

Evelin Ilves

The food offered at Jõhvi Secondary School and the conditions at Jõhvi Sports School are so good that they're attracting world-class athletes. Big cities: take note!

When I first visited Jõhvi Secondary School a year ago, I ended up in the canteen by accident rather than design. We were just leaving when the bell rang for lunch and the principal suggested we recharge our batteries ahead of the drive back to Tallinn. They were clearly quite proud of what they had to offer.

So off to the canteen we tottered. What awaited us was a surprise to us all – the rich flavours indicated that this was the work of master craftsmen. But when I shared my impressions on Facebook on the way home, describing what the two lovely Russian cooks had served up that day for the almost six hundred Estonian students, I got some unexpectedly harsh feedback.

Online avalanche

"Nothing more than a Potemkin village!" decried the first post. "There's no way they could offer all that on that kind of budget!" disputed the second. "It was all staged so you'd give them a good write-up!" And so it went on for almost two hours, bringing the integrity of the entire canteen into question.

By the time we got to Tallinn, students from the school had started returning fire. "What do you mean it was staged? There wasn't even as much to choose from as usual today. Normally it's better than that. And that's the kind of thing we get all the time." Lessons were obviously over for the day, giving the students the chance to put in their own two cents' worth.

Teachers from the school and even alumni weighed in on the debate: the school had been serving up really good food for twenty years or more, they said. Never mind that the cooks were different back then – they simply have a lot of respect for good food in Jõhvi and do their best with what they're given every day.

As the impressions we'd formed of the school showed no signs of fading, we decided to head back to Jõhvi so as to actually do a story about its school dinners. We also wanted to ask one of its 10th grade students, Reena Koll, what it was she ate that guaranteed her such good results: straight As indoors and world-class results for her age group outdoors. The day before we paid our visit the holder of the Young Athlete of the Year award had again broken the Estonian women's pole vault record, raising the bar to 4.24. The first time she broke it she was just 14. So what, we wanted to know, in jest more than anything else, did she eat?

Sports school stopover

When we arrive at the school, principal Tiit Salvan is waiting for us by the doors to the sports hall. Next to him stands Hanno Koll, Reena's father, who has been giving PE lessons at the school since the autumn alongside his role as an athletics coach in Jõhvi.

Since Priit Käen has been announced as the new director of the sports school that very morning, they want to show us what kind of opportunities are being afforded to their students. We're ushered along a glass-sided walkway linking the school building to the enormous sports hall, where anyone sitting in the tribunes can watch up to three basketball matches being played simultaneously. There's also a gym, of which we can see Hanno is particularly proud. Reena's main coaching takes place at Ahtme sports hall, but athletic elements of her pole vault training programme are also covered here.

Twice a week a bus takes the sports-loving kids from Jõhvi to Pannjärve, where they hit the skiing and running tracks that wind their way through its pine forests. The only thing missing in Jõhvi that would be the icing on the cake is a proper outdoor stadium.

1 x bellyful @ 78¢

Returning to the main building, Koll raises the topic of food. He says that it's not only the sports opportunities that are better in Jõhvi than they are in Tallinn or Tartu, but also the school dinners.

Some of the bigger lads can go hungry at sports camps in Tallinn, he says, and the quality of the food they're given doesn't bear comparison. But what kids are eating is enormously important! If you want to achieve anything in sports, nutrition has to form a key part of your training programme.

The kitchen at Jõhvi Secondary School not only provides lunches, but also proper meals that youngsters who have training to go to can tuck into. New additions to the menu include porridge in the morning and healthier choices in the buffet. This way, the school should be able to offer healthy food at a reasonable price a full three times per day.

Since the 78 cents that the state provides for school dinners per student allows the kitchen to properly feed its elementary school pupils, they don't look to turn a profit from their older peers: their lunch is charged at 78 cents and no more. Nowhere else have we come across such a scheme. The principal adds that if they balance their books properly, they usually have enough money left over at the end of the school year to cater the prom – and to do so in style.

Salad bar of plenty

We've done so many double-takes by this point that it's hard to know what else to expect. So as soon as the lunch bell sounds we follow the secondary students into the canteen. Reena leads us to a table and kindly allows us to dissect her dinner: the lunch menu that day features mince meat and potato bake in a cream sauce, while the salad bar offers a choice of five different sides. Not to mention the big bowl of grated and diced carrot, turnip and cucumber and another bowl full of fruit.

I've clearly been standing staring at the salad bar for some time, since cook Nadežda Lissovaja and her assistant Malle Bachmann come over to ask me whether I need any help. They often tell the kids what's in the salads, they say, adding that the students are only too happy to eat them. Even those who've never seen fresh vegetables at home give one a try, then another, and then another.

The canteen always offers the students four or five salads, of which at least one (but normally two) are made using sour cream or mayonnaise. "The kids love the potato salad and the beetroot salad we make," says Nadežda, without a hint of boastfulness. All of the salads are chopped and mixed by hand, making them more appealing in terms of both texture and taste.

Catering for athletes

The girls at the school are especially fond of the salads, as are the teachers who are conscious of their figures. Someone behind me says that no recipe ever gets a second outing at the canteen – little changes and additions are always being made to make the meals more interesting. But the favourites never change, one example of which is bean salad (see the recipe below). And the potato and salmon salad on offer the day we dine there is so good that everyone at our table goes back for seconds.

Reena too sings the praises of the cooks and says she always eats healthily, with plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables. Her chosen sport, the pole vault, demands the strength of an athlete and the suppleness of a gymnast, but doesn't prescribe a particularly complicated or limiting diet. "I just have to make sure I eat healthy food," she says, "and not overdo the potatoes and pasta." The sides she selects to accompany her main are an enormous pile of tomatoes and a few slices of orange.

Mission: healthy kids

I know it's only natural that some cooks are better at what they do than others, just as one principal can be a better director of their school than someone else doing the same job. But the fact that there are such huge differences in the content and quality of school dinners – as if we were talking about schools in different countries rather than counties – is hard to grasp. How does Jõhvi manage to feed its students a main dish, five salads and fresh fruit and vegetables for 78 cents a head when at my daughter's school, for example, the caterer demanded an extra 35 cents per student when we asked them to provide fruit? Never mind an entire salad bar.

But at least there are magicians out there whose mission is to raise healthy kids. The parents of these young athletes are particularly pleased, as you might expect them to be. Jõhvi presents itself as a very strong alternative to Tallinn and Tartu – or as Hanno Koll is convinced, it's better than both. That's why he and Reena moved there in the first place.

Pak choi and cheese salad

Serves four

200 g of pak choi
80 g of tomato
40 g of diced cheese
80 g of mayonnaise

Slice the pak choi into thin ribbons. Dice the tomato. Roughly grate or dice the cheese. Blend all of the ingredients with the mayonnaise. No seasoning should be required – the cheese and mayonnaise will provide all the salt that is needed.

Bean salad

Serves four

60 g of ham
40 g of apple
140 g of kidney beans (tinned)
80 g of corn (tinned)
80 g of mayonnaise

Chop the ham and apple into small cubes. Strain the beans and corn and add to the ham and apple. Blend in the mayonnaise. Garnish with herbs such as chives or coriander.

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