

Urban and Rural Attitudes toward School Food

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Received: January 30, 2023 • Accepted: March 8, 2023

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ABSTRACT

In the social sciences, it is a classic practice to contrast the development of the countryside and the city as two endpoints of a chain. However, since the beginning of the 21st century, the validity of the rural-urban dichotomy has been increasingly questioned, and we are now talking about two interconnected and complementary systems instead. In examining contemporary school meals, we ourselves observed this close and varied pattern of intertwining between the city and the countryside. Therefore, we believe it is useful to identify rural and urban features in contemporary public catering practices, and to outline mixed models that can be placed between the two endpoints in space and time. All of this can be edifying because urbanized foodways, following current food health and gastronomic trends, sustainability, climate and environmental protection requirements, as well as social considerations, return from time to time to the old village farming practices and foodways in various ways, and utilize knowledge related to traditional farming. Illustrated with specific examples, the study outlines three types of school catering models, from the oldest practice called “rural” to the “urban” (urbanized) type. A comparison of these types of public catering practices reveals the problems observed in today’s public catering.

KEYWORDS

school canteens, school food, Hungarian rural and urban culture and lifestyle, generational differences

“In the old days, even the lunch ladies were fatter / In the old days, even the poppy seed bread pudding had more poppy seeds, / In the old days, bombshells were atomic / In the old days, even the salt was saltier, the sugar sweeter, the paprika spicier...”¹ Our contemporary Hungarian

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¹János Lackfi: *Bezzeg*. Facebook post, November 26, 2019. <https://m.facebook.com/lackfi/photos/bezzegbezzeg-r%C3%A9gen-a-konyh%C3%A1s-n%C3%A9nik-is-k%C3%B6v%C3%A9rbek-voltakbezzeg-r%C3%A9gen-a-m%C3%A1kos-guba/2366250053503137/>, accessed May 22, 2023.

poet, János Lackfi recalls the atmosphere and flavors of his childhood school lunches with comic nostalgia. The picture he paints evokes a familial canteen milieu, which is today largely limited to smaller settlements, but due to the scientific foundations and state-driven reform of public catering, the old home-style flavors mentioned with nostalgia are often absent.

The SIEF's 23rd International Ethnological Food Research Conference — *Food, People and the City. Comparative Perspectives* — created a good opportunity for us as contemporary ethnographers to raise some questions along the comparative aspects of rural and urban, past and present, within the framework of an interdisciplinary research project of the Institute of Ethnography of the Research Centre for the Humanities and the Hungarian Institute of Pharmacy and Nutrition [*Országos Gyógyszerészeti és Élelmezés-egészségügyi Intézet (OGYÉI)*] on school catering, called “The Social Embeddedness of the Public Catering of Children: Issues and Opportunities.”²

The food challenges of the globally dynamically growing urban population are an ever-increasing problem, which has attracted the interest of food culture researchers. The basic foodstuffs provided by agriculture and the processed products of the food industry, as well as the ready-to-eat meals offered by various types of catering establishments are essential for the survival of cities. City dwellers gain access to these raw materials and processed foods through the complex chain of economy, trade, hospitality, and many of them through the (social) service of public catering. Thus, not only do most of them have no direct connection with agriculture, they also have almost no knowledge of crops and animals, their care, or processing. With the global upsurge of urbanization and modernization, all of this can now be said not only of the inhabitants of big cities but also of other smaller types of settlements (urban agglomerations, small towns, villages), especially of the younger generations, including those of school age. Most of the latter eat on weekdays in school canteens, which is a common practice in Hungary.

The institutional system of school meals, still thriving to this day, developed in the 1950s and 60s (the first decades of socialism), alongside the mass (often forced) employment of women. This was not only a necessary measure, or process, it also ensured state control over children's everyday food intake (which has since become more and more complex). This control primarily means ensuring sufficient and “healthy” nutrition in accordance with the health and dietetic guidelines of the given era, through official public health regulation, in line with financing standards defined through legislation (VÁRKONYI-NICKEL et al. 2019:129–135).

Although social and historical sciences, along with ethnography, study and analyze the phenomena related to the urbanization of the countryside and various areas of everyday life in the city from many different perspectives, interestingly, these investigations do not even mention school meals, which have been a fundamental part of the everyday life of children past and present. In this paper, after clarifying some basic theoretical cornerstones, I will provide concrete examples of the three types of public catering, taken mainly from the sites of our previously mentioned research project.

²NKFIH-128925 K-18 supported by the National Research, Development, and Innovation Fund of Hungary. For more information on the research, see Anikó Bati's study in this volume, as well as BATI 2019, 2020. The study discusses the issues raised in my presentation at the conference.



