

We have seen healthy and delicious meals cooked for a school family of approximately one hundred in a number of cosy country schools. But meals cooked for more than a thousand? This sounds scary... We decided to check out the kitchen of Jüri Gymnasium with Evelin Ilves.

We are standing in front of a huge building built of concrete panels. The appearance of the house conveys strong hints of a school-colossus built during the Soviet period. Diagonal strips of windows, stretching from the ground to the roof, passing through a number of floors, however, are details that characterise a new, youthfully mischievous and modern public building. This house is the second home and place of employment for children and adults, numbering more than one thousand.

Atomic youth comes to lunch

The head of the school, Maria Tiro, is awaiting us in the lobby, sparkling in the rays of the sun; she is accompanied by the President of the Students' Representative Body – Rasmus Ristisaar (17), wearing an immaculate suit and stunning us with impeccable manners. Any hesitations that we had dissipate immediately; we feel like we have come to some sort of a university, guided by a well-bred corporate figure.

As we want to meet the cooks before the lunch break, which is to start in a few minutes, we go to the lunchroom immediately.

"A 'Thank you' is free" and "The right way to a guy's heart is through his stomach", declare colourful slogans, drawn by the children and attached to the glass doors of the lunchroom. I only have a minute to wonder how these glass doors will survive with three hundred children rushing in for lunch – and then they come.

A moment after a peaceful piece of music has sounded – this is the bell or call signal chosen by the students – the lunchroom is rapidly filled with students. And surprise-surprise – the doors remain intact and we are still standing on our feet as the children are not rushing in, they arrive.

And they arrange themselves into three queues, like atoms. In 10 minutes, hundreds of children are sitting at tables.

Later, as we talk to the children, we learn that for 15-year-old girls the 35-minute lunch break is a nice chance to have some rest and a nice conversation with their friends while enjoying their lunch. They feel like they are in a cafe. And while the lunchroom is large, the tasteful furniture and giant windows give the impression of being in a spacious and chic lounge.

School meals and Estonian holidays

As we sit down to have a lunch, the headmistress tells us that catering represents an important part of education and development offered by Jüri school. Food and table manners are, after all, an important and substantial part of any culture. The school menu reflects public holidays – the students can enjoy a buffet and huge cake on the anniversary of the Republic, while pea soup is offered on Shrove Tuesday and blood sausages with sauerkraut at Christmas. This list is long as every month has one or more red-letter days. The headmistress discusses all food-related details with cooks and thanks them every night for the good job they do. All of this is music to our ears.

We study the menu – and are unable to find any meals that are not made from scratch. How is this possible? We get the answer from the manager of the cafeteria, Lyudmila Toom, who has been working in this school for 25 years, assisted by cooks Malle Malk and Tiiu Salumäe. "Life is good now; we can order nice cuts of meat, and the vegetables are all peeled as they arrive. We do not use potatoes or carrots treated with sulphites," tells Ljuda, praising today's working conditions and recalling how the cafeteria personnel had to buy half a pig carcass some years ago – the carcass was then cut for cooking and they had real problems with all the fat that was left over.

Cooks and support staff are on the school payroll and every single penny of the 78 euro cents, allocated by the state, is used to pay for the ingredients. The headmistress has graduated from the University of Technology and holds a diploma in catering – so she knows every step food has to take in becoming a fresh and healthy meal served to students.

Ljuda adds that she likes the current organisation of work – it is possible to discuss the meals with the headmistress, who considers the school cafeteria as important as the events that take place in the classrooms or gym. "This is not a company where you are told to buy only the cheapest ingredients. We can order the ingredients that are good and that we want to buy. Of course, the large number of eaters leaves us with some more room for manoeuvring." Although when analysing the menus of schools in the capital, one can easily get the impression that it is impossible to serve high-quality, fresh meals to large numbers of students.

"We use raw milk from Parbo Farm to make porridge; they also supply some of the vegetables and herbs that we use. We have our sauerkraut custom-made; the children like jams and juices from Rõngu and smoothies by Kadarbiku. We would never buy cheap, deep-frozen foreign meat," tells Ljuda, showing us the contents of her fridges that would make any knowledgeable home cook proud.

The Chef Sisters

This may sound funny, but the kitchen manager Ljuda, who attends folk dance classes with many of the parents, must often share school lunch recipes as the children go home and tell their parents that some meals taste better in school. And then Ljuda will tell them that lots of onions and soured cream – no flour mixtures – go into minced meat sauce and raw pumpkin with grated apple makes a delicious salad with a dash of lemon and apple juice, honey and cinnamon. We got to taste this salad and I have to admit that it has now found its way onto the menu of our family.

Ljuda's sister is the chef at Tabasalu School and the sisters exchange recipes and ideas quite often. They go on outings together and recommend ingredients and farmers to each other.

Yes, the culinary art of Ljuda and her team is legendary. Those who attended Jüri School years ago still remember her. And one of them, today an adviser to the President, is the person who recommended her when we were looking for possible candidates for a new, good school lunchroom. And so we are no longer surprised that today's Jüri alumni tell us, laughing, that food is one of the best things they remember from their school years. "Above all, chicken pasta," rings simultaneously from four mouths around the table.