



Newsletter of School Feeding

Tajikistan

№29, 2025



"I EAT, I MOVE, I GROW"

Dushanbe hosts first children's festival

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MEANINGFUL LUNCH:

CIS officials gather in Dushanbe for School Feeding Forum

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UN SOUNDS THE ALARM AS CHILDHOOD OBESITY OVERTAKES UNDERWEIGHT

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Pomegranate:

energy in every seed

BENEFITS FOR BODY AND MIND

- 1. A SHIELD FOR IMMUNE SYSTEM**
Pomegranates contain nearly as much vitamin C as oranges, helping the body fight off colds and stay strong and energized.
- 2. SUPER FUEL FOR THE BRAIN**
Pomegranate seeds are a natural "power boost" for the mind. They help children stay focused in class, memorize poems, and remain attentive.
- 3. A FRIEND TO THE HEART**
Pomegranates support heart health by keeping blood vessels strong and clear, helping blood circulate easily throughout the body.
- 4. IRON POWER**
They provide iron, which is essential for energy production and for preventing fatigue.
- 5. DIGESTIVE SUPPORT**
The fiber in pomegranate seeds helps keep the digestive system working smoothly.

The pomegranate is a true treasure chest. Inside are hundreds of ruby-red seeds that look like tiny gemstones. Each one is filled with sweet-and-tangy juice and the power of nature.

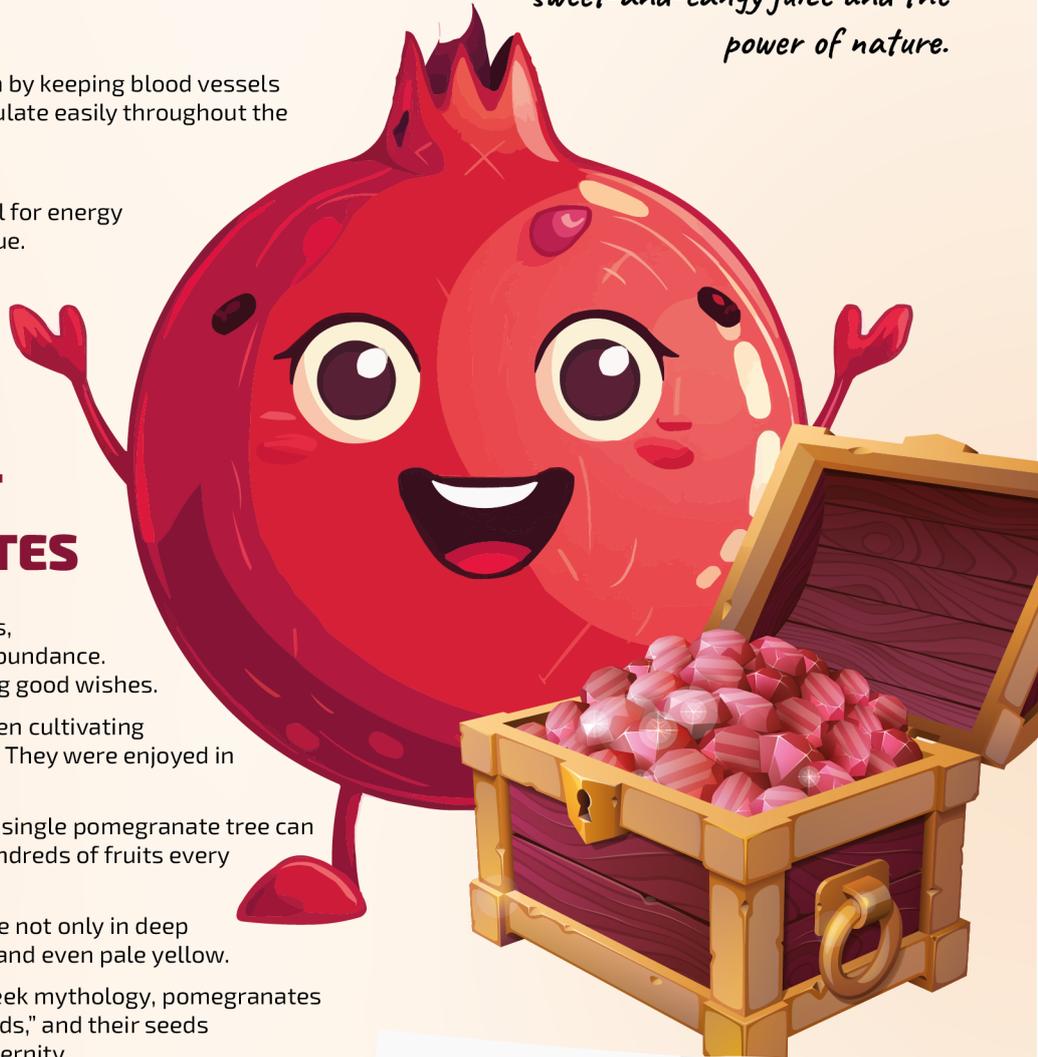
5 FACTS ABOUT POMEGRANATES

- **A SYMBOL OF LIFE.** In many cultures, pomegranates symbolize life and abundance. They are often given as gifts to bring good wishes.
- **AN ANCIENT FRUIT.** People have been cultivating pomegranates for over 5,000 years. They were enjoyed in Ancient Egypt and Ancient Rome.
- **ONE TREE, ABUNDANT HARVEST.** A single pomegranate tree can live up to 100 years and produce hundreds of fruits every year.
- **NOT ONLY RED.** Pomegranates come not only in deep ruby red, but also in shades of pink and even pale yellow.
- **A FRUIT OF LEGENDS.** In ancient Greek mythology, pomegranates were considered the "food of the gods," and their seeds symbolized life, rebirth, and even eternity.