URBANIZATION, CITY, AND COUNTRY FROM THE SOCIAL SCIENCES PERSPECTIVE

In Hungary, forced urbanization was part of the socialist-communist ideology of the decades following the communist regime change in 1948, that is, the effort to bring the peasantry closer to the lifestyle of urban workers in all respects.³

The complicated phenomenon of urbanization, which has otherwise become a global socio-cultural process, can be broken down into two closely interrelated components. One is the influx of peasants to cities, the other is the development of the physical framework of urban existence, the organization of the values, norms, behavioral patterns, etc. indicated by the concept of “urban culture” into a system in villages. These provincial settlements contain a mix of rural-urban characteristics in a variety of patterns in terms of their built environment, their economy, and the lifeworld of their inhabitants (cf. FEJŐS – NIEDERMÜLLER 1983). All of this resulted in countless versions of transitional and mixed sociocultural lifeworld types, in which elements determined by different historical forces are present at the same time. This condition, called “parallel non-synchronism” after Bloch and Bausinger, may contain elements other than those corresponding to certain stages of the process toward modernization. In the last few decades, due to the prominence and appreciation of sustainability, ecological approaches, and tangible and intangible “heritage,” and as a result of a conscious return to the knowledge of previous eras, there is a kind of parallel (different than the previous one), even “complex” non-synchronicity that can be partly linked to glocalization processes.⁴ Hungarian ethnography distinguishes three main stages of cultural change: premodern ~ “rural, local;” modern ~ pre-millennial “urban;” and post-millennial, late-modern, or post-modern cultural strata with ~ “Western European metropolitan” values (LAJOS 2009). In relation to food systems, researchers have described a similar development process and stages.⁵

A classic practice in the social sciences is the juxtaposition of the countryside and the city, which is often accompanied by the concept of the rural-urban continuum, according to which the relationship between the two is hierarchical and can be represented as a progression. In this evolutionist approach, the village “community” embodies the old and traditional, while the urban “society” embodies the new and modern qualities (TÖNNIES 1983:9; REDFIELD 1947:293–294). From the beginning of the 21st century, the validity of the rural-urban dichotomy has been increasingly questioned. Unlike before, certain parts of urban and rural spaces are distinguished according to the extent and form of their connection to urban networks (cf. MORMONT 1987:17). That is, rural and urban are not separated, they are by no means in opposition, but rather complement each other. According to Mormont’s interpretation, despite the differences in the attributes of the rural and the urban, the two are interconnected, so that neither can be interpreted without taking the other into account (MORMONT 1987).

³On socialist urbanization in general, see ENYEDI 1989; DANGLOVÁ et al. 2003. On the first socialist city, Sztálinváros (Stalin City): HORVÁTH 2004, 2005; PITTAWAY 2005.

⁴BAUSINGER 1989:25. Using the example of Moldavian Csangos, Veronika Lajos speaks specifically of a “complex” non-synchronicity, highlighting the multiple layers of the structure of culture, the simultaneous accumulation of cultural systems identified with different socio-historical times (LAJOS 2009:163–166).

⁵Cf. GIDDENS 1990; MAXWELL – SLATER 2003; SPAARGAREN et al. 2012.



During our examination of contemporary school meals, we ourselves experienced this close and varied pattern of intertwining between “the urban” and “the rural.” At the same time, even taking all of this into account, we consider it useful to compare the rural and the urban, or rather to identify rural and urban features from the point of view of food service, and to outline mixed models that can be placed between the two endpoints in space and time. As we have already noted, these models do not characterize individual stages of a chronological historical development, although they do have a historical dimension. Urbanized food service practices — following current food safety and gastronomic trends, sustainability, ecology, climate, and environmental protection requirements, as well as social considerations — return from time to time to the old rural farming and food practices in various ways, and make use of the knowledge related to traditional farming.

FOOD SYSTEMS AND TYPES OF CATERING

Economic, sociological, and agricultural studies describe the transformation of food systems as a process that goes from “traditional” through conventional, industry-driven, “long food supply chain” to the alternative food network (including short food supply chain).⁶ From the ethnographic perspective, we distinguish the archaic “traditional” (rural, pre-modern), self-sufficient peasant economy and lifestyle, as well as the modern and post-modern⁷ urban lifestyle, which can be paralleled with the aforementioned food systems. These systems tend to show signs of the already mentioned parallel and complex non-synchronicity as well. This is particularly true for the development of the 21st-century form of the food system, which can be linked to two main buzzwords that stand in partial opposition: globalization and sustainable development. On the one hand, the process of globalization is intertwined with the so-called long food chain striving for monopoly, which takes food production and consumption out of its geographical and social embeddedness (GIDDENS 1990). As a result, shopping centers and multinational discount food stores offer an unprecedented selection of the global food industry at cheap prices, and a fairly large proportion of the Hungarian population can only afford these products. On the other hand, the demand to re-socialize and re-spatialize food procurement and consumption is constantly growing in an ever-wider circle of society. The COVID-19 pandemic has focused even more attention on locally available, locally produced foods (NEMES et al. 2020). Actors in the food sector have also recognized that both food production and food consumption (trade, transport) must become sustainable (SPAARGAREN et al. 2012).

