

The Swedish School Meal Heritage — Memories of Food, Taste, and Commensality

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ABSTRACT

In Sweden, free school lunch has been served for more than a hundred years, and it is now a democratic right of all elementary school children. The school meal has always been associated with different opinions and subject to much debate. The aim of the study is to explore school meal food and taste memories in a convenient sample of Swedish adults. A web-based survey was carried out in the summer of 2020. The 246 respondents attended school between the 1940s and the early 2000s. The material was collectively analyzed using NVivo 12 Pro (QSR International), resulting in two overarching themes. “The traditional school food heritage” theme consisted of accounts of traditional Swedish food through the ages and meanings attached to it. Memories were connected to likes and dislikes of certain foods and dishes. “The social school food heritage” theme consisted of accounts of coercion, control, and peer pressure, but also joy, friendship, and commensality. The Swedish school meal is a shared experience surrounded by strong feelings and memories regarding the food and the context. It means a lot both culturally and socially, acting as a carrier of a common food heritage.

KEYWORDS

school lunch, school canteen, food heritage, food memories, food experiences, Sweden

INTRODUCTION

“The kitchen staff have started their workday early to prepare today’s school lunch. In large cooking pots meals are prepared and the smell spreads in and around the school building, and then finds its way through the fan system into the classroom. Hunger is awakened if it is something you like. When it’s time to eat, we hurry through long corridors with yellow brick walls. Then we stand nicely in a row and wait for our turn to pick up the orange plastic tray,

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cutlery, plate, and glass. The milk is taken from a giant tetra pack, there is also lukewarm water in stainless steel jugs and sometimes there is orange juice. Everything ought to be eaten; ‘think of the children in Africa’ is a mantra during the ’70s. The yellow pea soup with white pieces of pork fat is moved around on the plate, then hidden under a napkin and secretly thrown away. Fastened under the table is a sticky chewing gum. A glass of milk and crispbread with butter and *Aromat*¹ seasoning will be the rescue on days when you don’t like the food.” (From the authors’ memories of the ’70s school lunches).

Most children who have attended Swedish elementary school from the mid-1900s, have taken part in the free school meal program; it is part of our common food heritage. The school meal in Sweden started to take its form during the 1930s, when the school was turned into an arena for social reforms, and it was stated that not only should the school provide knowledge through teaching but also foster better and healthier future citizens (GULLBERG 2006). Before the 1930s, it was only the poorly fed children in need that received school lunches or breakfasts. A free and general school meal program was proposed in 1945, after which it was gradually introduced into the school system. Since 1997, Sweden’s municipalities have been obligated to serve free school meals to all pupils in elementary schools according to the Education Act.² Today, about 1.2 million hot school lunches are served daily in publicly as well as in privately financed elementary schools (SWEDISH FOOD AGENCY et al. 2022). From the original purpose of filling stomachs and providing energy, school meals have today, in many places, come to live up to a list of requirements equal to a restaurant experience. The spirit of the times has been reflected in the meals served, from traditional Swedish dishes such as *pölsa*³ and herring pudding, through mashed potatoes from powder and hot dogs, to today’s menus with international influences and plant-based elements such as *chili sin carne* and the Indian lentil stew *daal*. Eating school meals is a collective experience that often evokes strong emotions and memories. What food and taste memories do we carry with us from the school meal and what significance has it really had for our food heritage? The aim of the present study is to explore school meal food and taste memories in a convenient sample of Swedish adults.

PARTICIPANTS AND METHODS

As many as 246 respondents shared their thoughts and experiences about school meals through a web-based questionnaire, distributed and further shared via the researchers’ social media network (Facebook) in the summer of 2020. The experiences ranged from canteen dining in the 1940s all the way to school restaurants in the 2000s, from the northern to the southern parts of Sweden. However, most respondents attended school during the 1970s and ’80s, and the majority of them in the Gothenburg area. Besides background information, the questionnaire consisted of four open-ended questions: “What dishes do you remember liking and why?”,

¹*Aromat* is a food seasoning salt containing plant extracts and glutamate that is used to enhance flavors.

²Skolmat i Sverige sedan långt tillbaka [School Food in Sweden since a Long Time Ago], <https://www.skolmatsverige.se/om-oss/skolmatens-historia/>, accessed June 10, 2023 (hereafter: SkolmatSverige 2023).

