

# School Dinners

At school I longed for packed lunches. I desired a packed lunch. I wanted a packed lunch. I needed a packed lunch. But I was a child of the 80s and I received free school dinners. My mother would never change her mind but it didn't stop me constantly asking. In fact, I longed for packed lunches with such a longing that seeing the children on the packed lunch table was like a long, slow torture. Nails down the blackboard type of torture.

It wasn't even that my school dinners were bad. Quite the contrary. I dined pre-Turkey Twisters, pre the Jamie revolution, and being at a small school my dinners were cooked from scratch and with local ingredients every day by the same group of hard-working women. As we got changed from PE smells of roast dinners, chicken pie and steamed puddings with custard would waft from the kitchens. If you walked from assembly you would hear the clatter of pans and the happy singing coming from the hub of the food preparation. Queuing with your tray you would view mountains of fluffy rice, succulent steaming stews and jugs full of sweet chocolate custard to smother the rich, squidgy chocolate cake. No, my school dinners were delicious. This was not why I wanted a packed lunch.



I would gaze over enviously at the chosen ones. The special table of packed lunch eaters as they opened their pretty, plastic packed lunch boxes brightly coloured with bold pictures of Thunder-cats, My Little Pony or Care-bears or whatever the current craze was. As they clicked the plastic catches of the suitcase-style boxes and revealed the hidden treasures within, I could only dream.

Obviously there were the obligatory ordinary sandwiches, the staple of the packed lunch, but these were quickly eaten to get to the jewels in the crown. Out of the treasure chests would come rustling crisp packets, the salt-covered, mouth-watering crisps encased in shimmering packets of ruby red, emerald green, blue or pink. The children would delve into these packets as though foraging for pearls in the ocean. Following this would be the biscuits. Square ones, rectangle ones, round ones, ones with two fingers you could snap in half. Chocolate deliciousness enveloped in multi-coloured wrappers or shimmering gold and silver. And this was where my desire for a packed lunch came from. The wrappers; I wanted to open crisp packets then blow and pop them, unwrap sandwiches and pretend the cling film was bubble gum and carefully unwrap the green foil from my perfectly round biscuit then spend ages smoothing it. I wanted wrappers but all I got was an empty plate and a dirty tray.

*Autobiographical extract, by Georgia Hitchin*