The three food systems also partially influence the public catering system — in a given place and time. Statutory, public health, and food safety regulations affect both areas, but public catering is subject to an ever-increasing health and social policy control even within this. Below, I will illustrate with specific examples the three types of school catering models, from the oldest

⁶For more, see MARSDEN et al. 2000; MAXWELL – SLATER 2003; RENTING et al. 2003; INZSÓL 2022.

⁷“Postmodernism is not another stage of the modern age because it does not emphasize the negation, transcendence, or overbidding of the previous one, but is based on a completely different historical consciousness. It accepts modernity, but only as one of the possibilities. It does not reject the results of modernization, it does not tear down its objectifications, but includes these among its values and experiences, or reinterprets and utilizes them” (FARAGÓ 1991:6).



practice called “rural” to the “urban” (urbanized) type. By comparing these three types of public catering, the problems that can be observed in today’s public catering become clear.

RURAL TYPE PUBLIC CATERING

The so-called “rural” public catering system is not necessarily found only in smaller settlements, but in some of its basic features it evokes the rural (pre-modern) self-sufficient economy of earlier periods, as well as communal, family-style food preparation and eating habits.

In Hungary, from 1949, as part of the socialist social policy measures (as a significant interference in the private sector), and with the two-earner family model becoming commonplace, the day-to-day care of children (according to the Soviet model) was partially provided by the state: their meals were already arranged in kindergartens and schools, and made available to everyone.⁸ This measure fundamentally changed the daily diet and eating habits of the children and their families participating in public catering. After the first food law passed in 1958,⁹ continuously revised central regulations governed both the quantitative and qualitative indicators of child nutrition.¹⁰

At the same time, the urbanization of Hungarian villages was a protracted process, and the central regulation itself was not as well-defined as it is today. Therefore, public catering in rural settlements relied on local traditions in many respects, and over time, the public kitchen became an integral part of the life of the village community. The raw materials were usually obtained from local farmers or the farming cooperative. The food was also prepared in the usual way: apart from the basic spices used at home (salt, pepper, paprika), no other seasoning was used. Some of the cooks working in the kitchen were already considered local culinary experts,¹¹ and continued in this role (Fig. 1). Thus, the person preparing and serving the food was not a stranger but a person well known to the local residents.

Thus, the food is prepared locally, and the cooks who prepare the food are also the servers of the food. This is a very important detail, because cooking can also be interpreted as a kind of interaction, in which the hospitality and the food itself are an expression of love and togetherness, but it can also carry many different messages and symbols (KAPITÁNY – KAPITÁNY 2011). The conditions for all this are better in a smaller settlement than in a city, but this is not a strict requirement. In the case of this model, what the adjective “rural” expresses is that this model is the closest to traditional hospitality and the old community framework, regardless of where the canteen operating according to this principle is located, and around which a small circle of clearly defined local relationships develops. One cannot necessarily call this a community, although there are obviously examples of this, but it certainly implies a social network in which

⁸During the 40 years of socialism, approx. half of the 3–18 age group had used this service regularly, while the others continued to have lunch at home or ate cold food brought from home (BÁTI 2018).

⁹Act 27/1958 on the production and distribution of food and beverages.

¹⁰On the impact of regulations on public catering, see the results of three national surveys by OGYÉI: https://ogyei.gov.hu/orszagos_iskolai_menza_korkep, accessed August 15, 2022.

¹¹There are countless examples of this, for example from Hajdúsámson (<https://www.haon.hu/hajdusamson-hirei/2019/02/vera-neni-hajdusamson-szakacsnenije>, accessed August 15, 2022), Gyomaendrőd (Fig. 1), and one of our research locations, Szarvas.