In Tajikistan, the pomegranate is cherished as a symbol of **longevity, beauty, and health**. It grows in warm parts of the country, with the finest varieties found in Hisor, Kubodiyon, and Vakhsh. In autumn, market stalls overflow with vibrant red fruit, and families often buy them for the winter, as pomegranates are considered one of **the best natural sources of vitamins** during the cold season.

IS POMEGRANATE A FRUIT OR A BERRY?

Botanically, the pomegranate is a berry. It belongs to a special group known as "**multi-seed berries**," which contain numerous tiny seeds, each encased in its own juicy sac. In everyday life, however, people usually call it a fruit simply because it feels more familiar.



HOW TO CHOOSE THE PERFECT POMEGRANATE

1. Choose a fruit that **feels heavy** for its size. It's a sign of juiciness.
2. The crown at **the top should be dry**.
3. The skin should be **smooth and without soft spots**.

IMPORTANT:

Pomegranate juice is very concentrated. It's best to dilute it with water and drink it through a straw to protect tooth enamel.

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This issue is made by the Social and Industrial Foodservice Institute on request of United Nations World Food Programme in Tajikistan

CELEBRATION OF TASTE AND KNOWLEDGE:

how Dushanbe marked World Food Day

For 80 years, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has been helping countries fight hunger and build a better future. This year, Tajikistan celebrated FAO's anniversary together with World Food Day by hosting a vibrant family festival on November 1 in Dushanbe.

The event's theme, Hand in Hand for Better Foods and a Better Future, came to life through games, masterclasses, and children's smiles. The day turned into a lively journey into the world of healthy eating for more than 250 guests, including schoolchildren, parents, teachers, farmers, and government representatives.

Children were at the heart of the celebration. FAO, the World Food Programme (WFP), and the Social and Industrial Foodservice Institute (SIFI) prepared a rich program full of surprises.



The Journey of a Grain

While adults attended the official opening ceremony, the younger guests were drawn into a theatrical adventure: a performance called The Journey of a Grain: From Farm to Fork.

The children were not just spectators. They became part of the story. They helped the Little Grain sprout, drove away the harmful Beetle, clapped along as they learned about healthy foods, and crossed their arms when the story turned to unhealthy ones.

The performance ended with a cheerful flash mob, Sources of Strength. Together with the actors, the children repeated the main lesson: just as plants need sun and water to grow, achieving any goal requires friendship and perseverance.

“The atmosphere was incredible,” one of the organizers shared. “The children didn’t want to leave after the show. They genuinely worried about the heroes and remembered how important farmers’ work is and why we must treat bread with care.”

Creative kitchen: parents and children learn to cook with purpose

During the culinary workshops, children and parents became true food artists. At the session titled My Healthy Dish, SIFI experts invited the young participants to create edible artworks. Waiting for them on the tables were colorful vegetables, fruits, yogurts, and nuts.



“I want to make a salad shaped like the sun!” eight-year-old Amina exclaimed. Her enthusiasm quickly spread to the other children: some created rockets out of apples, others made funny smiley faces using bananas and yogurt. Through play, the children learned to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy foods and discovered that eating healthy can be both exciting and enjoyable.

While the children explored food art, parents took part in a session named Healthy School Meals for Every Day, led by expert Zulfiya Faizieva. They learned how to prepare vegetable smoothies, sugar-free cookies, and a colorful Vitamin Rainbow salad. Questions came one after another: “Can I replace the beetroot?” “Is sour cream or yogurt better?” Everyone left not only with new recipes but also with the confidence that a nutritious breakfast for a schoolchild can be quick, delicious, and easy to prepare.

Celebration that united everyone

The formal part of the event was opened by hosts Orzu Isoev and Nargis Kasymova. Deputy ministers of agriculture and education delivered speeches on the importance of child nutrition and education, while representatives of FAO and WFP highlighted their joint work in the country.

One of the most touching moments was when beneficiaries of FAO and WFP programs — ordinary community members — took the floor to personally thank the organizations for their support. Their stories were a heartfelt reminder that efforts to strengthen food security directly impact real families.

No celebration would be complete without a quiz. Children and adults eagerly competed to answer questions such as “Which vitamin is found in carrots?” and “How many food groups should be included in a daily diet?” The winners received small prizes, and everyone walked away with fresh knowledge.

Working together for a better future

The day once again proved that raising a healthy generation requires working together, hand in hand. Schools, parents, government, and international organizations all share the same goal. The celebration came to an end, but its most important outcome remained: the joy on children’s faces and parents’ renewed motivation to make each day a little healthier and tastier for their families.



On October 25 Dushanbe welcomed its first large-scale children's festival, "I Eat, I Move, I Grow," which brought together more than 1,500 children and parents at Alisher Navoi Park. The main goal of the event was to inspire families to embrace healthy eating habits and active lifestyles, showing that caring for health can be fun, delicious, and unifying.

DUSHANBE HOSTS FIRST CHILDREN'S FESTIVAL "I EAT, I MOVE, I GROW"

Festive atmosphere

From early morning, the park was filled with excitement. Families received branded T-shirts and festival maps marking the locations of different zones. As they explored all five areas, participants collected stickers and received souvenirs upon completing the route.

The hosts and organizers of the festival — representatives of the Ministry of Health and Social Protection of the Population, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Tajikistan, the UN World Food Programme (WFP), the Social and Industrial Foodservice Institute (SIFI), and the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Tajikistan — welcomed guests from the main stage.



The celebration opened with an energizing morning workout by Crocus Fitness, followed by the first collective flashmob, Healthy Crunch, which became a symbol of the event. All participants bit into their apples at the same moment, filling the park with the refreshing sound of a healthy start to the day.

