Acta Ethnographica Hungarica 68 (2023) 1, 79–89
DOI: 10.1556/022.2023.00017

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The Impact of the Gastronomic Norms of Contemporary Mass Culture on Public Catering for Children

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Received: May 5, 2023 • Accepted: June 13, 2023
Published online: October 2, 2023

ABSTRACT

Since the start of the new millennium, there has been a marked turn in nutrition-related ethnographic research in Hungary. Following the reconstruction of the historical and regional processes of change in Hungarian dietary traditions, professional attention has increasingly shifted towards the present day. In this study, I first summarize the most important aspects of contemporary gastronomy and the respective research opportunities, before exploring the question of the relationship between contemporary food culture and public catering for children. The conclusion reached is that public catering for children and the food on offer in school canteens cannot be discussed without an understanding of the changes taking place in contemporary food culture, which in turn cannot be understood without taking into account contemporary social and cultural developments. Until the slowly changing culture of public catering becomes more closely aligned with the rapid changes in eating at home and in restaurants, fewer and fewer children will make use of school canteens, and where they do, they will barely touch the food but prefer to go hungry.

KEYWORDS

contemporary gastronomy, food ethnography, public catering for children, *zeitgeist*, changes

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INTRODUCTION

Since the start of the new millennium, there has been a marked turn in nutrition-related ethnographic research in Hungary.[1] As outlined by the work of Eszter Kisbán, the almost complete reconstruction of Hungarian popular food culture, focusing on historical changes, took place between the 1960s and 1990s, along such themes as the evolution in food choice, the daily, weekly, and annual meal schedule, table manners, central regulation, and the influence of European culinary centers (Kisbán 1963, 1966, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1970, 1975, 1984, 1987, 1989, 1992, 1994, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 2001). In her early works, the definitive researcher of the new era in recent decades, Anikó Báti, focused on examining the changes that have taken place to date in such "traditional" themes as festive and wedding meals in villages (Báti 1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 2000, 2004). From there, her interest gradually turned towards the research of present-day (big) cities and everyday life, as best exemplified by two interrelated studies: one carried out in a block of 100 apartments in the 20th district of Budapest, and the other in kindergarten and school canteens.[2] Naturally, this shift in academic interest and research focus is not a Hungarian phenomenon; a similar change had taken place in European ethnography two decades earlier.[3]

A POTENTIAL APPROACH TO CONTEMPORARY HUNGARIAN GASTRONOMY

When dealing with the issue of public catering for children in Hungary today, we cannot ignore contemporary trends in nutrition, which are aspects of contemporary society and culture. How can contemporary food culture be thematized? Here we might usefully turn to the volume by Kapitány and Kapitány, which is perhaps the most comprehensive, and at the same time the most detailed exploration of contemporary lifestyles and the *zeitgeist* in Hungary after the turn of the millennium (Kapitány – Kapitány 2013). It is also worth thematizing contemporary Hungarian gastronomy partly using the criteria they proposed. The way in which poverty is manifested in the purchase and consumption of food is one aspect of the theme of the polarization of rich and poor. There is a wide spectrum from trash-bin foragers to the purchase and consumption of chicken backs as a "status symbol" among those on a low income. At the other end of the scale are foods that can be regarded as the status symbols of the wealthy, and ingredients used by ("fine-dining," Michelin-star) restaurants, such as scallops and Angus beef

[1]The present study is based on my own, everyday observations and is not linked to the results of targeted human or social science research. My aim is not therefore to provide answers, but to raise questions, highlight areas for future research, and formulate hypotheses.

[2]For a summary of the experiences, see Báti 2018. For the results of research into public catering, see Báti 2014, 2020.

[3]A good example of this is the change in Scandinavian (Swedish) ethnology, pioneered by Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren, professors at the Department of European Ethnology at the University of Lund in southern Sweden. Published in 1996, the introduction to their volume on customs can be regarded as the manifesto of this change (Frykman – Löfgren 1996).

steaks. The linguistic anthropological investigation of elite gastronomy might also be of interest — from the names given to the dishes offered on menus[4] to the definition of cooking techniques (blanching, sous vide, etc.) and the various fusion cuisines or molecular gastronomy.