Fig. 1. Cooks from Gyoma in the school kitchen in the 1960s. It is clear to see that the whole thing looks more like cooking for a wedding than for a canteen. (Family photo archive of Katalin Juhász)

everyone knows the others, at least by sight, and even has additional information on them (e.g., where they live, who their family members are, what they do, etc.). The relationship and symbolic interaction work back and forth: the cooks know who they are cooking for, and the children are fed by someone familiar to them. In such a system of relationships — no matter how loose the community — a kind of direct social control operates. Ergo, bad food has an immediate and clear consequence in the form of direct criticism and negative opinions from close acquaintances. And of course, in the same way, a good opinion can be expressed in many ways as direct feedback. This direct connection enables continuous back-and-forth communication. The person who cooks strives to be a good host so that the person they serve is satisfied and provides as much positive feedback as possible. The consumer also appreciates this and provides feedback. How all this is realized in the contemporary practice of a small town is well illustrated by the example of the school canteen in Érdliget,¹² one of whose employees, the 65-year-old auntie Mrs. József Irma Román, was voted most beloved lunch lady in the country in the competition of the Hungarian Institute of Pharmacy and Nutrition. Mrs. József Román has been in the profession since 1978, during which time she has served 3 generations and knows almost all the students, their parents, and even their grandparents. “Auntie Irmus has been

¹²Érd is a city with county rights in the Budapest agglomeration, the seat of the Érd district, the largest settlement in Pest County (with 70,000 inhabitants in 2021). Érdliget is one of the city’s suburban neighborhoods.



working in the school kitchen for so long that she even served my mother lunch when she attended this school. Both she and I love her very much (...) Auntie Irmus is always kind to us, pays attention to us, asks how we are (...) If someone is hungry, we can always ask for seconds, but she also keeps in mind who dislikes what food” (excerpt from the students’ nomination).

Mrs. Román started as a cook in the kitchen of the school in Érdliget, where she also served lunch. When cooking on site was discontinued, she carried on in the service kitchen. She brings the soup to the tables herself in large bowls, and while she places them on the table, she straightens the bowls, and asks about the children: what’s going on with them, how they like the soup.¹³

An example of the use of local ingredients as well as direct contact and cooperation with producers is the kitchen in the town of Szarvas¹⁴ in Békés County, which serves all the schools and residential social institutions in the town.¹⁵ In their case, it is not only about using local ingredients (50–60% of which are organic!), but also about the fact that the producers themselves (through their own children) know that the raw materials they provide to the canteen will also be consumed by their own children. Thus, relationships are formed at this level, too.

Another very important detail is that in this model, local dishes are also part of the menu. That is, it includes not only dishes prepared according to bureaucratic, top-down regulations and schematic lists of raw materials but also familiar local, “home-style” flavors. Due to increasingly strict regulations, however, this is becoming less and less possible. Thus, in Szarvas, too, it is mainly for the holidays, as well as for school and community events, or when catering for summer campers, that local regional dishes (e.g. mutton stew, fish soup, *kapusznyik* or cabbage dumplings, *szarvasi túrós béles* (cottage cheese puff pastry from Szarvas) are made. Today, it is increasingly rare and only found in very small traditional settlements with their own kitchens that the traditional diet of the settlement can be found on the canteen’s menu. In the first half of the 20th century, not only in rural areas but often in the cities as well, there was a specific order for the meals served on certain days of the week. There were meat days (Tuesday, Thursday) and meatless days (Monday and, for the longest time, Friday), and this order was also upheld in public catering for a long time. In public catering, Wednesdays typically became vegetable stew days, and Fridays were “pasta” days.

Here we must raise the question: why is it important to have local flavors and familiar dishes in the canteen, which are also being prepared and served by a person accepted by the consumers? This is not the space to address the anthropology and semiotics of food and eating in detail, so I only refer to the food classification system outlined by Ágnes and Gábor Kapitány, based on 25 binary opposition aspects, which explains this issue (KAPITÁNY – KAPITÁNY 2011). In short: if a dish is unusual, unfamiliar, foreign, and its maker is unfamiliar, and what’s more, it has to be eaten under conditions that are far from homey (bad smell, unsavory cutlery or presentation, overcrowding, noise), it evokes a feeling of aversion and aloofness in the consumer

¹³According to the online coverage of the *Népszava* newspaper: https://nepszava.hu/1161185_irma-neni-amenzamenedzser, accessed September 13, 2020.

¹⁴Szarvas is a district seat in the agricultural region of Békés County, one of the prominent cultural centers of the Slovak national minority in Hungary. 8% of the 15,000 inhabitants are of Slovak nationality.

¹⁵The kitchen in Szarvas and one of the schools it serves were also one of our research sites.



(which we already know from researches on cleanliness). In the case of the canteen, attention should therefore be paid to all of these (VÁRKONYI-NICKEL *et al.* 2019:138–140).