Learning through play

The festival followed the edutainment format, which implies learning through play. Across five themed zones, children and parents discovered the principles of healthy eating, physical activity, and the benefits of local foods.

In the “Fruit and Vegetable Art” zone, children painted and decorated clay fruits and vegetables. In the “Taste of Childhood” interactive area, they guessed foods by taste and smell. Meanwhile, parents joined “Healthy Alternative” cooking masterclass, where popular food blogger Shamsiddin Nasriddinov and food technologists from SIFI demonstrated how to replace fast food with simple, tasty, and nutritious meals.

One of the festival’s highlights was the interactive performance “How Children Helped the Hamburger Get Healthy.” This educational show taught children how unhealthy foods can become healthy thanks to knowledge and teamwork. Together with the actors, the children learned how to choose healthy ingredients and created their own healthy plate.

The main stage also hosted the “Runway of Health” costume parade, where young participants showcased their creative “vitamin looks” and spoke about the nutritional value of the foods they’ve chosen.

The farmers’ market attracted great attention as well. Visitors could taste organic products grown by local producers and by schoolchildren involved in the BizKids initiative. All proceeds from the market will be donated to charity, proving that caring for health can also bring benefits to others.

Movement is life!

At the festival’s sports zone, Crocus Fitness trainers led fun relays and mini-workouts, showing that sport is not just about competition but about joy, energy, and movement. Players from the national football team of Tajikistan impressed the crowd with their skillful tricks

and hosted an autograph session for young fans.

For teenagers, there was a special Healthy Lifestyle Tech Zone, where participants could take photos, send them through an app, and instantly receive printed copies on-site. This interactive activity became one of the highlights of the day. Children eagerly shared their photos and took home lasting memories of a bright celebration of health.

The festive mood continued with a vibrant concert program featuring children’s creative groups, singer Alimukhammad Fakirov, dance ensembles, and popular artist Farrukh Khasanov.

The event concluded with a prize draw for participants and heartfelt words of gratitude from the organizers.



МЕХУРАМ МЕГАРДАМ МЕАФЗОЯМ.

WFP
Барномаи
Сотавории
Ҷаҳонӣ
НАҶОТИ
ҶАЁТ
БЕҶБУ
ЗИНДА

SIFI
ФИЗ



Healthy habits – a shared responsibility

The importance of the festival, held as part of the School Feeding Development Programme in Tajikistan, was emphasized by representatives of government institutions.

Zulfiya Abdusamatzoda, Deputy Minister of Health and Social Protection of the Population of the Republic of Tajikistan, noted: “I want to draw special attention

to the participation of parents in this festival. Their involvement is no coincidence, as parents play a vital role in the proper development of a child. Children are the future of our nation, and it is essential to teach them to appreciate the work of farmers and to make informed food choices from an early age.”

She also encouraged families to gradually reduce consumption of fast food and include more local dairy products, vegetables, and fruits in their diets.



Badriddin Muzaffarzoda, Deputy Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Tajikistan, addressed schoolchildren with the following words: “We must remember that proper, healthy nutrition is the foundation of our growth, energy, and success. Today, we see active, enthusiastic children supported by their parents, and that makes us all truly happy.”

Together for a healthy future

“I Eat, I Move, I Grow” festival marked a milestone in promoting a culture of healthy eating and active lifestyle among schoolchildren.

Organizers are confident that such initiatives help children not only have fun but also understand that health is a daily choice, one that begins with simple and joyful habits.





Long before the first school bell rings, the lights are already on in the kitchen. Someone is stirring porridge, someone is sliding trays of buns into the oven, someone is tasting the soup, hoping the children enjoy it.

These people usually stay behind the scenes of school life. However, once a year, everything changes. At the national Best School Cook competition, they step into the spotlight, both literally and figuratively. Here, the applause is for those who, day after day, provide schoolchildren with hot, nutritious, and delicious meals.

BEST SCHOOL COOK 2025 COMPETITION: CREATING MEALS CHILDREN LOVE

When competition becomes a tradition

In 2025, the annual Best School Cook competition was held for the fourth time, achieving record-breaking participation and results. A total of 145 applications were submitted, twice as many as in the early years. This time, in addition to cooks from rural schools participating in the UN WFP School Feeding Programme, schools from major cities — Dushanbe, Khujand, and Bokhtar — also joined in.

Fifty-five participants advanced to the provincial semifinals. Nine finalists made it to the national final, representing all provinces of the country and its two largest cities, Khujand and Dushanbe.

Supporting this effort is a strong partnership: the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Tajikistan, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection of the Population, the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), and Russia's Social and Industrial Foodservice Institute (SIFI). Their joint actions have



turned the competition into a meaningful platform for improving school meals and supporting the professional growth of school cooks nationwide.

More than competition

The competition serves as intensive training for those who prepare meals for children every day.

Preceding the provincial stages, participants attended online seminars covering the specifics of school meals, food safety and hygiene standards, and working with standardized flowcharts. This year, previous finalists joined the training to share their experiences, show how participation in the competition contributed to improving the quality of meals in their schools, and demonstrate simple yet effective techniques that help cooks work more efficiently and prepare tastier meals. Their involvement became an important educational element and a source of inspiration for newcomers.

Each cooking session was followed by a masterclass. Food technologists analyzed common mistakes, explained why vegetables should be steamed rather than fried, how cutting techniques affect the taste of a salad, and why “cooking by eye” can be risky. These may appear to be minor details, but together they help create a wholesome and appealing meal that children enjoy fully, reducing the likelihood of reaching for unhealthy snacks shortly afterward.

