

Lunch around the World

by Tracey Middlekauff

What do kids in other countries have for lunch?

What do you usually eat for lunch at school? Maybe you bring a peanut butter and jelly sandwich from home, or grab a cheeseburger or fish sticks in the cafeteria. But how about having some congee or *mee siam*, as kids in Singapore do? Have you ever brought a yummy stuffed *paratha* to school, as kids in Amritsar, India, often do?

Read on to learn about those dishes and more, as we explore what kids around the world eat for lunch.

Nancy, France

Nancy is located in northeastern France, near Germany. The city is famous for its buildings and its parks.

The 411: In Nancy, kids either buy their lunch in the *cantine* or go home for lunch. Unless they have a medical condition and a doctor's prescription, they're not allowed to bring their own lunch from home.

So, what's for lunch?

For about 6 euros (about 8 U.S. dollars) each, siblings Louise C., 12, and Alphonse C., 10, can get an appetizer; a main course of fish or meat; a veggie or carb side dish; cheese; a dessert of fruit, yogurt, or chocolate mousse; and as much bread as they want! Thanks to the rich assortment of fruits, veggies, proteins, starches, and dairy, kids get a well-rounded meal packed with vitamins and minerals.

While kids can choose an appetizer of veggies or cold cuts, there are also hot local specialties available. A good example is *friends*-puff pastries filled with ground meat (usually pork), herbs and eggs.

Louise says she loves to get grape-fruit, a common French appetizer, as her first lunch course.

Madrid, Spain

Madrid is Spain's capital and largest city. It's known for its art museums, parks, and food.

The 411: Lunch is usually a healthy two-course meal. The first course is veggies, rice, or pasta. The second course is a meat or fish dish. Dessert is either fruit or yogurt.

So, what's for lunch?

In a typical school week for brothers Óscar F. and Diego F., the cafeteria may serve swordfish in lemon sauce, lentil soup, chicken with mushrooms, tuna in tomato sauce, roasted chicken, and paella, a Spanish specialty. Paella consists of rice, seafood, meat, peppers, spices, and veggies. It's a great way to get protein, vitamins, and carbs all at once.

Óscar, 8, says that one of his favorite things to eat for lunch is *cocida*, a stew of meat, veggies, and chickpeas, which are high in fiber and protein. Diego, 11, loves anything with salmon.

Beirut, Lebanon

Beirut was known as the Paris of the Middle East until its civil war in the 1970s to early 1990s destroyed much of the city. But the city is rebuilding and slowly returning to what it once was. Most people in Beirut speak English, French, and Arabic.

The 411: Kids may either bring their own lunch from home or buy it in the cafeteria.

So, what's for lunch?

According to Maurice O., 14, the cafeterias sell "fish, meat, chicken, rice, and lentils. ... If kids bring their lunch from home, it's usually sandwiches with cheese or mortadella [an Italian cold cut]."

In the cafeteria, kids can buy a *mankouche*, a low-fat Lebanese flatbread pizza made with cheese and a Middle Eastern spice mix called *za'atar*.

It turns out that when it comes to lunch, kids in Beirut have a lot in common with U.S. kids. According to Maurice, "Most kids' favorite lunch foods are the hamburger, nuggets, pizza, and French fries!"

Amritsar, India

Located in northern India, Amritsar is an important center for the Sikh religion. It's home to the Golden Temple, considered one of the most beautiful shrines in the world.

The 411: Most kids in Amritsar bring their own lunch from home. Chips and soft drinks are strongly discouraged.

So, what's for lunch?

At 11-year-old Sakshi R.'s school, everyone brings a lunch according to a menu set by the school. For example, on Mondays kids bring veggie sandwiches, Tuesdays are called Mother's Choice Days, and on Wednesdays kids bring stuffed *parathas*. Think of a paratha as a cross between a soft, savory pancake and pita bread, stuffed with cheese, veggies, or both. On Fridays, students share their lunch with their classmates. On that day, Sakshi's mom packs homemade cake or popcorn.

Sakshi's favorite lunch is a mayonnaise and veggie sandwich. "I simply love the taste of cheese and mayonnaise," she says. But she also likes trying new things. "I love eating, but I love having a variety. Friday lunch is my favorite!"