In several of our research locations (Szarvas, Debrecen, Budapest — in church schools), in addition to the quality of the ingredients, the fact that a kind of community ritual is implemented for school meals also plays a very important role. We have observed that if the conditions are appropriate (regulated, ritualized, but at the same time relaxed, calm, comfortable within the given framework), the children are more likely to finish the same food that is left on the plates in other schools. At the Lutheran school in Szarvas, for example, rations are not distributed but everyone serves themselves, so there are no leftovers, while in the kitchen's central canteens with a tray system a lot of food goes to waste. The children sit at tables in groups of six, and they themselves participate in setting the tables, serving the food, and clearing the tables. Moreover, since it is a church school, they say a prayer before and after the meal, so the meal has an introductory and a closing rite.¹⁶ We observed a similar practice in a Catholic school in Debrecen, which has its own kitchen, and there are also several nicely and functionally furnished lunchrooms available to the children for each age group.

Regarding the “rural” model, we should also mention that, while previously the leftovers were sold as animal feed or utilized on the settlement's own farm, today EU regulations classify all leftovers as strictly hazardous waste which must be destroyed in a qualified plant. This is not only an extra expense for the operators of the kitchens but also a serious waste, since in most cases it is not just the food left on the plates but also the food left in the kitchen, completely untouched and suitable for consumption, that must be thrown away along with the leftovers. Although there are examples of the latter being regularly delivered to the needy with the help of charitable organizations, they must also assume the possible fines imposed for this.¹⁷ It is clear that it is doubly wasteful to dispose of food that is dietetically sound and prepared with state support, at an extra cost, especially in the current crisis situation caused by the drought and war.

RURAL PUBLIC CATERING MODEL BASED ON SELF-SUFFICIENCY AND SOCIAL WORK

I previously mentioned that the classic, so-called “rural” type of public catering model is in decline, and examples of it tend to be from the past rather than from present practice. At the same time, one of the new trends of recent decades is that in the poorest, socially disadvantaged settlements, where the local government could not fund public catering in any other way, they carry out the task in the framework of self-sufficiency, relying on the work of public employees, thus capitalizing on their predicament.¹⁸ Partly with the support of the European Union for rural development, a number of successful projects have been implemented in the most disadvantaged areas, for example in several villages of the Sellye district, located near the border in southern Transdanubia. In the case of Markóc, for example, vegetables and meat produced in

¹⁶On the role of mealtime prayers in public catering, see JUHÁSZ 2021a, 2021b, 2022.

¹⁷For example, this happens regularly in our location in Debrecen.

¹⁸The much-criticized but for the poorest classes life-saving public work program was launched in Hungary in 2011 (CVI of 2011. law on public employment: <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=a1100106.tv>, accessed August 12, 2022).



the framework of the agricultural program are delivered to the school kitchen in Drávafok, some of it being utilized in the canteen and the rest distributed (PULSZTER 2018). In Ináncs, in northeastern Hungary, all raw materials from all agricultural programs (crop production, animal husbandry, pasta factory) are used in public catering in such a way that the product of one program element forms the basis of another program, thus creating a food chain. In practice, this means that the products of crop production serve as feed for livestock, the organic material from their own livestock farms is returned to the land, improving its quality, the processed pigs and poultry are additional raw materials for public catering, while the hens' eggs are used by the local dry pasta factory (MOZGA et al. 2018). We could list many more examples of similarly self-sustaining settlements that not only remedy social problems by operating their own village farms but also minimize the ecological footprint of public catering, especially if they practice organic farming.¹⁹

("URBAN") TRANSITIONAL TYPE

Between the rural and urban models of public catering as endpoints, there are many different transitional solutions in the most diverse types of settlements. These public catering systems, approaching the "urban" model, mainly cook with partially processed raw materials from large-scale farming and trade, and they often not only provide canteen-style catering but also deliver ready-made food to other institutions in the settlement. Because of the size of these kitchens, there is usually no direct contact between the maker of the food and the consumer. The ready meals are distributed by the staff of the service kitchen. Under the previous rules, leftover food was used as animal feed in some places, but today it must be treated as hazardous waste everywhere.

From among our fieldworks, we can cite the Nátus kitchen in Pápa as an example of this type (at least until the reorganization of 2021). Pápa, located in Western Hungary, is not a particularly large city.²⁰ The Nátus Kitchen has been the city's main public canteen for decades, several generations of residents have grown up on the food prepared here, and the number of people who take their meals home from here every day is significant. The size of the kitchen is close to that of an industrial one, and it serves several institutions. At the same time, since it is a settlement of moderate size, it became clear countless times during our conversations that there is a lot of direct contact with the cooks and the lunch ladies, and that is precisely why the cooks have a different approach to how they prepare food.

Due to the size of the kitchen, the raw materials must be procured through a public procurement procedure, so local producers are clearly at a disadvantage. Just one example: *Pápai*

¹⁹For example, BÁTI 2017b, 2017c provides a detailed overview of the project called "Bioszentandrás" in Hernádszentandrás in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County (cf. BÁTI 2017a). For a detailed analysis of the Short Supply Chain projects in Vas County, see INZSÖL 2022. Further examples: Kartal in Pest County (http://www.kartal.hu/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/Kartal_HEP.pdf, accessed August 12, 2022), Varsány in Nógrád County (<http://varsany.hu/falugazdasag/>, accessed August 12, 2022), or Rozsály in Szatmár County (<https://storeinsider.hu/cikk/peldaerteku-a-magyar-onfenn tarto-falu>, accessed August 12, 2022).