Five dishes in two hours: provincial semifinals

The provincial rounds took place over the summer. Each participant had two hours to prepare a complete five-dish school lunch — soup, main course, salad, drink, and baked item — strictly following the flowcharts from the School Meals Recipe Book developed by WFP and SIFI.

EACH PROVINCE HAD ITS OWN MENU:

GBAO: pickle soup, moshkichiri (mung bean and rice porridge), shakarob salad with apples, syrniki, hot chocolate.

Sughd Province: lentil soup, beef cutlets, Vinaigrette (beet salad), pancakes, ayran.

Districts under Republican Subordination: buckwheat soup, pilaf with meat and red beans, potato and pickled cucumber salad, pancakes, kissel.

Kulob: shchi, pasta, school pizza, vitamin-rich compote.



Bokhtar: borscht, pilaf with chickpeas, carrot and prune salad, omelet, fresh fruit compote.

Dushanbe: buckwheat soup, pilaf, sweet corn salad, pancakes, kissel.

Mistakes were common. Some fried vegetables instead of steaming them, others miscalculated quantities, or skipped steps in the flowcharts. However, this is exactly where growth happens. Cooks learned on the spot, consulted with technologists, and gained new skills at every stage.

According to the jury, what united all participants was their genuine motivation, willingness to improve, and love for their profession.

The final round in Dushanbe

On September 27, the Gagarin School in Dushanbe felt less like an ordinary school and more like a festival of healthy school meals. The lobby featured a photo zone with hashtags and a constant line of guests. A large 3D screen played videos from previous competition seasons.

Tables displayed Recipe Books, brochures with finalists' signature dishes, and School Feeding newsletters.

While the finalists competed, interactive activities were organized for children and adults. Guided by popular food blogger Shamsiddin Nasriddinov, guests assembled the "perfect healthy breakfast," answered quiz questions, and joined a cooking masterclass on quick, nutritious school snacks.

Still, the most important action was happening in the kitchen.

Signature dishes: when simple ingredients become a culinary highlight

Before the final, participants were given a home assignment to develop a signature hot dish within the standard school lunch budget of 7–9 somoni per portion. This task highlighted their creativity:

- **SHOHRUKH NIYOZOV** from Sughd presented his take on school-style lagman — light, vegetable-rich, and wonderfully aromatic.
- **KHAIRINISO CHOBBIROVA** from Khatlon surprised everyone with a tender baked pumpkin that every child present at the event wanted to try.
- **SABOKHAT NAZAROVA** from Dushanbe prepared vegetable patties that even the pickiest kids couldn't resist.

After the presentations, the main culinary showdown began: in just 90 minutes, the finalists had to prepare a full five-dish lunch. The audience watched with bated breath.



Students' Choice award: honest feedback from children

A new feature in 2025 was the Students' Choice award. Fourth graders from the Gagarin School tasted the dishes and voted for their favorite.

Their clear standout was Saboat Khomidova from Khujand. Her meals were described by children as "the most home-style and the most delicious."

The winners

The jury's verdict matched the children's choice. The Golden Spoon of 2025 was shared by Saboat Khomidova (Khujand), Shohrukh Niyozov (Sughd), and Zebo Nasriddinova (Dushanbe) — the best school cooks of



Tajikistan in 2025.

Finalists received medals, certificates, vouchers for household appliances, and sets of kitchenware for their schools. Nonetheless, the most valuable reward, as many admitted, was the feeling of recognition.

An investment in the future

“Without our cooks, there would be no School Feeding Programme. These remarkable people rise before dawn, work tirelessly, and make sure every child receives nutritious, wholesome food,” said Adham Musallam, WFP Country Director in Tajikistan.

Badriddin Muzaffarzoda, representative of the Ministry of Education and Science, added: “School meals in

Tajikistan are not just a social protection measure. They are an investment in human capital, education, health, and the country’s future.”

Today, more than 5,600 school cooks across Tajikistan start their workday long before students open their textbooks. They shape tastes, habits, and a culture of healthy eating for an entire generation.

Year after year, the Best School Cook competition makes school canteens better: it teaches, inspires, and connects people. It creates new recipes and raises the prestige of the profession. This means taking one small yet vital step toward a future where every child enjoys a warm, healthy, and much-loved meal every day and perhaps one day proudly says at home, “Mom, they cook so well at our school!”



WHEN SCHOOLYARD BECOMES PLACE OF GROWTH

Important changes are taking place today in some schoolyards across Tajikistan. Children are discovering activities that genuinely engage them: checking how the seedlings have grown, testing soil moisture, spotting the first blossom, or harvesting crops. School vegetable gardens, orchards, and greenhouses are becoming spaces of learning, care, and discovery. These very schoolyards became the focus of the second national competition, Best School Mini Garden 2025.

For many participants, the competition turned into more than just another event on the school calendar. It turned into a real-life story in which children, parents, and teachers joined efforts in support of the soil, honest work, and a conscious attitude toward food. For the second year in a row, the competition proves that when children see the journey from seed to plate with their own eyes, conversations about healthy eating stop being abstract.

GROWING GARDEN MOVEMENT

If the first competition felt like a cautious experiment for many schools, participation in 2025 was far more confident and purposeful. Schools approached the competition not as a one-off event, but as a process that could be developed, improved, and truly integrated into the learning environment.

The theme of the year, **Treasures of the Earth: Organic Dream Garden,**



set the right direction. It shifted the focus from quantity to quality, encouraging healthy competition and respect for nature. The emphasis was on growing food without harming the soil, teaching children to value work and resources, and turning the school plot into a living educational space.