Ágnes Kapitány and Gábor Kapitány (2013) considered it important to explore what people were afraid of and anxious about at around the turn of the millennium. Questions concerning the origin of ingredients and whether or not they are still fit for consumption, as a source of anxiety, are fueled by news, reports, and alarmist stories in the mass media. Such fears are reinforced by stomach-churning footage of illegal slaughterhouses or disgusting kitchens (home to cockroaches and rats). In the past 20 years, several specific cases of toxic substances in certain imported food items (ground paprika, cucumbers) have come to light. Other fears are related to E-numbers in foodstuffs, despite the fact that the codes found on the labels of processed foods indicate additives authorized by the European Union that are intended to reinforce food safety standards and the associated public confidence. More and more people are carefully reading the lists of ingredients on the foods they purchase, while food products marketed as "E-free" are becoming increasingly popular. Foodborne epidemics (from mad cow disease to swine fever and bird flu) are also fueling fears. Issues such as the chemical spraying of food crops and the use of hormones in food animal production are also present in public discourse and everyday conversations. Fears of food shortages (starvation, water shortages) may also cause anxiety, as can the potential solutions and scenarios proposed (such as eating insects).

In our contemporary world, the cult of health foods, organic foods, and nature is becoming increasingly pronounced. In food culture, this incorporates various diet trends (e.g., paleo), as well as increasing numbers of grocery stores with "organic food" sections. Preserving and canning are coming back into fashion, even among city dwellers, and the driving force is mainly nostalgia. Such efforts are popular not so much among those who are really in need of this form of self-sufficiency, but rather among those who are open towards tradition. In villages, research shows that it is typically elderly people who make preserves. However, given today's prices, this might change in the future. The public catering reforms affecting school canteens (2015), of which Jamie Oliver became the international public "face," are also directly related to the cult of health.

Several arenas for the representation of present-day food culture might be highlighted. The home is the most important space for the appearance of such models. After the change of political regime in 1990, American-style open-plan kitchens became fashionable, reflecting how a more communal approach to food preparation and consumption was gaining ground (as opposed to the earlier individualization). The new models for kitchens and kitchen fittings came with a new set of objects: cooker hoods, ceramic hobs, dishwashers, and bread makers.

The street, like the home, is also a space for the deployment of new gastronomic models. Street food is becoming something of a movement. We are witnessing not only a proliferation in terms of what is on offer but also a shift in price level; the kind of foods that once met everyday, lower-middle-class demand (hot-dogs and hamburgers) are now on sale at festivals and celebrations, from the premium *Zing Burger* to the village-style catering of *Tóni Katlan* and the newly invented *KOLBice*™ sausages served in a wholegrain cone. Another manifestation of the

[4] *Textúra*, for example, a restaurant in downtown Budapest (run by Michelin-starred chef Ákos Sárközi), offered a degustation menu with organic juices and Kagoshima Wagyu Carpaccio as the fresh daily specials as of December 7, 2022.

street food model are the month-long Advent fairs, where mulled wine and chimney cakes, an official *Hungarikum*, are served. Products such as *Túró Rudi* chocolate-covered curd bars and various soft drinks are also promoted on the streets, while billboards and neon advertisements are also used for marketing. Social welfare and poverty are also visible in public spaces in various forms, such as free food distribution for the needy.

Displays of family foods in innovative ways (chocolate Santas in the window) have become part of celebrations and festive customs. Holidays present opportunities for the sale of specific forms of food. The food and retail industries have extended the length of holiday periods (chocolate Santas appear on the shelves in October) and introduced new consumption-oriented holidays (Halloween). There are also entirely new examples of the proliferation of American-style holidays, such as roast turkey at Thanksgiving. Visible examples of festive food culture include queuing in the markets and grocery stores as part of the festive preparations (carp for the Christmas meal, pork for New Year, Easter ham). An important area of research for the future might be how landmark anniversaries and important turning points in the lives of individuals are treated, along with their gastronomic features.

The blurring of the boundaries between holidays and everyday life is evidenced by a number of factors, from the changing role of the cutlet to "hanging out at the mall" and the related food consumption habits. New models of food culture are also influencing everyday life. Home cooking (bread making, cucumber pickling, pasta making) is valued more highly, while the daily meal schedule has become less rigid, culminating in "snacking," with no fixed times or occasions. Building on the initial Family Frost model, mobile shops specializing in a variety of foodstuffs, baked goods, or meat products are playing an increasingly important role in supplying rural and village populations. This is driven by household reliance on store-based goods on the one hand, and by the closure of small shops in villages and the expansion of big shopping centers on the other. The increasingly prominent children's world goes with its own foodstuffs (Kinder products, dino-shaped frozen nuggets).