³*Pölsa* is a traditional dish from the northern parts of Sweden, usually made from beef sinew, heart, lung, and liver, barley, onion, and sometimes ground and boiled meat. It is often eaten with pickled beetroots, boiled potatoes, and fried eggs.



“Which dishes would you rather have avoided or remember with horror/disgust and why?”, “What significance has the school meal had for you?” and finally, “Feel free to give examples of food and taste memories from the school meal.” The respondents were informed that participation was voluntary, their answers would be anonymous, and they could withdraw at any time.⁴ A large and varied material was obtained from the answers that shed light on the Swedish school food heritage; specific dishes, smells, and tastes were mentioned, and narratives about the educational purpose of the school meal, atmosphere, and community were shared abundantly. In the first step of the analysis, the material was examined and discussed by the two researchers. Two themes emerged from the initial analysis, “the traditional school food heritage” and “the social school food heritage.” The second step focused on categorizing the material in relation to the two themes by means of Nvivo 12 Pro (QSR International 2020). The two themes will be further elaborated with quotes from respondents’ accounts.

THE TRADITIONAL SCHOOL FOOD HERITAGE

There is no doubt that the school meal affects and brings back many memories. School meals engage, and there is a willingness to share personal experiences of food and taste memories. Positive taste memories are often linked to the fact that the food has a high recognition factor. Being able to identify what is on the plate and that the food has a familiar texture means that you know what to expect and thus it tastes good. “Milanese soup — the best dish, like a rich spaghetti with minced meat sauce, all-in-one.” Nevertheless, they remember certain dishes with horror, there are testimonies of strong aversions, memories that remain for a long time, perhaps forever. “Liver stew, vomited on the plate but it was just to keep eating.” Another strong memory: “A few times tuna was served in the same way as the minced meat sauce with spaghetti. Horrible taste that grew in the mouth. Always had a hard time with tuna after that.” Most people probably agree that favoured dishes were served far too infrequently. “Once a year we got hamburgers” and “Calzone-pizza-pies. Good and rare!”

School meals through the ages

The basic idea behind the school meal started back in the 1800s, and its purpose was to feed hungry stomachs and provide energy for getting through the school day.⁵ The food served was simple and often consisted of porridge or soup. During the 1930s, school meals changed in character when government subsidies for free school meals were provided to the poorest children (Fig. 1). “When I was in 2nd or 3rd grade, school meals were introduced. We got rye flour porridge with lingonberry jam and crispbread with margarine. Couldn’t bear to eat the sandwich, it was put on a shelf in the pantry until the next day. Felt like a punishment. From the beginning, it was porridge every day. The lingonberry jam separated with the milk.” For some people, school meals have been associated with horrific memories that are hard to let go: “I was

⁴Good Research Practice. *Swedish Research Council*, 2017, <https://www.vr.se/english/analysis/reports/our-reports/2017-08-31-good-research-practice.html>, accessed June 11, 2023.

⁵SkolmatSverige 2023.





Fig. 1. School canteen in the 1930s, Högalids folkskola, Stockholm (Stockholmskällan, Stockholms stadsarkiv)

harmful for life. I cannot eat oatmeal, gruel, soups with broth. Ugh, I almost start grinning when I think about it.”

In 1945, the Parliament decided that municipalities that offered free school meals would receive subsidies from the state. There were special requirements for what was to be served: a main course with a glass of milk, bread, and butter.⁶ There was also the idea that pupils should learn good table manners and good eating habits (GULLBERG 2006). Thus, eating together became an important part of the school meal. Traditional and regional Swedish dishes were reflected in the menus, simple foods without finesse. “A lot of the food was cooked without crust or flavour. Not cooked to please the eye. Pale fishballs, boiled cod, porridge, macaroni pudding, fish pudding, boiled chicken, and lots of boiled potatoes.” It was important to finish what was on your plate, otherwise you would have to remain in the school canteen for the whole lunch break. In Fig. 2, kitchen staff serves ready-made crispbreads with margarine at the tables.

⁶Skolmat under 150 år [150 Years of School Meals]. *Stockholms Stad* [The City of Stockholm], 2023, <https://stockholmskallan.stockholm.se/teman/stockholm-ater/skolmat/>, accessed June 13, 2023.