WORKING TOGETHER FOR CHILDREN'S HEALTH

The organization of the competition became a strong example of how joint efforts lead to lasting results. The project was spearheaded by the UN World Food Programme, the Russian Social and Industrial Foodservice Institute, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Tajikistan, and the Ministry of Health and Social Protection of the Population. This partnership is grounded in a shared understanding: school meals begin long before the kitchen with a culture of respect for food.

Participants were asked to present an operating school vegetable garden, orchard, or greenhouse developed using organic methods, and to demonstrate how the area is integrated into the educational process. The goal was

not only to grow a harvest, but to demonstrate systematic work: planning plantings, caring for crops, involving children of different ages, and linking the school plot to healthy eating education.

Particular attention was paid to the role of primary school children. The jury assessed whether their involvement was well-defined, safe, and age-appropriate, and how work in the garden was integrated with lessons and creative activities. For schools, it was essential to show that children were not doing heavy labor but learning through practice, observation, and participation.

The competition requirements emphasized transparency and openness. Schools prepared photo and video materials, described the methods they used, explained how the harvest was distributed, and showed how the results of their work were reintegrated into school life. This approach made it possible to see not just reports, but real processes and real changes taking place in schools.





COMPETITION GEOGRAPHY

Schools from Khatlon Province, Districts of Republican Subordination, and Sughd Province took part. In total, forty-nine applications were submitted. Behind this number were different conditions, climates, and levels of capacity, yet the same shared ambition: to give children a space to learn through hands-on experience.

Each application told its own story. In some places, the school garden became a continuation of strong family farming traditions; elsewhere, it was a completely new beginning. In some schools, children saw for the first time how a vegetable grows; in others, they were already confidently distinguishing crops and understanding the differences between cultivation methods.

SUPPORT THAT TRULY MATTERS

The support provided by the organizers was more than administrative. Schools received all the materials needed to complete the competition tasks, as well as the opportunity to ask experts questions, share challenges, and work together to find solutions.

Working groups were created for schools, where teachers could consult with an agronomist and discuss soil cultivation, irrigation, planting schedules, and harvesting.

Field visits by agronomists played a particularly important role. On-site, they assessed the real conditions of school plots and offered recommendations tailored to the local climate and the capacity of each school. This approach is especially valuable because it shows that children are not being taught abstract rules, but practical and responsible agriculture.

WHAT GREW IN SCHOOL GARDENS

The school gardens participating in the competition were diverse and genuinely vibrant. They produced vegetables essential for children's diets, such as cabbage, carrots, onions, beets, potatoes, tomatoes, cucumbers, and peppers. A great deal of attention was paid to herbs, which are so important for the taste and nutritional value of school meals.

Yet the focus was not only on what was grown, but on how it was grown. Schools aimed to use organic methods, work with compost and humus, practice crop rotation, and conserve water. This helped children understand that soil is not an endless resource but a living system that must be cared for.



THE YOUNGEST PARTICIPANTS

Work in the gardens was integrated into the learning process. Children observed, asked questions, kept simple diaries, learned to compare results and draw conclusions.

A special component was the creative drawing competition **The Magic Treasures of Our Dream Garden**. Through their drawings, children depicted how they imagined their garden, what mattered most to them, and which fruits and vegetables they valued the most.

WHEN SCHOOL AND FAMILY BECOME A TEAM

One of the most significant aspects of the competition was the active involvement of parents. Families contributed

seeds and tools, shared experience, and came to help with garden care. The school garden became a meeting place — not formal, but genuinely alive.

For children, this is especially important. When parents are interested and engaged in school life, not only in class but beyond it, children begin to feel that their work truly matters.

Vegetables and herbs grown on school plots were used in school canteens. Part of the produce was sold to support further development of the gardens, and the surplus was shared with families. This helped children see the value of results and understand that their efforts have a real impact.



IT'S ONLY A BEGINNING

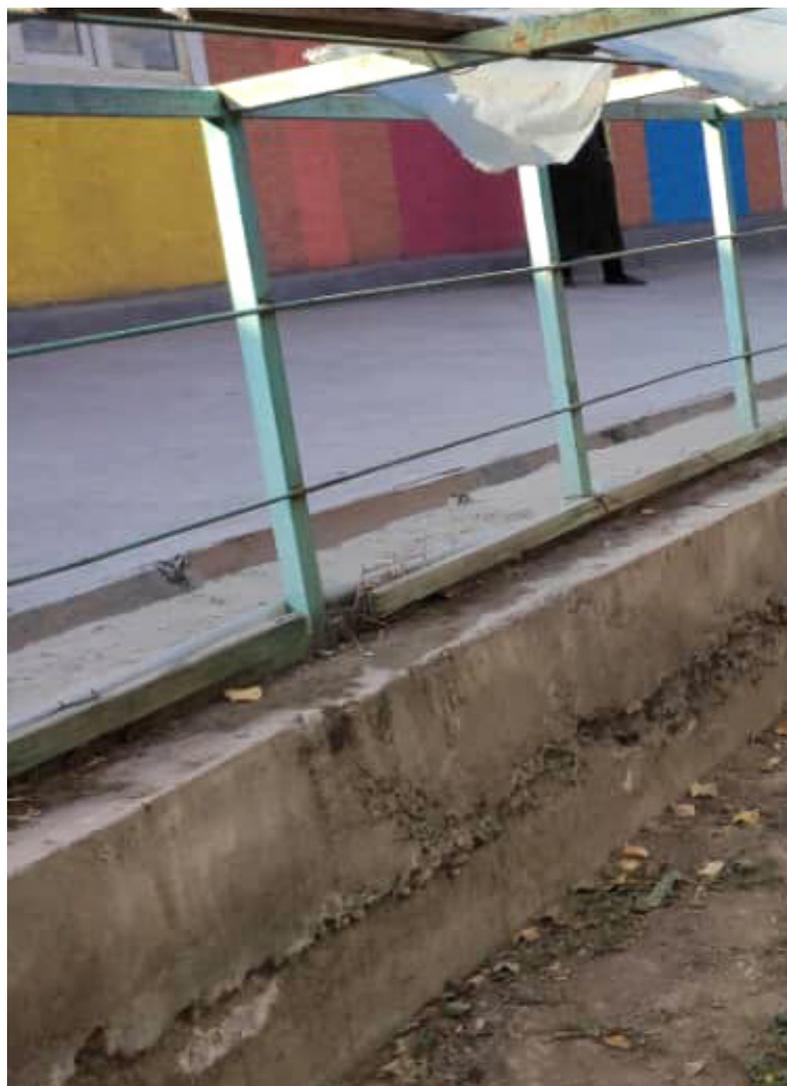
Entries in the categories Best School Orchard, Best School Vegetable Garden, and Best Greenhouse were evaluated by a jury composed of representatives of key national and international organizations. The submissions were reviewed by specialists from the Ministry of Agriculture of the Republic of Tajikistan, the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection of the Population, the UN World Food Programme, and the Association of Agronomists of Tajikistan. This composition made it possible to look at school gardens from several angles at once: educational, sanitary and hygienic, agronomic, and nutrition-related.