The restructuring of family formats, and of generational and gender roles, also has gastronomic implications. The food culture of the "singleton" is a prominent theme in women's magazines (*Cosmopolitan*). The changing role of parenthood (children who never leave the nest) also has an impact on food preparation and consumption. One example of the blurring of the boundaries between the adult world and the world of children is the consumption of muesli, which has become an adult breakfast food. Muesli is the modern-day renaissance of porridge, which was popular until the 1960s. In recent decades, varieties of porridge have burst onto the scene once again, now in the form of instant sachets. Consumers in their droves are rediscovering a foodstuff abandoned 70 years ago for reasons of prestige, even by the poorest of the poor. The candlelight dinner is proof of the greater value placed on romantic relationships. There are also several gastronomic examples of the blurring of gender boundaries. Cooking at home for the family is no longer an exclusively female domain, while at the same time increasing numbers of women wine makers are appearing in the media. The question remains as to whether there are still feminine and masculine dishes or cooking techniques. There may well be, if one thinks of stew cooked on an open fire or a homemade sponge cake. The blurring of identity boundaries is also reflected in food culture. Cat and dog foods and the way they are marketed represent a shift in the boundaries between humans and animals. Soybean burgers, vegetable fat, and vegan butchers in New York City are even examples of the blurring of the boundaries between animals and plants. The concept of good nutrition blends scientific and

everyday experience (e.g., *Norbi Update* products, sold by a franchise owned by a fitness guru). Increasingly uniform regional dishes and their names, which previously had ethnic or national associations, are an example of the blurring of the boundaries between different cultures (pizza, gyros). It would be worth examining how the boundaries between different religions have changed, and, specifically, the present-day role of Christian fasting and the Jewish kosher diet.

The cult of speed and efficiency is apparent in the consumption of frozen vegetables and ready meals, Chinese noodle soups, packet soups, ready-to-cook tripe, and the use of microwave ovens. In everyday life, factory kitchens and canteens are the most important places where food is consumed outside the home. Menus that can be ordered in to the workplace, or lunchtime visits to nearby restaurants (such as the *Pléh Csárda*, also known as the Tin Gundel, in the Kolozsvár Street market in the 15th district of Budapest) are popular. Dissertations have already been written on the meals supplied to boarding-school pupils, while the eating habits of commuters who travel daily by train or long-distance bus may also be of interest.

Another characteristic feature of contemporary culture is the possibility of experiencing and "consuming" historical periods in the present day, along with the specific gastronomic implications. Well-known restaurants specialize in medieval and Renaissance cuisine (the *Sir Lancelot* in Budapest, or the *Reneszánsz* in Visegrád). Several dishes conjure up the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries: *Gundel* pancakes, *Dobos* cake, or *Palóc* soup. Retro fashions, evoking the period from the 1960s to the 1980s, have led to increased demand for *Túró Rudi* desserts, *Traubi Soda*, and *Márka* soft drinks.

Examples of the combining of temporal and spatial models are the proliferation of labels with references to "peasant," "village," or "farmhouse" style when retailing various foodstuffs (bread, ham, eggs). The increasing popularity of Chinese, Japanese, Turkish, etc. restaurants and the rise of American fast-food chains (Burger King, McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken) are examples of the growing cultural power of spatial models. The Mediterranean–subtropical world, the lifestyle of the "South Seas" and Greek, Italian, and Spanish specialties, are a distinct feature of the gastronomic "revolution." Chain stores and fast-food outlets often hold thematic weeks, promoting products from a specific national cuisine. Since 2010, in parallel with the Hungarian Government's policy of promoting national solidarity, there has also been a marked increase in demand for Hungarian food brands from abroad. Particularly popular examples are products from the *Székely* Land in Romania (*Csíki* beer, *Csíki* crisps, "Székely Góbé" products), while the Kukkónia shop and its line of products are an example of the identity building of the Hungarian community in *Csallóköz* (Žitný ostrov, Slovakia).

Mass communication is the most important channel for propagating contemporary gastronomic models. Media attention is increasingly focused on roles (chef, food critic, gastro blogger) that were formerly less likely to earn celebrity status. Celebrity chef Marcsi Borbás occupies a unique place among Hungarian gastronomic television programs. Cooking shows are prime-time viewing on the main Hungarian commercial channels (*Konyhafőnök*, *Hal a tortán*, etc.), while cooking in the studio is also turning into an indispensable feature of morning shows. A lowering of the age group among both professionals and viewers is clearly perceptible in gastronomy culture, while the same can be said for amateur cooks. The models disseminated by the media have a direct impact on the changing stylistic characteristics of cooking and food consumption.

