

Japan's school lunch menu: A healthy meal, made from scratch

By Chico Harlan, Washington Post

TOKYO – In Japan, school lunch means a regular meal, not one that harms your health. The food is grown locally and almost never frozen. There's no mystery in front of the meat. From time to time, parents even call up with an unusual question: Can they get the recipes?

"Parents hear their kids talking about what they had for lunch," said Tatsuji Shino, the principal at Umejima Elementary School in Tokyo, "and kids ask them to re-create the meals at home."

Japan takes seriously both its food and its health and, as a result, its school lunches are a point of national pride – not a source of dismay. As other countries, including the United States, struggle to design school meals that are healthy, tasty and affordable, Japan has all but solved the puzzle, using a system that officials here describe as utterly common sense.

In the United States, where obesity rates have tripled over the past three decades, new legislation championed by Michelle Obama has pushed schools to debut menus with controversial calorie restrictions. But even the healthiest choices are generally provided by large agri-food companies, cooked off site, frozen and then reheated, and forced to compete in cafeterias with all things fried, salty and sweet.

Schools in Japan, by contrast, give children the sort of food they'd get at home, not at a stadium. The meals are often made from scratch. They're balanced but hearty, heavy on rice and

vegetables, fish and soups. The meals haven't changed much in four decades.

Mealtime is a scene of communal duty: In both elementary and middle schools, students don white coats and caps and serve their classmates. Children eat in their classrooms. They get identical meals, and if they leave food untouched, they are out of luck: Their schools have no vending machines. Barring dietary restrictions, children in most districts can't bring food to school, either, until they reach high school.

Japan's system has an envious payoff – its kids are relatively healthy. According to government data, Japan's child obesity rate, always among the world's lowest, has declined for each of the past six years, a period during which the country has expanded its dietary education program.

Japan does struggle with childhood and adolescent eating disorders, and government data show a rise in the number of extremely skinny children. But there is virtually no malnutrition resulting from poverty. Japan's children will live on average to 83, longer than those in any other country, according to the World Health Organization.

When it comes to food, Japan has some deeply ingrained advantages. Children are taught to eat what they are served, meaning they are prone to accept, rather than revolt against, the food on their plates. But Japan also invests heavily in cultivating this mind-set. Most schools employ nutritionists who, among other tasks, work with children who are picky or unhealthy eaters.

Though Japan's central government sets basic nutritional guidelines, regulation is surprisingly minimal. Not every meal has to meet precise caloric guidelines. At many schools, a nutritionist draws up the recipes – no bureaucratic interference. Central government officials say they have ultimate authority to step in if schools are serving unhealthy

food, but they can't think of any examples where that actually happened.

Funding for lunches is handled locally, too: Municipalities pay for labor costs, but parents – billed monthly – pay for the ingredients, about \$3 per meal, with reduced and free options for poorer families.

Notable is what's lacking: You don't see low-fat options. You don't see dessert, other than fruit and yogurt. You occasionally see fried food, but in stark moderation. On a recent day at Umejima, kids were served the Japanese version of fried chicken, known as karaage. Each child was allowed one nugget.

Officials at Adachi Ward, in northern Tokyo, say they run a "fairly standard" school lunch program in the ward's 71 elementary schools and 37 middle schools. And because this is food-obsessed Japan, those standard meals are restaurant-worthy; in fact, the ward publishes a full-color cookbook based on its best school meals.

District officials allow themselves to brag for just one reason, their success in cutting food waste to 5 percent. This follows the "Oishii Kyushoku," or "Delicious School Lunch," program they created five years ago to get kids more interested in what they were eating.

At Umejima, one of Adachi Ward's schools, the hallway walls look like the pages of Bon Appetit magazine. Hand drawings of healthy lunches dreamed up by students hang near the principal's office. There are charts of beans and spices. Then there's the real food, which is chopped, diced and simmered every morning, beginning at 8a., by a staff of 12. Shortly after noon, they'll have meals for 760 students.

"Everything is cooked on site," school nutritionist Kimii Fujii said. "We even make our own broth."

Fujii has an expansive job – part educator, part chef and the point person for parent questions. Because of concerns about food contamination in the wake of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, Fujii gives a daily account on the school Web site of where the lunch ingredients are coming from: the sardines from Hyogo, the carrots from Chiba, the bean sprouts from Tochigi.

She writes the recipes, changing them to reflect seasonal ingredients, and she's realized, over the years, that kids will eat almost anything if you serve it to them right. They'll eat hijiki, an earthy black seaweed, if you mix it with rice. They'll eat small whole fish, heads and all, if they are lightly fried. Tofu is an easier bet, but just to be sure, it sometimes comes with minced pork.

Fujii doesn't teach a class, but three or four times a year, classrooms come visit her for lunch – meaning they eat in the cafeteria, rather than their classrooms. This field trip comes with a small price: After the kids have served themselves the food, but before they can eat, they get a five-minute lecture about the items on their plates.

Lunchtime, on this particular day, begins with a call from the teacher.

“People in charge, please come up.”

Six third-graders put on their white sanitary smocks and caps and take their positions behind serving trays. One child eyes the thick reservoir of Sichuan tofu and wiggles his right arm, as if to warm up his ladling hand. A teacher shows the girl serving rice how much to give each of her classmates – between 160 and 180 grams.

“Is this OK?” the girl asks as the first student comes by.

When everybody sits back down, the lecture begins.

“Today’s meal is made up of various ingredients, but to fill you up, you have to eat everything fully,” Fujii told the class of third-graders. “If you finish this whole lunch, it means you are taking in 21 ingredients.”

One child interrupted.

“You have to eat a balanced meal.”

“That’s right,” Fujii said. “You can get full without vegetables, but we still need them. Why do we need them? Because they have Vitamin C, which makes you stronger.”

Japanese food, contrary to the common perception, isn’t automatically healthy; it includes crispy chicken, rich bowls of salty ramen with pork belly and battered and deep-fried tempura. But, like most cuisines, it can be healthy.

Japan began emphasizing healthy food for its students in the aftermath of World War II, when the government prioritized education and health as a way to catch up to the modernized West. For a decade after the war, school lunch food was still coming from international donations. Many older Japanese remember postwar school meals of powdered skim milk, bread and daikon radish. But by the 1970s, the school meal came to look much like the modern-day standard. These days, ethnic food (such as Korean or Italian) is mixed in once or twice per week.

Japanese government officials say no other country has copied Japan’s system of made-from-scratch meals eaten in classrooms, or even tried to.

“What is most difficult for me to explain is why we can do this and other countries cannot,” said Masahiro Oji, a government director of school health education.

Oji mentioned that last year he attended an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation workshop in Moscow on school lunch

programs. Japan sent members of its education ministry, Oji said. Most other nations sent members from their agriculture or farm ministries.

“Japan’s standpoint is that school lunches are a part of education,” Oji said, “not a break from it.”

Yuki Oda contributed to this report.