Fig. 2. School canteen, 1952, Nannaskolan, Uppsala (Uppsala-Bild. Upplandsmuseet)

During the 1950s and '60s, the number of school meals increased drastically due to a major expansion of school kitchens as more schools now got their own kitchens and canteens. However, during the '70s, there was a centralization of school kitchens, and industrialized food in the form of processed and semi-processed products was introduced. “Still have problems with semi-processed food — associate it with heated, dried food with a strange aftertaste...” In Fig. 3, a



Fig. 3. School canteen in the 1970s, Sorsele (Photo by Pål-Nils Nilsson, Wikimedia Commons. Riksantikvarieämbetet)



simple and rational dining room from the 1970s is displayed. The children were served simple food (black pudding), drinking from metal jugs.

In the 1980s, the cost of food increased, which meant that school kitchens had to economize, which left its mark on the quality of the meals. Schools were forced to prepare cheaper food, and the range of dishes decreased. From the 1990s onwards, it became more common for schools to serve two different options for lunch, and the option of fermented milk with cereals or muesli could also be offered as an alternative. [Figure 4](#) illustrates a way of serving the school meal in separate bowls on each table.

In the Education Act that came into force in 2011,⁷ there are directives that state that school meals should be well-balanced and nutritious. This means that meals should be composed in accordance with current nutrition recommendations. The latest Nordic Nutrition Recommendations, that Swedish public will follow, were issued in June 2023 ([Blomhoff et al. 2023](#)). In addition, this must also be achieved within a limited budget where factors such as the meal being tasty, prepared with good quality ingredients, safe, environmentally smart, integrated into



Fig. 4. School canteen in the 1980s (Photo by Harry Moum, Mölndals stadsmuseum)

⁷The Education Act. Stockholm: Department of Education, 2010:800.



education, and served in a pleasant environment, according to the Meal Model (Fig. 5) that was created by the Swedish Food Agency to guide meals served in the public sector.

For school meals of the 2000s, one of the challenges has been to cater to the diversity of diners with different taste preferences, but also increasingly consider medical, ethical, and religious lifestyle reasons, as well as different cultural backgrounds. “Taco lunches with nacho chips provided an opportunity for a little more of your own choices in the form of different vegetables to go with the taco mince.” Since the ’90s, the Swedish Food Agency has also issued guidelines for school meals — the latest update is from 2021.⁸ School meals in the 2020s are characterized by being climate-smart and socially sustainable in accordance with global sustainability development goals (Agenda 2030). The menu now includes more plant-based foods, and a transition to more vegetarian dishes is taking place.

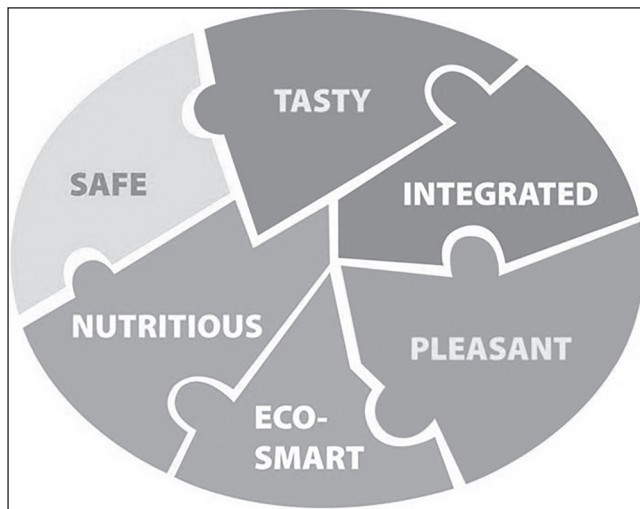


Fig. 5. The Meal Model (Source: Swedish Food Agency 2022, <https://www.livsmedelsverket.se/en/food-habits-health-and-environment/maltider-i-var-d-skola-och-omsorg>, accessed June 11, 2023)

⁸Nationella riktlinjer för måltider i skolan. Förskoleklass, grundskola, gymnasieskola och fritidshem [National Guidelines for Meals in School. Preschool, Elementary School, High School, and After-School Care]. Swedish Food Agency, 2021, https://www.livsmedelsverket.se/matvanor-halsa-miljo/maltider-i-var-d-skola-och-omsorg/skola#Nationella_riktlinjer_f%C3%B6r_m%C3%A5ltider_i_skolan, accessed June 11, 2023.