The Island of Singapore

Singapore is the smallest nation in Southeast Asia. The diverse population follows many different religions, including Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity. Chewing gum used to be illegal in Singapore, and now only pharmacists are allowed to sell it!

The 411: Most schools in Singapore don't allow the sale of sweets, chocolate, or soft drinks. In fact, overweight kids are required to attend an extra PE session. Hardly any kids bring their own lunch to school because there are so many choices at the cafeteria, known as the canteen or tuck shop.

So, what's for lunch?

At 11-year-old E-lyn C.'s school, there are a number of food stalls where she can purchase fruits, drinks, rice, and local specialties such as congee, one of her favorite lunch meals. Congee is a nutritious rice porridge made with meat or seafood and veggies. It's low in fat and high in protein and fiber.

There's also a *halal* food stall at E-lyn's school. Halal food is food that has been prepared according to the dietary laws of Islam. A typical dish is *mee siam*, a protein-rich meal of thin rice noodles with soybeans, tofu, boiled eggs, and garlic chives.

Beyond the Bologna Sandwich

Hungry for some bunny chow?

Believe it or not, it's *not* made of rabbits. It's actually a popular lunch sandwich in Cape Town, South Africa. Bunny chow is made of curry (usually chicken curry) stuffed into a hollowed-out bread roll. "It's a really different way to eat a sandwich," says Cricket Azimia, author of *Everybody Eats Lunch*, a book filled with recipes for lunch foods from all over the world.

How about fried eggs for lunch?

In Brazil, a fried egg often tops off the Bauru sandwich that many people eat for lunch. That famous sandwich is named after the city in which it became popular in the 1930s. A Bauru sandwich has roast beef and melted cheese on a French roll. It's similar to bunny chow in that some of the soft insides of the bread are also removed to make a Bauru.

Make Your Own Bento Lunch!

In Japan, many kids take *bentos* to school for lunch. A bento usually consists of a small portion of rice, a fish or meat, and pickled or fresh vegetables, all packed in a square box. Susan Yuen, author of *Hawai'i's Bento Box Cookbook*, says, "When making a bento, presentation of your food is very important to make your meal not only taste yummy but look delicious as well." The best way to do that is to make your bento colorful, with fruits, vegetables, and other healthy treats, she adds.

To make a fun and easy sandwich bento with your mom or dad, start by finding a cookie cutter. You may already have one around the house, Yuen says.

Then:

1. Take two slices of bread, and cut them using your cookie cutter.
2. Fill your sandwich with your favorite filling, such as cold cuts, cheese, or hummus.
3. Add eyes or fun decorations using foods such as dried fruits (blueberries, raisins, cranberries, currants, and so on), nuts, chocolate chips, cheese, or whatever else you have around the kitchen.
4. Fill in the empty spaces in your bento box with sides such as fruits and vegetables or other healthy snacks.

Fatty Foods Flunk Out Of School

Move over, french fries, extra-cheese pizza, and chocolate chip cookies. School cafeterias across the country are trimming the fat!

Dozens of states have passed nutrition laws to limit unhealthy foods in schools. Texas officials nixed deep-fried foods from school menus. Connecticut lawmakers banned the sale of high-fat, high-sugar snacks in vending machines, cafeterias, and school stores.

Legislators in New Jersey passed one of the toughest school nutrition laws in the country. No schools in that state will be able to sell foods or drinks, such as candy and soft drinks, that list sugar as the main ingredient. Experts predict that more states will soon follow New Jersey's lead.

So what's prompting the menu makeover? Over the past 25 years, the percentage of overweight U.S. kids has tripled. Today, more than 9 million people ages 6 to 19 are overweight, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

School lunches aren't entirely to blame for the obesity crisis, but many experts say the cafeteria menu is a good place to start. More than 26 million children buy lunch at school each day.

Educators and lawmakers hope that providing good food choices at school will help kids make good food choices at home. "Schools play an important role in improving the nutrition of young people," Julia Lear, director of the Center for Health and Health Care in Schools, told *Senior Edition*.

Experts say obesity at a young age can lead to health problems, such as heart disease, later in life. "Childhood obesity just can't be ignored anymore," Lear says.