²⁰Pápa is a historic town, a centre of the Reformed Church and Calvinist schools, the second largest settlement in Veszprém County, and a district seat. Its population is 30,000.



Hús (Pápa Meat) is not a supplier to Nátus Kitchen. They cannot work out how to use local raw materials. I also observed that the food service manager is very enthusiastic and conscientious, and on top of complying with dietary regulations, she also tries to have the cooks prepare “trendy” dishes based on local flavors while considering the needs of the children. So even with the large number of servings, she runs the kitchen with the attentive hospitality of a “housewife.” Similar examples can be found in other kitchens that also prepare thousands of portions. Here we should mention, for example, food service manager György Ambrus, who, with the involvement of dieticians, implemented exemplary public catering in Békés County, supplying the county hospital and several other public institutions (nearly 2,000 portions per day), using the available budget economically. 60–70 different dishes are prepared daily, considering various individual and dietary needs. Most of their raw materials are obtained from local producers and suppliers. Despite its large size, this complex company not only provides public catering, it also serves individuals, businesses, and institutions, from weddings to a wide variety of corporate and family events. Their motto — “Let your taste guide your cooking!” — clearly expresses that although they provide an industrial-scale catering service based on the latest findings of kitchen technology and nutritional science, they have managed to embed themselves in the local society in such a way that they can actively participate in its operation as an integral part of it, through an informal social network.

Returning to the example from Pápa: the problem there is that the dining hall associated with the kitchen, where children from several schools come to eat, is by no means a homey and comfortable environment due to its size, interior design, and furnishings. When hundreds of children are eating at the same time, the noise level is almost unbearable. This condition already points towards an urbanized, impersonal model. As of March 2021, the municipality of Pápa handed over the operation of the kitchen, which until then had been under its own management, to a large contractor, a catering company supplying many settlements in half of the country, thereby transforming the “transitional” catering system described above into a fully urbanized, “industrial” model.

URBANIZED, INDUSTRIAL PUBLIC CATERING MODEL

In Pápa, we were able to study not only the transitional and urbanized models but also the transition process from one to the other (which proved to be very informative). Eatrend Kft., which operates the kitchen, is a constantly expanding company, with currently around 40 locations across the country.²¹

Eatrend’s kitchens, which prepare thousands of portions of food, are practically large-scale, industrial kitchens where, based on a centrally defined operating standard, the daily menu is “produced” for the institutions that employ their services as economically as possible. The menu is put together by the leading dietitians at the centre based on legal food hygiene and food safety standards as well as economic aspects. Because of the large quantities, buying unprocessed raw

²¹The company’s predecessor, T-Gastro, was founded by an entrepreneur from Albertirsa (Pest County), who took over public catering from the municipalities in an ever-widening area (both in the capital and in rural settlements), operating several central kitchens. Having merged with several catering companies in Western Hungary, as well as T-Gastro, Eatrend now operates nationwide, with headquarters in Győr.



materials from small producers and local farms is not even a possibility. Instead, the dishes are prepared from ready-to-cook — cleaned, chopped, blanched (frozen) — vegetables as well as partially processed meat and dairy products, and seasoned with dried spices and spice mixtures instead of fresh herbs. Foods produced on an industrial scale from raw materials of industrial quantities and qualities, which are often unoriginal, plain, or strange-tasting, unfamiliar, unrecognizable, or just different from the usual types of food, are not very attractive to the children consuming them. The fact that the cooks have absolutely no contact with the consumers also contributes to all of this; for them, cooking is a day-to-day job devoid of personal attention and hospitality as an expression of love. The service kitchen staff has nothing to do with the food served either: they hand out the ready-to-eat meals received in containers mechanically, similarly devoid of cordial hospitality. The children standing in line with trays are thus merely refueling, the act of eating being deprived of any cultural content. Food is not a gift prepared and served by a familiar and beloved person, but a “dubious” thing coming from a strange place, which often causes aversion and resentment (strange is “unclean”²²). This is also the reason why many negative opinions and complaints are expressed by consumers at such canteens, which is reflected numerically in the amount of leftovers.

