

## Japan's School Lunch Program: Born in Tsuruoka

### Origin

The provision of school lunches (*gakko kyushoku*), at public schools throughout Japan is believed to have originated in Tsuruoka around 1889, when a Buddhist confederation began providing meals to children from poorer families to encourage attendance at school.

It is said that a Buddhist priest named Sato Reizan noticed the number of students not attending school because they could not pay school fees. He thought to offer disadvantaged and poor families who could not send their children to school a place for education and led the establishment of Chuai Elementary School on the grounds of Daitokuji Temple in Tsuruoka. The school was tailored to underprivileged children and provided everything the students needed apart from lunch. Children enrolled in the school but Reizan noticed that some of them had no lunch and became concerned that they could not study effectively while hungry and there could be discrimination among those who can afford to bring lunch and those who can't. To raise funds for their lunches, he and other monks in the temple went door-to-door collecting donations. The result was that the students could have a nutritious lunch at school. Over time, Reizan's efforts evolved to become modern Japan's school lunch program.

In 1932, the government began to subsidize the cost of preparing the meals. The school lunch program was expanded steadily but was suspended between 1941 and 1945 while the country was on a wartime footing.

As part of Japan's postwar recovery, the government issued a new policy on school lunches, which focused on daily nutrition. The initial school lunch program was formally re-launched thanks to the help of the Allied Forces that provided supplies. By 1947, 3 million school children in urban areas were receiving school lunches. In 1954, the School Lunch Program Act was established. In the following years, the program was updated continuously to reflect a growing understanding of nutrition and food education. By 2004, a new diet and nutrition teaching specialty was created and, in 2005, the Basic Law of *Shokuiku* (food and nutrition education) was established.

When the school lunch program began, meals were cooked at each participating school. By 1965, however, Tsuruoka City began preparing meals in a central kitchen and distributing them to local schools. As of fall 2020, about 10,000 meals are prepared daily for school children in Tsuruoka.

### Menu evolution

Initially, meals were quite basic and only included a couple of *onigiri* (rice balls), some salt-grilled fish, and a type of braised vegetable. Over the years, more options were offered due to greater availability of ingredients and the shift towards balanced nutrition. Today, bread is being served two or three times a month and meat side dishes are included.

Menus focus on fresh, seasonal produce, with little reliance on processed or canned ingredients in order to maintain the nutritional value of the meal. Tsuruoka continues to develop and refine its program.

### More than a meal

Tsuruoka's school lunch program goes far beyond simply the consumption of a midday meal. Students learn about traditional local dishes and the ingredients used to prepare them through school lunches.

For example, "*Onigiri kyushoku*" (Rice Ball Lunch) is served once a year to allow students to eat that simple meal and learn about the origin of school lunches. Every October and November, the children are served the "All-Tsuruoka Produced School Lunch" that uses only ingredients produced in Tsuruoka. On special occasions, seasonal festive dishes such as *moso* bamboo shoot soup and *imoni* (stewed taro and meat soup) are prepared for traditional holidays. In December, a traditional festival called Daikokusama no Otoshiya is celebrated in Tsuruoka, where the locals prepare food to give thanks to Daikokusama (the deity of wealth and guardian of farmers) for a good harvest. During this day, *kyushoku* will serve dishes that are commonly offered to Daikokusama. They include rice with beans and *hatahata* (Japanese sandfish).

Before beginning the meal, students read fun, interesting facts about the dishes and their ingredients. To further deepen their appreciation for the connection between food and the region, local farmers are invited into the classroom on days when the menu features dishes made with ingredients they have provided. Students and their parents also participate in field trips to local farms, giving them a first-hand look at where their food comes from. Children have the opportunity to try farming tasks such as harvesting cabbage that will be used in the following week's soup or salad.

In addition to providing an education on nutrition, the school lunch program teaches students a wide range of social skills. These include motor skills (for younger children) and table manners like starting their meal together, eating politely, not talking with their mouths full of food, as well as life skills such as teamwork, communication, portioning, and sharing. After eating lunch, there is a scheduled time for students to brush their teeth and clean up their classrooms, teaching them good personal hygiene and cleanliness.

#### Local produce

As the focus on nutrition increased, Tsuruoka began to use locally obtainable produce in its school lunches. In 2000, about 13 varieties of locally produced vegetables were used. As of the summer of 2020, the number of locally sourced vegetables has grown to more than 50. According to the school lunch center, nearly 60 percent of the ingredients are sourced locally, depending on the season. Tsuruoka also takes advantage of the rich variety of unique seasonal produce only available locally. One example is the *moso* bamboo shoot soup made using a variety of bamboo shoots available in the local area only in spring.

The pride of Tsuruoka's contribution to the modern school lunch is celebrated twice each year, in October and November, when menus feature dishes created completely from Tsuruoka-sourced ingredients.

After more than 100 years of school lunch tradition in Tsuruoka, with hundreds of dishes on the menus, a survey of residents over the years reveals similar favorite meals. The students, as well as their parents and grandparents, all chose curry as their top choice. All three generations also agreed on their ideal summer menu item: a special chilled ramen dish, commonly called *ryanpanmen*.

#### Global recognition

In 2014, Tsuruoka was designated the first UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy in Japan. Part of this designation includes the city's commitment to the preservation and passing down of its unique regional cuisine.

The school lunch program serves distinctive meals designed to highlight the local cuisine, backed up by cooking experience programs offered to further promote food education and children's healthy growth. In addition, children learn about the 60 indigenous heirloom crops in the region, which are designated important under the UNESCO Creative Cities Network program.