

Trivia from the **Food Cultures of the World**

Part 7: School Lunch Programs Initiated to Relieve Deprived Children

School lunch is a starting point in educating children about food, and a great system for parents. Now implemented in many countries throughout the world, this system is said to have originated at a private school in France in 1720. Later, in the mid 19th century, school lunch programs were adopted widely in the West with the goal of providing relief for deprived children. Japan's school lunch system was initiated to assist children in financial or physical need.

Japan's first school lunch program is said to have originated in 1889 at Chuai Elementary School, a private school in the town of Tsuruoka, Yamagata Prefecture. A lunch of rice balls, a grilled fish, and pickles was served to children in need. In 1917, nutritionist Dr. Saeki advocated the school lunch as a nutritious meal beneficial to frail children. A program was adopted at Taimei Elementary School in Tokyo, though the concept did not spread right away.

In 1932 the first government-subsidized school lunch program was implemented not only to relieve deprived children but to increase school attendance and to improve the health of students. These school lunch programs became crucial to the undernourished children in the years following the Great Depression of 1929. Unfortunately, with the start of World War II,



Colonel Sams and his staff observing the school lunch prepared with LARA supplies at the Nagata-cho Elementary School in Tokyo

school lunch programs were abandoned throughout the country.

LARA Supplies Contributed to School Lunches

In postwar Japan, the streets teemed with malnourished children. Distressed by this crisis, a campaign to reestablish school lunch programs was initiated.

Thanks to such efforts, school lunch programs resumed in six major cities in 1946. A variety of international aid programs, including the Licensed Agencies for Relief in Asia (LARA), the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and Government and Relief in Occupied Areas (GARIOA) contributed to Japan's school lunch programs. The first LARA cargo arrived in Yokohama, was transported with a police escort to Tokyo, and presented in a ceremony to Nagata-cho National Elementary School in Kojimachi Ward. The cargo contained such things as butter, jam, canned goods, rice, wheat, clothes, and shoes.

School Lunches Improve with Rapid Economic Growth

In 1952, school lunch programs, offering a complete meal, were implemented in all elementary schools nationwide. In 1953, the National School Lunch Act was

enacted to promote children's awareness of nutrition and proper eating habits. Thus, school lunch became a part of the curriculum. At that time, school lunches consisted of a long bread roll, a common side dish, and powdered skim milk.

This standard menu, except for the occasional addition of margarine or jam, continued until the mid 1960's, when powdered skim milk was replaced with whole milk and fruit was added for dessert. The long bread rolls were sometimes replaced by sliced bread or noodles. As Japan's economy continued to grow, more variations were gradually added to the menu.

From the late 1970s, rice was added to the menus, further increasing the variety of lunches with *takikomi-gohan* (rice and various other ingredients steamed in a seasoned



LARA supplies were also provided to orphans sheltered at the Ishiwatari home in Tokyo (photos, taken around mid December, 1946, from Gekkan Okinawasha)

stock), pilaf, and *chirashi-zushi* (vinegared rice arranged with various toppings) filling out the menu. School lunches also became more specialized with the utilization of local products in their recipes and menus. Most importantly, these school lunch programs have become the foundation of children's nutritional education.

References

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Trivia from the Food Cultures of the World

Part 8: Enjoying Rice While Traveling Overseas —Europe and U.S.A.—

Rice is cooked and eaten in many different ways all over the world. Although Europe and the United States have a comparatively shorter history of rice cultivation, rice has become an established part of the diets of these regions, with a wide variety of rice dishes served at the dinner table.

The Metamorphosis of European Rice Dishes

The people of Italy and Spain eat more rice than do any other population in Europe. It is said that rice cultivation came to Spain with the Arabs in the 8th century. Today the main rice-producing regions are Valencia and Seville. The best known Spanish rice dish is paella, which originated in Valencia. Today, paella is made in every household and there are even paella competitions. It seems that the



Paella (© Alamy Images/PPS)

people of Barcelona make paella whenever they have too many leftovers taking up space in the refrigerator. One paella dish even uses squid ink.

As paella was introduced to Italy, it became risotto, common in Milan and the north of Italy. Risotto was not difficult to prepare and it had a great number of variations. One book introduces 128 different types of risotto. When more soup stock and vegetables are used to prepare risotto, the dish becomes minestrone. When a cream sauce is poured over risotto and the dish is baked, it becomes *gratinati*, or

gratin. *Suppli* (fried rice balls) can be made by adding mozzarella cheese to risotto and deep frying the combination.

One unique dish is rice salad. This dish tells us that rice is considered a vegetable. Salad oil, vinegar, lemon juice, sugar, and salt are mixed into cooked rice. Other ingredients such as cucumbers, ham, cloud ear mushrooms, and green *shiso* (leaf of the beefsteak plant) are also added. This rice mixture is then topped with boiled octopus, shrimp, and tomatoes tossed in a mustard dressing.

An Accident Becomes a Popular Dish

Rice cultivation began in the U.S. at the end of the 17th century when a cargo ship, traveling from Madagascar to Europe, wrecked on the Atlantic Ocean and washed up on the east coast of the United States, near Charleston, South Carolina. The unhulled rice dis-

covered on the wreckage was grown in the area surrounding Charleston and later introduced to Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri.

The most popular rice dish in the U.S. must be jambalaya. A local specialty of New Orleans, jambalaya is said to have originated with a cook named Jean, who threw a bunch of leftovers together—*balayez* (“mix some things together” in the local dialect)—to feed a hungry guest. The pleased and satisfied guest gratefully named the dish, “Jean Balayez”.

Although steak is the first food that

comes to mind when we consider American cuisine, Americans today have become much more health-oriented. Rice in particular is drawing keen attention, and sushi bars and seafood restaurants have become very popular.



Jambalaya (© Alamy Images/PPS)

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