Decisions were based on the materials submitted by schools, photo and video reports, and agronomists' recommendations. The jury assessed not only the appearance of the plots and yields, but also how well the gardens were integrated into school life, how primary school children were involved, whether organic farming principles were applied, and how the results of the work were linked to school meals and education. It was this comprehensive approach that proved decisive in selecting the winners.

In the category Best School Orchard, first place went to Secondary School No. 7 in Yovon District, Khatlon Province. The school's orchard was recognized for effective use of organic farming methods, systematic care, and active involvement of children in observing the growth and development of fruit trees. Second place went to School No. 4 in Devashtich District, Sughd Province, where the orchard became part of the learning environment and a model of responsible land cultivation.

In the category Best School Vegetable Garden, the victory was awarded to Secondary School No. 12 in Ayni District, Sughd Province. The garden stood out for the diversity of crops, well-designed crop rotation, and well-organized work with primary school children. Second place went to School No. 17 in the city of Isfara, Sughd Province, where the school garden demonstrated stable results and became an important part of both school life and the local community.

In the category Best School Greenhouse, first place was awarded to School No. 48 in the Devashtich district of Sughd Province. The greenhouse enabled the school to extend the growing season for vegetables and herbs and became a true learning laboratory for children. Second place went to School No. 16 in the Panjakent district of



Sughd Province, where the greenhouse was successfully integrated into the school infrastructure and used not only to produce crops but also as a teaching resource.

Winners in each of the three categories received certificates worth 10,000 somoni. These funds are intended exclusively for expanding and further developing school vegetable gardens, orchards, and greenhouses, including the purchase of seeds and tools, and improving growing conditions. For schools, this was not only an award but also a practical resource to continue their work.

Children's creativity held a special place in the competition. As part of the drawing contest, *The Magical Treasures of Our Dream Garden*, and an essay competition for higher-grade students, the jury recognized works that showed a thoughtful understanding of the themes of soil, nature, and shared effort.

The best essay was written by seventh-grader Turdiev Alibek from School No. 12 in the Ayni district of Sughd



Province. In his essay, Alibek reflects on the land as a place where a person finds peace, learns responsibility, and sees the results of labor. Through the story of a destroyed and restored school garden, he shows that caring for nature and working together can bring life back even where it once seemed completely lost.

The winner of the drawing competition was fourth-grader Akhmedov Alimukhammad from School No. 4 in the Devashtich district of Sughd Province. His work depicted the garden as a living and magical space filled with care and meaning.

Authors of the best creative works were rewarded with commemorative gifts, including school backpacks with stationery sets to support their academic progress and creativity. The greatest prize, however, was the recognition that children's perceptions, imagination, and sincere attitude toward nature have value and stand alongside the "adult" outcomes of the competition.

The award ceremony took place on November 20, 2025,

at the National Library of Tajikistan as part of the CIS School Feeding Forum. For the children, it was a rare and emotional moment to see their school garden become part of a broader national conversation about health, nutrition, and the country's future.

It is in such moments that a school garden ceases to be just a plot of land. It becomes a point of growth for the school and, above all, for the children.

The second School Mini Garden competition demonstrated that such initiatives are taking root and developing in Tajikistan. They make it possible to talk about healthy eating not through lecturing but through real-life experience. They bring schools and families closer and help children develop respect for the soil and for their own work.

Perhaps, these very school gardens are now laying the most reliable foundation for the future, when children grow up with the understanding that caring for health begins with a small seed planted by their own hands.

SUGHD PROVINCE HOSTS IMPORTANT DISCUSSION ON SCHOOL MEALS

From December 17 to 19, the Interdepartmental Coordination Council on School Feeding held a field meeting in Sughd Province. The event went far beyond a formal roundtable discussion. Council members, led by Deputy Governor Jamshed Jurazoda, traveled to schools to see firsthand how meals are organized and to discuss ways to strengthen the school feeding system.

The main goal was clear: to make sure that every schoolchild receives not just food, but a full, tasty, and nutritious lunch that supports the learning process and growth.