Traditional Swedish dishes

The following common traditional Swedish dishes (*husmanskost*) are often mentioned by the respondents: *pölsa*⁹ with pickled beetroots (Fig. 6), stewed brown beans and fried cured pork belly, *lapskojs*,¹⁰ yellow pea soup, *kalops*,¹¹ stuffed cabbage rolls, *järpar*,¹² chicken in curry sauce, liver stew, *pyttipanna*,¹³ and rice porridge with condiments. These dishes were eaten both at home and at school and tasted differently depending on where they were served. “The aunts [kitchen staff] did the best they could. But school kitchen cooking didn’t turn out like at home.” Sometimes it was the other way around: the food at school tasted better than at home. “All school meals except liver patties were better than what I ate at home. We got *sjömansbiff*,¹⁴ fantastic. *Slottsstek*,¹⁵ just as amazing. *Pölsa*, lovely. Potato buns with ham sauce. What I liked was that the flavor composition, the combinations, were so rich.”



Fig. 6. *Pölsa* (hash) served with boiled potatoes and pickled beetroots (Photo by Cecilia Magnusson Sporre)

⁹*Pölsa* comes in many varieties in the northern parts of Sweden. A novel by the Swedish author Torgny Lindgren (1938–2017), *Hash: a novel* (LINDGREN 2004), describes a dedicated search for the perfect *pölsa*.

¹⁰*Lapskojs* is a dish customary in the northern parts of Sweden, usually consisting of cooked pieces of salted beef mixed with mashed potatoes, served with pickles.

¹¹*Kalops* is a meat stew seasoned with bay leaves and allspice.

¹²*Järpar* is a variety of meatballs, oblong in shape.

¹³*Pyttipanna* (hash) is a pan-fried dish usually made from leftover meat and sausages in pieces, chopped onions, and potatoes, served with fried eggs and pickled beetroot.

¹⁴*Sjömansbiff* is layered beef, onions, and potatoes in thin slices, cooked with beer.

¹⁵*Slottsstek* is a beef roast with a creamy gravy flavored with anchovy.



A traditional dish that is often mentioned with disgust is yellow pea soup (Fig. 7). “Pea soup with fat, quivering pieces of pork in it.” The smell of the yellow pea soup being cooked in the kitchen produced a kind of stench throughout the school. Other foods that many people had difficulty with and that also have a strong smell are dishes with liver. “Liver patties were dry and strong in taste; it could be hidden with lingonberry jam. Liver patties is an abomination compared to a fried liver slice.”

Some dishes differ from the slightly heavier traditional Swedish dishes, spaghetti with meat sauce (pasta Bolognese), sausage Stroganoff,¹⁶ breaded fish sticks, almond fish gratin,¹⁷ and tacos, dishes that can perhaps be counted as an updated variety of traditional cooking. These dishes are described with a high recognition factor and great approval. “Spaghetti with minced meat sauce that I still crave, and, above all, Milanese soup that I could eat liters of.” In the present study, we obtained a list of dishes that have affected the respondents both positively and negatively (Table 1).

“Comfort food” — creamy, soft, and delicious

Simplicity of dishes, a high recognition factor, and dishes that are particularly suitable for cooking in large scale kitchens and can also be kept warm are remembered positively. One dish that lives up to these criteria is minced meat sauce and spaghetti, the favorite food mentioned most often. Even variations on the favorite dish are raised to the skies. “A dish where large macaroni and minced meat sauce were pre-mixed in a large, messy, lovely mass. Real comfort food that you ladled onto the plate and put ketchup on.” Some of the dishes that are described



Fig. 7. Yellow pea soup with crispbread and Aromat seasoning
(Photo by Cecilia Magnusson Sporre)

¹⁶This is a variety of the classic dish *Beef Stroganoff*, popular among children.

¹⁷This popular fish gratin is covered with a mixture of grated almonds, breadcrumbs, and butter.



