rural, municipal, and urban child catering practices within the community, based on their role in the daily life of newcomers and long-term residents. Ethnographer *János Bali*¹³ analyzed the impact of the patterns of mass culture on public catering. Economist *Katalin Kelemen*¹⁴ examined the supply and demand issues of the canteen as a market.

⁷BTK NTI (Institute of Ethnology, HUN-REN Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungary), senior research fellow.

⁸BTK TTI (Institute of History, HUN-REN Research Centre for Humanities, Hungary), research fellow.

⁹EKKE TT (Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Eszterházy Károly Catholic University, Hungary).

¹⁰BTK NTI (Institute of Ethnology, HUN-REN Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungary), research fellow.

¹¹MOME (Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, Hungary).

¹²BTK NTI (Institute of Ethnology, HUN-REN Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungary), senior research fellow.

¹³ELTE BTK/NSKI (Faculty of Humanities, Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary/Research Institute for National Strategy, Hungary).

¹⁴ELTE ÁJK (Faculty of Law, Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary).



Dean and college professor Andrea Lugasi¹⁵ pointed out the links between hospitality and public catering. She analyzed changes in the number of commercial food service and public catering establishments and their regional distribution on the common platform of the legal framework. After an overview of the historical roots and specific image of Hungarian cuisine, she discussed innovations in cooking techniques and technology as well as recipes. She pointed out that these really come to the fore in regularly organized cooking competitions. She concluded her presentation — as a summary and a kind of message — with a quote from the internationally renowned master chef, Károly Gundel, from 1934: “Verily I say: a perfectly prepared, simple, basic dish can rise to artistic heights, like a veal ragout or mutton stew, and even a *foie gras pâté* made with the finest ingredients can turn out particularly bad. Good food has no upward or downward value limit. After all, it’s not always the food. It’s also how we serve it, how we put it on the table; but above all, it’s how we prepare it — even if it is with the simplest ingredients. With love, with pleasure, with heart, or just to have it: out of necessity.”

Foodservice managers and dietitians are key in the success of public catering. Their training and work were featured in two presentations by college professors *Éva Csajbókné Csobod* and *Katalin Tátrai-Németh*.¹⁶ Three practicing foodservice managers, Katalin Vigné Sági, Andrea Péntzes, and György Ambrus were invited guests of the conference. All three have several decades of experience in the field of child catering and an overview of the profession as a whole as they hold important positions at the head of professional organizations.¹⁷ In the framework of the conference, in a roundtable discussion, they shared their personal experiences, successes in everyday life, the difficulties they have experienced, and the problems they had to solve.

Gastro blogger Zsófia Mautner highlighted the opinion-shaping role of the media in public catering and healthy eating. She proposed topics for consideration that take into account the children’s perspective and that can stimulate joint thinking among caterers, researchers, relevant authorities, and the media. Her starting point was the experience that the media (such as television cooking shows) now play a crucial role in shaping young people’s perceptions of food and eating. Building on the term “culinary intelligence/culinary receptivity,” she also outlined the role and responsibility of parents in how open and amenable students are in terms of nutrition. She stressed that the development of culinary competence should be part of the school curriculum and should be given a prominent place in canteen projects. There is also a great need for authentic transmission of information about the origin of food, which could be provided by media personalities popular with young people. Food is more than just meeting biological needs. The media can also provide students with good examples of meaningful ways of communicating about food around the dinner table. Zsófia Mautner also highlighted the personal development potential of cooking occasions (community building, learning, creation, experiencing success). She pointed out that the values conveyed by the media can be misleading in the absence of proper background information. In addition to the media, it is the role of caterers, and more broadly adults, to help the younger generations make optimal dietary choices by providing good examples and good practices related to sustainable gastronomy.

¹⁵BGE KVIK (Faculty of Commerce, Hospitality and Tourism, Budapest Business University, Hungary), dean.

¹⁶SOTE AEI (Department of Dietetics and Nutrition, Faculty of Health Sciences, Semmelweis University, Hungary).

¹⁷National Association of Food Service Managers, National Association of Public Caterers and Food Service Managers, National Association of Hungarian Dietitians, Hungarian National Association of Gastronomy.





Fig. 1. Detail from the exhibition panels (Photo by Noémi Szurok, Hungarian Museum of Trade and Tourism, 2023)

The young and talented ceramic designer Zsuzsanna Sinkovits¹⁸ presented the steps of creating a canteen tableware of her design to the conference participants. The aim of her work was to build on the experience of her fieldwork to renew the physical environment of the canteen and to support children’s meals in a more relaxed atmosphere with a set of objects that fit in well with everyday practice. This is how she created the *Kidware Cantine Set*, which meets the needs of 21st-century children in terms of material, appearance, and form, but also the expectations of caterers.

Food designer Angéla Góg presented a possible way of preserving food memories in the framework of the *Table of the Future* project.¹⁹ Finally, Anna Zoltai, president of a professional organization of public caterers, reviewed the role and professional importance of the public catering chef competition.

For all of them, the different perspectives on school catering brought new ideas, and it was clear that they also wanted and planned further professional cooperation for a “cool canteen of the future.” Incidentally, this was the title of the drawing competition that the research team launched in conjunction with the program. Around fifty primary school children communicated through their drawings and creations what kind of canteen they would like to see in the future.

¹⁸MOME (Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, Hungary). See: <https://www.zsuzsannasinkovits.com/kidware-cantine-set>, accessed February 10, 2023.

¹⁹MOME (Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, Hungary). See: Góg 2018, 2020.





