

The Secret behind Japanese School Lunches

“Kyu-shoku”

One of the reasons why Japan is currently an internationally popular destination is for its food culture. Japanese food (“Washoku” as we say it) is unique for its colorful visuals using seasonal products, and the multi-dimensional flavor made from the subtle yet essential process incorporated in the recipe. Such things like “Dashi” (cooking stock often taken from dried bonito or kelp) which is used to make the base of soups or noodle broths, is a good example that shows how the Japanese takes the extra step to make a delicious dish. These techniques are not limited to professional chefs in restaurants, but are practiced in our daily meals at home, at hospitals, and school lunches.

Today we will introduce the secrets of Japanese school lunches as an example to show how these detailed processes are so essential to our food culture. Most elementary and middle schools in Japan serve pre-made lunch called “Kyu-shoku”, and students eat them in their classrooms with their classmates. The menus are planned out each month, carefully calculated by professionals so that meals are full of variety while being nutritiously balanced.

Here is an example of a “Kyu-shoku” from a local private school in Tokyo. This particular menu consists of fish,

2 vegetable side dishes, rice and miso soup, along with a seasonal dessert. You can see how colorful the menu is, with a variety of different ingredients used for each dish. Schools also change the menu accordingly to the season using different seasonal ingredients. Japanese



households used to celebrate certain traditional holidays by eating a specific traditional meal, but in recent families it is becoming less-accustomed. This is why schools are using “Kyu-shoku” to educate the younger generation the tradition of how the Japanese cuisine show the change of seasons with their seasonal cuisines. Some schools also include regional menus, arranging local dishes from certain regions in Japan.



Who actually makes these nutritious meals for everyone? Schools either have Kyu-shokus delivered to them from local facilities that make these lunches for the hundreds of students in the area, or have their own on-site kitchen. Safety and cleanliness are strictly prioritized, and each licensed chefs go through detailed hygiene procedures before, during, and after the cooking. Meals are made in big portions using enormous sauce pans, stirred with big spatulas, as they carefully measure and control the temperature of the food throughout each process. When the meal is ready, they will be portioned into designated amounts into separate containers, and distributed to each classroom for the students to serve themselves. The students will chant “Itadakimasu” before they eat to thank the people who have served them their meal, and eat their Kyu-shoku to help them boost their energy for the rest of the day. Most Japanese who were educated in a Japanese school have grown up eating these special lunch meals every day, educating the importance of knowing about what you eat. It may look like a simple meal, but behind it is a series of detailed calculations, high-standard hygiene procedures, and effort by each chef.

This value upon our food culture symbolizes how the Japanese find meaning not only in its results, but also in its process - it's not all about how it tastes and its presentation, but it's the small details and its back story that truly makes the total product so special.