Table 1. Top ten list of foods remembered with delight and/or disgust

Delight	Disgust
1. Spaghetti with meat sauce	1. Black pudding
2. Fried fish, cold sauce, potatoes	2. Boiled fish/fishballs
3. Pancakes	3. Boiled potatoes
4. Meatballs	4. Liver patties
5. Black pudding	5. Liver stew
6. Hot dogs, mashed potatoes	6. Yellow pea soup
7. Potato buns	7. Pölsa (eng. hash)
8. Falu sausage	8. Lapskojs
9. Fish fingers	9. Kalops
10. Sausage Stroganoff, rice	10. Brown beans (stewed)

with love and longing are often mentioned with words like “creamy, soft, and delicious.” Food that gives a sense of pleasure and comfort. The milk stewed or boiled macaroni that were “big, soft, and a little sticky” are described as positive memories from the school lunch. Someone said that “everything with white sauce” tasted good, and gratins of various kinds are described as tasty and having good texture. Milk stewed macaroni with *falú*¹⁸ sausage is highlighted in positive terms, despite — or perhaps thanks to — the sticky, soft, and overcooked macaroni in *béchamel* sauce and “pale sausage in oven trays without frying surface.” Pancake with sweet jam, for some lucky ones even with whipped cream, comes high on the list of beloved dishes from school days. “The pancake was square and a little thicker and was served with good jam. Clear favorite!” Attention is also paid to the oven baked variant of pancake. “Oven baked pancake with jam [lingonberry] — it was always good and a little doughy in the middle.” Soft, tasty, and easy to eat.

Meatballs are a similarly appreciated dish. They may not be comparable to “mom’s” home-made meatballs, but the industrially manufactured ready-made meatballs are remembered by many with delight, as extra delicious together with “mashed potatoes and sauce.” “Meatballs in sauce, in those days it was ‘real’ meatballs.” There were also some who were not as positive and thought the school’s “meatballs were hard and had a peculiar taste.” Many minced meat dishes have also been mentioned as clear memories of the school meal, such as *järpar*, patties and stuffed cabbage rolls. We also found some creative interpretations of classic dishes: “*Sjömansbiff* (minced meat patties tucked into mashed potatoes, with fried bacon and chopped parsley on top).”

¹⁸“*Falu* sausage” comes from the Swedish city “Falun.” This name-protected sausage was originally made from oxen that worked by the mines. Today’s *Falu* sausage is a cooked sausage containing smoked pork and beef.



The hot potato

The potatoes served in school are widely disputed. Potatoes with “skin,” i.e., the hard, dried membrane around the potatoes that rose while being kept warm were not appreciated. Inside the “skin,” the potatoes were “soft and watery.” Those who have been served canned potatoes describe them as “grey, hard potatoes that tasted like chemicals.” The potatoes were usually hard, had a crust, and tasted stale. “Disliked all boiled potatoes — it was really nasty. Overcooked, half cold, and had always been kept for a long time so it got an extra skin. Took several years for me to start eating potatoes again. Now, I think it’s delicious.” The mashed potatoes were more appreciated, and preferably “homemade and not made from powder.” “The burgers with the mashed potatoes. Tasted like home. It was homemade mash with butter and white pepper and lots of onions and good lingonberry jam! Everything with mash was good.” Even potato buns with lingonberries were a dish that many liked because it was tasty and easy to eat. Potato buns are also mentioned as a dish that was not served at home and therefore it tasted extra good at school.

Black pudding — loved and hated

The black pudding¹⁹ is a dish that evokes many memories; many described it as a favorite dish because it was a little chewy yet crunchy, probably from being kept warm. “It tastes good when it’s fried, because then it’s not soft and bloody.” Others describe the same sensory phenomena as “shoe soles,” where the black pudding did not evoke any positive memories. “Dry, well-fried black pudding was not tasty, called shoe soles. Had dried on the trays in the oven.” A common combination on the menu was black pudding and potato buns served together, two dishes enhanced by a large spoon of lingonberry jam. “Black pudding with lingonberries (I liked the taste, even though I understood from everyone that it should be disgusting).” Just the thought of eating black pudding could cause nausea due to the fact that it is made of blood. Kitchen staff that have forced children to eat it traumatized some of them. “Black pudding gave me nausea, had to eat it. Never ate it again. The kitchen staff forced me to finish it.” Classic accompaniments to the school’s black pudding were shredded cabbage mixed with lingonberry jam, and sometimes even vitamin C-rich orange juice or orange wedges were served with the black pudding, which created a “feeling of luxury” (Fig. 8).