Fig. 2. Detail from the exhibition installation, serving counter (Photo by Noémi Szurok, Hungarian Museum of Trade and Tourism, 2023)

The conference attracted media interest and the project also entered professional public discourse. To the researchers' delight, this has also led to more experts joining them. Their studies have further expanded the circle of "canteen researchers." Sociologist *Ildikó Husz*²⁰ wrote about the possibilities and social significance of children's catering during school holidays, while *Anna Kiss*²¹ and her fellow researchers analyzed the content of the food service managers' roundtable discussion at the conference. In their study, they highlighted the nodes and networks emerging in the child catering system, as well as the problems still to be solved.

Nutrition and social science researchers are concerned with the day-to-day functioning of school catering in many countries in Europe. Polish sociologist and anthropologist Zofi Boni studied the food and catering of children in Warsaw. In many ways, she came to similar conclusions about families and school meals as our research team did. A review of her book

²⁰TTK (HUN-REN Centre for Social Science, Hungary).

²¹ELTE PPK (Faculty of Education and Psychology, Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary).





Fig. 3. Detail from the exhibition installation, folk kitchen (Photo by Anikó Báti, Institute of Ethnology, HUN-REN Research Centre for the Humanities, 2023)

is now published in this thematic issue. In addition, in 2022, a three-day conference was held in Bergen,²² Norway, where the topic of school catering was discussed with an ethnographic focus. Our research team successfully participated in the event. We have established a close professional relationship with several colleagues. Two of them have published their work here: A study by Hillevi Prell and co-author Cecilia Magnusson Sporre, from the Department of Food and Nutrition and Sports Science, University of Gothenburg, looks at free school meals in Sweden over a century. The aim of the study was to explore the food and taste memories associated with school meals and the *social food heritage of school meals* in a sample of Swedish adults. Another colleague, Gurpinder Singh Lalli, a UK-based sociologist and ethnographer has researched the school meals service with a focus on inequity in education. In this thematic issue, we review his recently published book, *Schools, Space and Culinary Capital* in which he summarizes his recent findings on the role of children's meals and the socialization of children in school life.

²²Conference on School Meals. Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, Bergen, June 8–10, 2022. See: <https://www.hvl.no/en/research/conference/conference-on-school-meals/>, accessed September 10, 2023.



To share knowledge and raise awareness of the importance of canteens, we have also created a temporary, interactive thematic exhibition with the Hungarian Museum of Trade and Tourism: *Menzán innen – menzán túl. Titkok, tények, távlatok a gyermek közétkeztetésben* [Canteens and Beyond. Secrets, Facts, and Perspectives in Children's Public Catering] (Figs 1–3). In addition to the research work, the general public can also get a glimpse into the nitty-gritty of how public catering works today through a range of photos and descriptions as well as figures. The exhibition presents the history of public catering, reaching back to its beginnings, illustrating the catering system of each era with period photographs, objects, as well as film footage.

The research project and its publications, including this thematic issue, aim to present the public catering sector — which affects the nutrition of 1.5 million people every day in Hungary — and the details of its operation from a perspective that can facilitate better understanding and communication between its participants. And building on these, to feed the research findings back to the communities studied, in order to help develop local solutions. With this project, the work has only just begun, and there are still many questions to be answered, which also hold further opportunities for ethnographic food culture research. Their social use, however, makes the fresh results and new aspects of research tangible in the present. It can inspire a rethinking of the system at different organizational levels, inspiring all those involved in its regulation and operation — for a sustainable public catering service accepted by the community.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The research team's work was undertaken in the framework of the National Research, Development and Innovation Office grant 128925 K-18.

REFERENCES

- BÁTI, Anikó (ed.)
2023 *Menzadimenziók* [Canteen Dimensions]. Néprajztudományi könyvtár 2. Budapest: Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont, Néprajztudományi Intézet. DOI: [10.61380/978-963-567-072-7](https://doi.org/10.61380/978-963-567-072-7).
- GÓG, Angéla
2018 *A jövő íze* [The Taste of the Future]. (A study carried out under a grant from the New National Excellence Program, manuscript.) Budapest: MOME.
2020 *Az emlék íze* [The Taste of Memory]. PhD dissertation. Manuscript. Budapest: MOME Doktori Iskola.
- HART, Caroline Sarojini
2016 The School Food Plan and the Social Context of Food in Schools. *Cambridge Journal of Education* 46(2):211–231. DOI: [10.1080/0305764X.2016.1158783](https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2016.1158783).
- MATALAS, Antonia-Leda – LAZAROU, Chrystalleni – B. PANAGIOTAKOS, Demosthenes
2012 Meal Habits of Schoolchildren. Associations with Socio-Economic Factors. In LYSAGHT, Patricia (ed.) *Time for Food. Everyday Food and Changing Meal Habits in Global Perspective*, 237–245. Abo: Abo Akademi University Press.



MIKKELSEN, Bent Egbert

- 2013 Can Healthy Eating at School be Considered a Human Right? In RÖCKLINSBERG, Helena – SANDIN, Per (eds.) *The Ethics of Consumption. The Citizen, the Market and the Law*, 412–415. Wageningen: Wageningen Academic Publishers.

MORGAN, Kevin – SONNINO, Roberta

- 2007 Empowering Consumers. The Creative Production of School Meals in Italy and UK. *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 31(1):19–25.
- 2008 *The School Food Revolution. Public Food and the Challenge of Sustainable Development*. London: Routledge.

Open Access statement. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited, a link to the CC License is provided, and changes – if any – are indicated. (SID_1)