ENCOURAGING RESULTS FROM LEADING SCHOOLS

Before gathering for the roundtable, participants spent two days visiting schools in the Ayni, B. Gafurov, and D. Rasulov districts. They visited six schools and noted real, positive change:

- **NEW KITCHEN EQUIPMENT.** School kitchens are being equipped with modern appliances, which help ensure safe and high-quality food preparation.
- **CLEANLINESS AND ORDER.** Strict compliance with sanitary standards is becoming a solid foundation for protecting children's health.
- **TASTY AND VARIED MEALS.** Menus are expanding, and cooks are paying greater attention to taste and food quality.
- **BENEFITS FOR BOTH MIND AND BODY.** Special focus is placed on balanced meals so that every child's plate contains what is needed for their age: energy for active play and strength to acquire new knowledge.



Meals in these schools are funded by the state. For example, School No. 14 in the B. Gafurov district received 430.1 thousand somoni for organizing meals, while School No. 8 in the Ayni district received 145.8 thousand somoni. These figures reflect a serious investment in the healthy future of the younger generation.

TEAMWORK: SCHOOL, DISTRICT, AND STATE

It was emphasized that success is the result of joint effort. School administrations are taking greater responsibility for organizing meals, while local authorities are actively supporting the initiatives. This

coordinated approach guarantees that positive changes will not be temporary but will grow into a sustainable system.

At the conclusion of the visit, specialists exchanged practical experience. How can the process be organized more effectively? How can successful practices be shared from one school to another?

This trip clearly showed that school feeding continues to receive constant and serious attention. It is not simply about providing food. It is about investing in children's health, academic success, and a happy childhood.



MEANINGFUL LUNCH: CIS OFFICIALS GATHER IN DUSHANBE FOR SCHOOL FEEDING FORUM

In late November, Dushanbe moved to a special, thoughtful rhythm. While schools continued their daily routines and children hurried to class, adults from across the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) gathered at the National Library to discuss an issue that rarely makes headlines yet affects every family every day: school meals. Participants came from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.

From November 20 to 22, the city hosted the Second International CIS Forum on School Feeding, titled *School Meals as Investment in Healthy Generation*. More than 300 participants attended, including representatives of ministries of education and health, experts, researchers, educators, school feeding specialists, and partners from the UN World Food Programme (WFP) and the Social and Industrial Foodservice Institute (SIFI). Formally, it was an international event. In essence, it was a wide-ranging conversation about children, their health, and their future.





SCHOOL LUNCH IS MORE THAN A MEAL

Nutrition during the school years is a particularly sensitive issue. It is at this age that eating habits are formed, shaping health for many years to come. For this reason, school feeding in Tajikistan has long ceased to be a secondary concern.

Today, more than 440,000 children receive hot meals every day in nearly 2,000 schools across the country. Behind these figures lie over 25 years of systematic work, the State Programme for the Development of School Feeding for 2022-2027, and strong partnerships with international organizations, including the WFP and SIFI.

Throughout the Forum, speakers emphasized that a school lunch is not simply a break between lessons. It helps children stay focused, supports good health, reduces fatigue, and ultimately ensures equal opportunities for all children, regardless of family income.

In his address to the Forum participants, Russian Minister of Education Sergey Kravtsov described school meals as one of the key factors influencing the quality of education:

“I am confident that providing high-quality, well-balanced, and affordable meals for children should be a priority for every education system in the CIS. We are ready to actively cooperate with international partners, support initiatives and projects aimed at improving the provision of hot meals for primary school children, ensuring healthy diets for older students, and

introducing modern food preparation technologies in school canteens.”

DAY ONE: CONVERSATION ABOUT SYSTEMS AND RESPONSIBILITY

The first day of the Forum felt like a large family council, spanning an entire country and even the wider region. Representatives of ministries, experts, educators, and nutrition specialists from across the CIS gathered in one hall.

Tajikistan presented its experience as an example of a sustainable model in which school feeding develops not spontaneously, but as an integral part of public policy. Discussions focused on financing, the regulatory framework, modernization of school kitchens, staff training, and the role of local communities and parents.

Zulfiya Abdusamatzoda, Deputy Minister of Health and Social Protection of the Population of the Republic of Tajikistan, outlined her ministry’s priorities in the field of child nutrition, effectively summarizing the overall direction of development:

“In the coming years, the ministry intends to continue implementing measures under the National School Feeding Programme, with particular attention to preventing nutrition-related diseases and fostering healthy lifestyle skills among children. It is important to expand educational outreach to parents and teachers so that school meals are seen as part of a broader child health policy. The ministry’s goal is to build a sustainable,

safe, and scientifically robust system that will serve as a foundation for the health of future generations.”

Special attention was given to food quality, including the balance of proteins, fats, and carbohydrates, reducing excessive sugar, salt, and fat, and increasing the availability of vegetables, fruits, and dairy products. These discussions were not abstract theory but reflected practical steps already being implemented in schools nationwide.

SIFI President Vladimir Chernigov emphasized that nothing is more important than feeding a child:

“Today, we are joined by those who work on this issue at the national level. I support everyone who understands that what may seem like a simple act, feeding a child, is in fact a major investment in a child’s potential, the nation’s capital, and the future of every country. I am confident that we will achieve all the goals we have set.”

DAY TWO: WHEN SERIOUS TOPIC COMES ALIVE

The next day, the library turned into a true culinary studio. It hosted The School Menu of the Future masterclass, the most vivid and emotional highlight of the Forum. The session was led by the charismatic TV host Takhmina Rajabova, who brought warmth and genuine joy to the process, while food technologist and expert Zulfiya Fayzieva guided participants with clear, informative commentary.

Participants worked in teams that brought together schoolchildren, well-known Tajik food blogger Shamsiddin Nasriddinov, representatives of ministries, and school cooks. These were people rarely imagined side by side at the same table. Yet here, everything felt natural. Official delegations put on aprons, eagerly chopped vegetables, and discussed how to replace standard sweets so that children could enjoy food that was both healthy and appealing.