The debated fish

Fish dishes at school that the respondents remember fondly were fried, breaded fish fillets or fish fingers with cold sauce (made from sour milk), quite a favorite among the participants. Fried mackerel with spinach is also mentioned, and one person highlighted “especially the delicious mackerel skin.” Many seem to have a love/hate relationship with the buttery fish gratin with almond on top; some liked the almond crust while others were skeptical. Fishballs, however, caused a clear division into two sides: for and against. Some thought the dish was simple and delicious, with nice flavors. “Fishballs, you could put them on the crispbread, so good.” Others recall terrible experiences that have left deep marks. “Fishballs, which were served on the first day of school. They grew in my mouth, and I couldn’t swallow. In the end, I sat alone at the table

¹⁹Black pudding (*blodpudding*) is a large sausage made from pig’s blood.





Fig. 8. School lunch tray with black pudding served with shredded cabbage mixed with lingonberry jam (Photo by Cecilia Magnusson Sporre)

in the canteen. And cried. A kind teacher came to the rescue. They were not gracious, those serving staff, watching me as we threw away the food. After that, I never ever ate in the canteen again.”

“All the crispbread we ate when we didn’t like the food”

The crispbread with butter and *Aromat* seasoning was a big hit until the school removed the seasoning because no one ate anything else. In some cases it went so far that restrictions were also imposed on crispbread because you were not allowed to just fill your stomach with bread. A glass of milk and crispbread with grated carrots, *Aromat*, barbecue seasoning, or maybe just a little salt, have satisfied the hunger of many children’s stomachs, both past and present.

THE SOCIAL SCHOOL FOOD HERITAGE

When asked about the importance of the school meal, most believe that the lunch was important for coping and getting energy for the afternoon classes. But equally important was the social aspect, for the school meal was something that united: “I loved the school lunch! I liked almost all the food, and I thought it was super nice to sit and talk to my friends.” The school meal offered companionship in different ways, such as when you stood in line in pairs outside the canteen and tried to guess by the smell what was being served for lunch.

The serving staff noticed all the pupils, even though the schools were quite large. “I have always appreciated the food I received, and I had a good relationship with the staff. I think they’ve all had a positive impact on my interest in food.” The kitchen staff even visited the dining room sometimes, talking to the pupils about the food, and the pupils also got involved in the school kitchen. Sometimes special ties developed that brought benefits. “When applesauce was served as an accompaniment to a dish, my friend and I each got a whole plate to eat with



milk. This was not a privilege for everyone but was based on tight ties between the staff and us. We were both diligent helpers and eager to please.”

The controlling school meal

Others testify to social control. Within and between classes, groups developed depending on where people sat. “I have more memories of the school canteen itself and the social aspects: queuing, choosing a table, who to sit with, pushing boys, etc. That one survived!” Under peer pressure, one would say the food was “disgusting” even if one thought it was good. It was also important how one behaved, what one ate or threw away. If someone dropped a plate or glass on the floor, all pupils applauded. Even one’s intake would be controlled. “One didn’t get to determine the amount on the plate — really hard, because I’ve always been a picky eater, not particularly fond of eating, and especially not the food in the school canteen.” Pupils were forced to eat what was on their plate, accompanied by the expression “Everyone must taste.” The waste bin was carefully monitored so that no one threw away food (Fig. 9). “One of the serving staff stood at the exit and looked through the napkins that were being thrown away and picked them up from the trash as proof that you hadn’t finished your food (e.g., the potatoes).” Different strategies emerged around food one didn’t like: throwing away the food when the waste bin guard was talking to someone, hiding it in a cup that one placed upside down, putting it into the flowerpots, filling one’s mouth with food and spitting it out outside, sticking crispbread sandwiches on the underside of the dining table. “This taught me that it was not possible to communicate with adults/authorities, just obey, manipulate, or go behind their back.”

“I ate as much as I could”

Some respondents recalled that the school meal was the only hot meal they got during the day, sometimes also their only meal. “I remember my friend, always loving the school food. She helped herself several times. Then I found out it was the only meal she ate all day.”