As we also experienced in Pápa, since Eatrend took over the operation of the kitchen, local needs and possible quality/quantity objections only reach the management through multiple transmissions in the labyrinth of bureaucracy. The kitchen staff and local professional management are not so keen on the regional representative and his people, giving orders from outside and above, depriving the employees of all their competence so that they can only do their work in the centrally prescribed manner (half of the staff resigned because of this). Although Eatrend strictly applies the highest quality assurance system according to the usual marketing and communication strategy of large companies, the inflexible, hierarchical, bureaucratic system cannot provide adequate service due to the lack of direct human relationships, which are essential for quality hospitality.

How strongly the conditions influence the evaluation of the food even in such cases is clearly illustrated by the catering practice of church-run and Waldorf schools, where special attention is paid to making the meal a communal rite (regardless of where the food being served came from). In one of our research locations in Budapest (a Catholic school),²³ the lower graders eat in groups, forming smaller parties at tables, without queuing. Before and after meals, standing next to the table and facing the cross hanging on the wall, there is a group prayer accompanied by crossing themselves and bowing. Everyone serves themselves from the first and second course laid out on the table. Those on daily duty help with clearing the tables. The children eat relatively well, the evaluation of the food is basically positive, and there are not too many leftovers. Upper graders and high school students consume the same lunch under completely different conditions. The students, standing in long lines in the narrow corridor filled with food smells and the dining hall, get their food shoved in front of them by the overworked lunch ladies without a single kind word. Since time is limited, they eat in a hurry, or they prefer not to eat at all because

²²Countless “purity studies” mention this. Regarding food, see BÁTI 2009; KAPITÁNY – KAPITÁNY 2011; regarding catering see VÁRKONYI-NICKEL et al. 2019:138–140.

²³Public catering is provided by Familiar Foods Kft., which has been operating in Budapest for 18 years, serving schools and kindergartens, as well as operating canteens and snack bars.



they consider the food (especially the soups) the lower graders eat with such delight to be slop, disgusting, badmouthing it and making fun of it. Most of the food served to them ends up as waste, so most of the students in higher grades do not even get enrolled in the canteen anymore. This way, they enter a dimension of urban existence that is commonplace for most adults: during their day-long activities (7–8 h at school, after-school classes, training), they eat irregularly (and only cold food), or go hungry (many leave home without breakfast). The urban distances do not allow them to go home for lunch during the day, so the main meal is postponed until late in the evening, and its quantity usually exceeds the optimal value. This lifestyle is a direct path to the diseases of civilization.

“RURAL” COMMUNAL FOOD PREPARATION WITHIN URBANIZED PUBLIC CATERING – AN EXAMPLE FROM CSÖMÖR

In Csömör, located in the Budapest agglomeration, the natives (mainly of Slovak and German heritage) and their descendants have maintained their local and national identity to such an extent that they have managed to integrate a large number of new residents moving out of the city, far exceeding the original population, into the local society and local culture. An important element of this integration process is food (farmers’ market, community events with communal cooking and eating), as well as local gastronomic traditions (Slovak and German dishes). Nowadays, in the urbanized settlement with an excellent infrastructure, even in modern conditions, there is a very strong commitment to keeping numerous elements of traditional culture alive, reviving them, and passing them on. While the elementary school with four parallel classes and the kindergartens are catered (according to the “urban” model) by the Budapest-based *Diák és Munkahelyi Vendéglátó Kft.* (Student and Workplace Catering Ltd.), the “rural” type communal cooking takes place during various events organized by local civic associations.²⁴ Prime among these, from our point of view, is the so-called “Tót Konyha” (Slovak Kitchen), operating within the institutional framework of the *Csömöri Tót Hagyományaink Háza* (House of Slovak Heritage of Csömör), which not only participates regularly in village events but also consciously and systematically tries to pass on the gastronomic knowledge of the ancestors to elementary school students through living practice (Fig. 2).

For this, they have collected all traditional kitchen goods, primarily representing the technological level of the early 20th century, from stoves through pots and bowls to wooden spoons and sausage stuffers, which can be used to truly reconstruct the work processes and methods of the past, including clothing used for various jobs (folk costumes that were still in use between the two world wars). Old tools for baking and cooking are not stored as defunct museum objects but used according to their function (just like clothing). Today, for example, they can slaughter a pig (traditionally in November) without using any plastic bowls or other modern tools, only the old ones. The same applies to the preparation of the typical dishes of significant days (e.g., Mardi Gras doughnuts, various potato dishes, wedding strudels and cakes, etc.), or for summer and

²⁴For example, the regular gatherings of the *Csömöri Konyhatündérek gasztró-klub* (Kitchen Fairies of Csömör Gastro Club), or the farmers’ market and communal cooking of the self-organizing organic local shopping community called *Csömöri Éléskamra* (Csömör Pantry) operating since 2012. For more on Csömör’s gastronomic heritage conservation and community programs, see BÁTI et al. 2019.