Art and taste are playing an increasingly important role in contemporary gastronomy. Representative gastronomic magazines (*Magyar Konyha*) and illustrated volumes on

gastronomy bear witness to an unprecedented level of sophistication when it comes to food presentation and table settings. Examples of the visual experience of food and drink include ice cream sundaes, cocktails, and customized or photo cakes. In addition to multicultural models, global consumption habits are also on the rise (Starbucks and IKEA restaurants). In parallel with the shift of life management and purchasing to the digital, online space, accelerated by the pandemic that began in 2020, a similar pattern can be observed in food culture. Recipes are no longer found exclusively in published cookbooks or personal, handwritten recipe collections, but in thematic TikTok and YouTube videos, or online recipe collections (*Mindmegette*, *Nosalty*, etc.).

In contrast to globalization, there is also a growing interest in nature/naturalness. Relationships with nature have changed, and the concept of "conquering nature" is starting to be replaced by the ideal of living in harmony with nature. Examples of this process include the introduction of reusable packaging and shopping bags; the ban on plastic cups, plates, and cutlery; short food chains between producer and consumer; selective food waste collection; the renaissance of foraging (Freeganism, or the art of dumpster diving), and the reuse of leftovers in recipes (e.g., *Hortobágy* meat pancakes). The turn towards transcendence is taking place not so much in historical churches and religious practices as it is in the New Age movement and the growing interest in esotericism and new paganism. One extreme "gastronomic" example of this is breatharianism, or "living on light."

Generally speaking, tradition-centered community and identity building and the quest for experience is fueled by an increased demand for authenticity. There are many different examples of this trend, from the *Lipóti* bakeries to craft beers and the boom in local cooking competitions and gastronomic festivals. At home, more and more people are starting to barbecue, grill, or cook over an open fire in the garden. The return to rural/village traditions and a more natural way of life can also be observed in food production. In houses with gardens or in apartments with garden access, food is increasingly being grown on a small scale. Kitchen gardens and raised beds for growing vegetables and herbs are beginning to make a comeback in grassed or paved decorative courtyards. Community gardens are spreading in urban areas. Balconies are being used for small-scale production in the apartments of multi-story buildings. The legalization of home distilling has relaunched the practice of processing homegrown fruits in many households.

The construction of "Hungarian," "national," or "domestic" brands can also be seen as counterbalancing the expansion of global models. One might think here of products labeled with Hungarian (e.g., Kalocsa) motifs, the regulation of the use of Hungarian branding, or the food and gastronomic aspects of the *Hungarikum* movement. The last example emphasizes how, in many cases, the nation itself becomes a brand (chimney cake, Karcag-style mutton stew, Szatmár-Berg plum jam, *pálinka*). Around the Saint Stephen's Day public holiday on August 20, the annually selected "national cake" and "national bread" become available for sampling. There are many examples of the Hungarianization of foreign food products by means of packaging. All of this can be seen as both the masking and the foregrounding of ethnicity. In the postmodern era, events involving "passive eating" or secondary (distracted) food consumption, such as watching television, going to the movies, or watching football, are ideal opportunities for snacking (popcorn, sunflower seeds, salty sticks, tacos, etc.).

Finally, it is worth looking briefly at the ethnography of food shopping. Ordering meals (pizza, burgers, gyros) over the internet or by phone is becoming increasingly common, and there are extensive delivery services from which to choose (Foodpanda, Wolt). On the other

hand, people still buy ingredients for themselves in shops and markets. One important question concerns, for example, the role of chain store flyers and "special offers" in the purchase of food, and, more generally, the techniques that are used to manipulate customers (e.g., the ways in which food is displayed and presented). How do "giveaways" (stickers, coupons, celebrity chef Tamás Széll recipe books) influence consumer behavior? What were/are the consequences of the regulations in force, such as the closing of stores on Sundays and their subsequent reopening, on food shopping and consumption practices? Supermarkets are venues not only for shopping but also for eating (food stalls in Tesco and Auchan). How do people shop: do they purchase little and often, or occasionally in bulk? Do they prefer small shops or wholesale retailers? Is there a daily, weekly, or seasonal pattern to shopping? How does the composition of the purchased foods vary according to the season? To explore the topics raised in this chapter and to answer the related questions, further research is needed.

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONTEMPORARY FOOD CULTURE AND PUBLIC CATERING FOR CHILDREN?

Fifty percent of children have been eating in school canteens for around 70 years, and this rate may have increased since the Covid pandemic, although there has been a noticeable decline in the number of upper-middle-class children among those eating in school canteens. What are the possible reasons for this? The two most important reasons are certainly the ceiling on the price of the meals, which limits the quantity and quality of the ingredients used; and the available technology, which determines the type of hot meals that can be prepared. For further analysis, let us take a look at a randomly selected weekly menu (Table 1).