Fig. 9. The handing in of dishes is supervised by the kitchen staff
(Photo by Harry Moum, Mölnåls Stadsmuseum)



The respondents maintain that it is a good thing that school meals are free because it is fair and equal. The school meal was also used as a tool to draw attention to social injustices. “One UN²⁰ day, the teachers had decided that you would draw a lottery ticket when entering the school canteen — some hit the ‘jackpot’ and got to eat mashed turnips and pork sausage, others only got rice, and I imagine that some got like a piece of bread without anything else.” UN day was a recurring event in many schools whose purpose was to highlight injustices in the world and being grateful for what we have. Moreover, the school meal was a chance to get healthy and good food if one ate poorly at home. “I took school meals for granted and never thought about what a luxury it was to get it.” Others point out that through school meals, they learned to try dishes that were different than what they were used to from home and have thus gained a broader taste repertoire. For some, school meals were the only contact with traditional Swedish food.

THE SCHOOL MEAL HERITAGE TODAY AND TOMORROW

This paper offered an insight into the food and taste memories of the school meal that people of different ages in Sweden express. In addition, the social significance of the school meal was pointed out. The basic idea behind the school meal that it should provide everyone the energy to cope with schoolwork still applies. The fact that school meals are served on equal terms, regardless of background and socioeconomic position, also remains and is probably still important for some pupils. Interestingly, a recent study analyzed the long-term effects of the free, nutritious school lunch program that was implemented in Sweden (LUNDBORG et al. 2021). People participating in the program had a 3% higher life-time income, and it seems that socioeconomic inequalities in adulthood were reduced. Indeed, the free school lunch can be seen as a welfare service and a part of Swedish public health efforts (PERSSON OSOWSKI – FJELLSTRÖM 2019). However, an earlier study showed that although people like the idea of the school meal being part of the Swedish welfare state, many regard it as a second-class meal (PERSSON OSOWSKI et al. 2010).

Many of the respondents’ stories presented here did not fully support that position, however, as there were both positive and negative opinions regarding the school meal and some participants even regarded the school lunch as more appealing than the food served at home. We can establish, though, that there are favorite dishes and dishes people strongly detest, and that school meals leave no one indifferent. One question is how much of our traditional school food heritage will survive in the future? Yellow pea soup, liver stew, black pudding, and *pölsa* (hash) were not among the most appreciated dishes. One thing is certain: food culture is constantly changing (ANDERSON 2014). Some parts of our traditional school food heritage will certainly fall into oblivion, while other parts will persist in some way or another. Today, there is an increase in climate-friendly plant-based foods and vegetarian dishes on school menus (Figs 10–11). Perhaps we will discover new interpretations of traditional signature dishes, reborn in vegetarian guises, maybe making previously unpopular dishes likable, thus contributing to the reduction of food waste, a major issue that school canteens are dealing with. Our study indicates that plate waste might be a recurring problem in relation to unpopular dishes.

Among kitchen staff, there seems to be a notion that popular dishes and vegetarian foods in schools generate more food waste. However, in a recently published study, both popular dishes

²⁰Abbreviation of the United Nations.





Fig. 10. Serving line with vegetarian soups and pasta, Samskolan, Göteborg (Photo by Gunilla Martinsson, Skolmatsakademin)

and plant-based options in schools were perceived to be generating less waste than unpopular dishes (SUNDIN *et al.* 2023).

The trend points towards increased choices in school canteens by serving several different options daily, which makes it possible to compose one's own plate based on individual preferences. That the school meal should satisfy different needs is a general expectation, but it is nevertheless inevitable that the privilege of the free school meal in itself will put some constraint on the extent of individual choice (PERSSON OSOWSKI – FJELLSTRÖM 2019). However, the ideal meal experience includes several other aspects as well, apart from the actual food on the plate.²¹ Not the least among them is the atmosphere in the dining room, along with social aspects. The social interaction during the school meal was shown to be a vital issue for many respondents, with narratives about the atmosphere and the importance of sitting together at the table in the school canteen: school meal commensality. Indeed, the school meal experience depends to a high extent on the interaction between the social and the physical space (BERGGREN *et al.* 2020). As pointed

²¹SWEDISH FOOD AGENCY *et al.* 2022.



Fig. 11. Salad bar, Samskolan, Göteborg (Photo by Gunilla Martinsson, Skolmatsakademin)

out by Claude Fischler, commensality is one of the most important features of human activity, as it means eating together at the same table (FISCHLER 2011). Memories of different foods and traditional dishes, along with memories of school meal commensality, make up the Swedish school meal heritage, which is still vividly present in the minds of many and will probably remain so in the future.

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