Fig. 2. Pig butchering (*zabijacka*) in the Slovak Heritage House, 2012. (Photo by Tamás Sajó)

autumn canning. Children who express an interest and participate in the maintenance of traditions with or without their parents within the given framework are also included in these activities, in an age-appropriate manner. Additionally, from the 2012/2013 academic year, the Slovak classes of the Mátyás Király Primary School in Csömör have also been learning how to prepare simple Slovak dishes as part of the curriculum. This kind of heritage conservation, reconstruction, and heritagization is part of the glocalization processes of the 21st century, as well as the settlement's striving for resilience.²⁵

FINAL THOUGHTS

The food acquisition and consumption systems and public catering systems outlined here that can be attributed to rural lifestyles are schematized models that cannot be found anywhere in their "pure" form. In addition to the basic features listed for each type, the local characteristics of

²⁵Anikó Báti and Katalin Juhász are conducting further research and fieldwork on this through two research projects of the Institute of Ethnology at the RCH.



each location — the nature of the settlement, the physical environment, the technical equipment, the skills and individual habitus of the personnel coordinating/operating/implementing the catering, the type of school, and the tastes and needs of the consumers — determine the complex character of the given canteen. As we illustrated, in the 21st century, elements characteristic of any of the types listed here can be found in any of the other types of school canteens and catering systems.

Nonetheless, what is certain is that eating — whether it is consuming food in a family circle, alone, in a public place or even a school canteen, in a village or in a city, in a ritualized or mechanical way — is never just about the mere intake of nutrients — it has many cultural aspects. Even the strictest adherence to food safety and dietetic regulations is not enough to make the diner feel comfortable and ensure that the food is properly utilized as nourishment.

Indeed, the goal of our interdisciplinary research is to examine and understand as anthropologists — by expanding our horizons and including new aspects, through participant observations and many conversations — the importance of the gastrocultural background of the children and their families, and how it all relates to public catering.

When it comes to canteen reform, there is an external and top-down intervention in something that is one of the most personal and sensitive issues for an individual. Eating, like cleanliness and other areas relating to the intimate sphere, is a very personal issue that cannot and should not be controlled by regulations alone. It is also very difficult to influence, and it requires the sensitivity that ethnographers and anthropologists can bring to the topic.

According to today's trends, the urbanized, metropolitan-type canteen — although it follows the law to the letter and prepares “healthy” food according to the standards from ingredients that are deemed “healthy” — like the food industry supplying these raw materials, practically produces an industrial product that is deprived of any cultural content by the time it gets on the children's table and plate. Besides the scientifically supported raw materials considered appropriate and the ratio of nutrients and calories, how a certain type of food, flavor, or texture makes a consumer feel also plays an important role. People often convert elements and phenomena of the physical world, including food, to the conceptual level: thus, food passes through not only the actual digestive canal but also through a kind of intellectual digestive system.

Just as we equate ourselves with our “fuel,” food also becomes a symbol through which people consume not only the organic substances that provide vitamins and energy but also the meanings that embody and recreate the world. In addition to taste, eating is also a question of *identity*, which is expressed not only in the types of food but also in the way they are consumed. All these factors make up the social embeddedness of public catering. It seems that modernization and the urbanized model, even though it is the most economical solution from an economic point of view (bringing the greatest profit for large catering companies), cannot fully replace the intimate human relationships, the feeling of coziness, and respect for the food and its maker.²⁶

European and Hungarian decision-makers have recognized all of this, which is why in recent years they have advocated alternative food systems by way of regulations, including the introduction of the so-called short food supply chain (SFSC) and the local food system (LFS) in

²⁶Appreciation for the work performed, respect, and the fact that people are social beings and pay attention to maintaining personal character while eating food play a big role in social interactions related to public catering (SAGE 2003; MAYE 2013; Cf. ZUREK et al. 2016).



public catering. This is based not only on including local products in public catering but also on making the natural and cultural values of the area part of the transaction (ILBERY et al. 2006).

Government Decree 676/2020 (XII. 28.) on special rules for public procurement procedures for public catering defines the concept of the catering short supply chain (KREL) and lays down that, based on Act XLVI/2008 on food chain and its control, beginning January 1, 2022, “no more than one intermediate actor (food business operator, marketer, recognized producer organization) shall be involved in the food supply chain between the primary producer or food production facility and the catering operator.” According to the regulation, 60% of the raw materials used in public catering must come from local food products and the catering short supply chain. From January 1, 2023, this proportion will be at least 80 percent.

The actors of public catering have a great work before them, which can only be realized with coordinated and well-thought-out development steps. Our research project creates an opportunity to examine the changes generated by legal regulations within the examination of the social embeddedness of public catering, both from the side of public catering and consumers.

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