It is striking that each main meal starts with a soup course. By contrast, in contemporary food culture the consumption of soup is declining, even in the case of festive and weekend meals. As more and more people declare "I'm not really a soup person," it also has an impact on children's preferences. Besides, the soups served in school canteens are thin and without texture, and they look unappealing, precisely because of the limitations in terms of ingredients. As in the case of soups, the "over-representation" of creamed vegetable stews is also striking. This may obviously be down to the fact that they are relatively cost-effective and simple to produce, but children are less and less likely to encounter such foods at home, which makes them off-putting. Schoolchildren may be given some kind of drink with smaller meals, but with the main meal they have to make do with tap water in jugs, while more and more families are eschewing plain tap water and replacing it with mineral water, soft drinks, etc. This is often motivated by specific fears, usually related to the filtration and purification of tap water.

Eating habits at home have changed significantly, and these changes cannot be followed by the school canteen. One example is snacking at home, which is not reflected in public catering. This also implies that the daily schedule of meals is falling apart, with children eating whenever they get hungry, while also suggesting that marketing on the part of the food industry is perhaps the most efficient means of influencing tastes and consumption practices (crisps, sweets, etc.). I have already touched on the absence from school canteens of meals produced using modern kitchen appliances. If children regularly consume foods and drinks prepared using blenders, electric grills, or toasters at home, they will become used to these foods and drinks and will also demand them from the canteen. International cuisine, with the exception of a few Italian pasta dishes, is absent from

Table 1. The menu in the canteen at the Fabriczius József Elementary School in Veresegyháza (April 24–28, 2023) (Source: https://www.fabriczius.hu/2023/04/18/etlap-17-het/, accessed May 5, 2023)

MENU					
24–28 April 2023					
Week 17					
Meal	**Monday**	**Tuesday**	**Wednesday**	**Thursday**	**Friday**
MID-MORNING SNACK	milk	tea	tea	tea	cocoa
	wholegrain roll with margarine	wholewheat bread with margarine, boiled egg	wholemeal bread with margarine, pork luncheon meat, cucumber	potato bread with cheese spread, bell pepper	seeded bread roll with margarine
LUNCH	clear soup	potato cream soup	soup with semolina dumplings	tarragon chicken soup	tomato soup
	boiled meat with fruit sauce	roast meat	creamed peas with frankfurters	cabbage pasta	fried pork chop, rice with sweetcorn
	boiled potatoes	bulgur with herbs and vegetables, yoghurt and mayonnaise dressing	fruit	fruit	gherkins
AFTERNOON SNACK	potato scone	rice pudding with fruit sauce	carton of milk	wholemeal roll with margarine, salami	cheese pastry
	high-fiber fruit juice		brioche	carrot	fruit
We reserve the right to make changes to the menu.					
The pickles contain artificial sweeteners.					

school canteens, even though it plays an increasingly important role in the diet of Hungarian families today. Nor are popular street-food dishes to be found among school meals, although these are also popular among children not only because of their flavors but also because the circumstance in which they are consumed are typically linked to some kind of leisure activity, such as holidays at Lake Balaton (fried *lángos* dough, pancakes, gyros, hamburgers, hake). There are also obvious financial reasons for the rather meager choice of meats, which consists almost exclusively of chicken and pork, while many families are regularly eating fish, beef, or waterfowl. The link between contemporary gastronomy and the art of serving has already been mentioned above. Even if children do not necessarily go to restaurants, where this is a priority, more and more families are paying attention to the aesthetics of food and how it is served. Trays, plates, and cutlery are simply fulfilling their primary function, while a more cheerful, individual design could make the served

meal more attractive. Children encounter ready-made meals in the canteens, while they come across packaged meals when shopping with their parents, or when they look in the fridge at home. Needless to say, in the food retail industry, where selling products is paramount, attractive packaging is often an indispensable accessory. Like any adult, a child's interest in food and ingredients will be piqued by the way it is packaged.

CONCLUSION

Public catering for children and the food on offer in school canteens cannot be discussed without an understanding of the changes taking place in contemporary food culture, which in turn cannot be understood without taking into account contemporary social and cultural developments. In the three decades following the change of political regime in Hungary, food culture has undergone a fundamental transformation. Until the slowly changing culture of public catering becomes more closely aligned with the rapidly changing culture of eating at home and in restaurants, fewer and fewer children will use the school canteens, and even when they do, they will barely touch the meals and will go hungry. Or, if they prefer not to stay hungry, they will opt instead for the "competition" — the school snack bar, the local gyros shop, or the nearby bakery.

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