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## CIR's Corner

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Hello everyone! "CIR's Corner" is my monthly article about international exchange and cultures around the world. I will introduce a variety of interesting international topics.

### This Month's Topic: Packed Lunches and School Lunches

My daughter just started the second grade last month. During spring break, she attended the children's center. The children's center does not provide lunch, so we had to make it for her each day. My husband handled lunch duty at first. He woke up early and lovingly made a traditional *obento* for her. However, he exhausted himself within the first week. From then on, I took over lunch duty. Each day, I made my daughter a standard American packed lunch, which doesn't require cooking, and is relatively easy to put together. Japanese *obento* balance nutrition with presentation, but American packed lunches prioritize convenience. My daughter likes both.



Daddy's bento

I noticed some cultural differences while packing my daughter's lunch. There are many differences with school lunches as well. This month, I'm going to explain American packed lunches and school lunches.

#### Packed Lunches

American packed lunches are overwhelmingly sandwiches. Children enjoy eating peanut butter and jelly (jam) sandwiches, which we call "PBJ." They usually contain either grape or strawberry jam (I personally

prefer strawberry). Other popular sandwiches are ham and cheese, turkey and cheese, bacon lettuce and tomato (BLT), chicken salad, tuna salad, and egg salad.

In addition to sandwiches, we pack foods rich in nutrients such as whole bananas, apples, and oranges, berries like strawberries and blueberries, vegetables like cherry tomatoes and cut raw veggie sticks, and dairy like string cheese and yogurt. Sometimes we pack salty snacks such as potato chips or pretzels, or sweet desserts such as pudding or cookies.



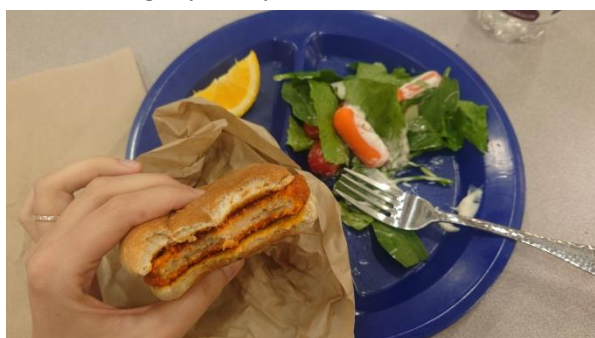
An American "bento box"

In recent years, "bento boxes" similar to the ones used in Japan are growing in popularity, but most people put their food in regular containers and Ziploc bags, and then pack everything in an insulated lunch bag. Americans generally prefer lunch items that can be eaten cold or at room temperature. Most people do not have the time in the morning to cook hot food to pack in their lunch, and many American dishes don't taste good when they get cold anyway. Also, a common concern in both Japan and America is food safety. Even in Japan, I have to

put cooling packs in my daughter's lunch during summer break.

### School Lunch

In Japan, almost all elementary and junior high school students eat school lunch, and they all have to eat the same thing. In America, students can choose to bring their own lunch or eat the school lunch. In addition, there are always two or three main dishes to choose from. The most popular school lunches are pizza, hamburgers, hot dogs, tacos, burritos, and chicken nuggets. My favorite school lunch was super nachos. It was a plate of tortilla chips topped with seasoned ground beef and nacho cheese sauce. I didn't like meat very much, so I always asked for no meat and extra cheese sauce. I was also a fan of the chicken sandwiches. When I go to Gresham with the Junior High School Exchange Program every year, I have the opportunity to eat school lunch again. Eating a school lunch chicken sandwich again brought back memories. Unfortunately, super nachos haven't been on the menu during my visit yet.



Spicy chicken sandwich

In Japan, school lunch is prepared fresh each day in the school kitchen, or at "School Lunch Centers" that distribute lunch to multiple schools. In America, it depends on the school district budget and school facilities, but in most cases, school lunches are delivered to each school frozen or refrigerated and are reheated before serving. This is due to cost efficiency, convenience, and food safety considerations.

American students can help themselves to fruit and vegetables from the salad bar. However, there are many students who don't like vegetables, so schools have a rule that each student must take one serving. They just have to put the vegetables on their plate; they are allowed to throw them away. Students can also use as much ketchup and dressing as they like. Some students cover their

entire plate in ranch dressing.

Students can also choose their milk. Schools offer low-fat and fat-free milk, and sometimes even low-fat chocolate milk. In 2012, whole milk, which is high in calories, was banned from school lunches in order to help reduce childhood obesity. However, in January of this year, President Trump signed a bill to allow whole milk in school lunches again. When I was in school, chocolate milk was only served on Fridays, so I always looked forward to it as a special treat. In Gresham schools, chocolate milk is served every day. I was very surprised by that, since chocolate milk is high in added sugar. Is that really healthier than natural whole milk? I think maybe President Trump made a good decision, this one time.

So, how much does American school lunch cost? Students pay around 300 to 500 yen per meal, and they pay for each meal. However, low income households can get free or reduced price lunch. There are even some school districts that provide free school lunches to all students. Gresham is one of them.

In addition to school lunch, American schools also offer school breakfast. Students can eat breakfast staples such as cereal, bread, fruit, yogurt, sausage, and hard-boiled eggs. In America, there is a large income gap, and there are many students who cannot eat three proper meals a day at home. Being able to eat two nutritious meals at school for free is a saving grace for families struggling with poverty. My family was poor, so I always ate breakfast and lunch at school.



Pancakes, sausage patty, hard-boiled egg, cereal, orange juice, and low-fat milk

As you can see, you can learn a lot about a country's culture and values through their lunches. The most important thing is that both Japan and America value children's mealtime. I hope to teach my daughter to respect both traditions and to create an environment where she can enjoy eating many kinds of food.

# School Lunches of the World



The United States



South Korea



Sweden



France



The United Kingdom



Thailand

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