The ingredients were simple and familiar, the kind found in any school kitchen: yogurt, cottage cheese, fruit, herbs, and grains. From these everyday products, the teams created a colorful array of easy-to-prepare dishes. Fruit rolls, salads, smoothies, and no-bake mini desserts looked as though they had come not from a nutrition lab, but from the kitchen of a caring family.

As the teams cooked, the audience discussed which



dishes their own children might enjoy, debated the benefits of different products, and shared memories of home recipes. The masterclass was not a competition, but a warm conversation about how to make school meals feel closer to home: simple, accessible, and genuinely delicious.

The final part was especially heartfelt. The jury sampled the dishes, the audience voted to support the teams, and all participants received aprons reading “Healthy Nutrition Chef.” The gesture was symbolic. Every adult who is ready to help children eat better can be a chef in this sense.

DAY THREE: WHERE THEORY MEETS REALITY

The final day of the Forum took place in schools in Dushanbe and Nurek. Delegations saw how the principles



discussed during the sessions are applied in real life. Guests visited modern canteens, school bakeries, greenhouses, and gardens where children, together with their teachers, grow vegetables and herbs and learn the basics of healthy eating through hands-on experience.

One moment left a particularly strong impression: the planting of a Friendship Garden at one of the schools in Nurek. Representatives from different countries planted fruit trees together as a symbol of long-term commitment and responsibility to future generations. The gesture served as a reminder that the results of caring for children are not always immediate, but they inevitably bear fruit.



SHARED DECISIONS FOR SHARED FUTURE

The Forum concluded with agreements on continued cooperation among CIS countries, the exchange of best practices, updates to standards, and further development of school feeding infrastructure. Yet the most important outcome lay elsewhere.

The event demonstrated that school feeding is a shared responsibility in which the voice of the family matters.



Parents can support school initiatives, take an interest in the development of menus, participate in discussions, and help children develop a respectful attitude toward food and the work of those who prepare it.

INSTEAD OF EPILOGUE

Three days of discussions served as a reminder that caring for children begins with simple things: a hot

meal, attention to their needs, and a willingness to listen and understand. When the state, schools, and families act together, school meals cease to be a formality and become part of a happy childhood.

Perhaps, it is at gatherings like this that a future begins, one in which care for children carries the scent of fresh bread, warm milk, and confidence in tomorrow.



What would make a chef who once ran the kitchen at the legendary Noma — a destination for culinary pilgrims — walk away from the Michelin-star world and step into a school canteen? For Dan Giusti, it was not a reckless move but a deliberate choice. The glitter of haute cuisine eventually faded in comparison to a far more meaningful mission: to change the world by changing what ends up on a schoolchild's lunch tray.

He took this mission seriously, founding Brigaid, an organization that connects professional chefs with food service programs, in the United States. His conviction inspired dozens of other professionals, proving that true purpose can be found far beyond restaurant walls.

NEW PHILOSOPHY OF SCHOOL MEALS FROM CHEF DAN GIUSTI

Chef and school canteen: clash of worlds or unique opportunities?

For ten years now, Giusti has lived outside the realm of fine dining. Through Brigaid, he helps schools and social institutions cook food that is healthier, tastier, and made with care. With nothing more than a chef's knife and a thoughtfully designed menu, he set out to change the system from within.

Giusti's background speaks for itself: years in top-tier restaurants, leadership roles in internationally renowned kitchens, and formative experience at Copenhagen's iconic Noma. Michelin stars, months-long reservation lists, elegant plating, awards, and the endless race for reviews — all of that had once been routine.

However, suddenly, the glamour of haute cuisine seemed insignificant compared to a much simpler yet profoundly important task: school meals.

Feeding thousands of children every day is an entirely different dimension. It is a different responsibility and a different scale.

More than chef: what a school kitchen can teach

At Brigaid's first summit in the Bronx, seasoned professionals carried red canteen trays like schoolchildren and sampled a typical school lunch. These trays didn't hold bland patties. Instead, they offered fragrant herb-braised pork, golden slices of fried bananas, and a vibrant mozzarella-and-tomato salad. These were dishes worthy of a good bistro.

The real surprise? The cost of ingredients per portion was just \$2.71. In the U.S., schools receive \$4.62 per lunch — a sum that must also cover salaries, utilities, and equipment, leaving mere pennies for ingredients. In such conditions, a chef's talent isn't judged by the ability to prepare super-flavorful truffles but by the skill to make something remarkable with a strictly limited budget.

Giusti emphasizes that restaurants often teach you only how to cook, while a school kitchen forces you to think far more broadly. School food service is about strategy, organization, and leadership. It is about working with



Dan Giusti and Alex Leigh at Nathan Hale Arts Magnet School's cafeteria on 24 September.
Photograph: Josephine Sittenfeld/The Guardian

what you have and still making it delicious. It's about creativity that thrives despite constraints.

Try feeding 600 people in 30 minutes. That's a real challenge.

Some chefs who joined Brigaid admit they initially tried to "run a restaurant" and quickly failed. Only when they shifted their mindset did they discover the joy of creating menus not for critics, but for children.

Stories that drive the change

Mai Giffard, a chef from California who went from Michelin-star kitchens to a school canteen, shares her own journey: "I grew up on free school lunches. Now I get to define the food served to kids who sit exactly where I once sat. In fine dining, you cook for a tiny fraction of society. Here, you cook for thousands and thousands of children."

Her story is not unique. For many Brigaid chefs, it is the first time in their careers that they receive health insurance, enjoy stable weekends, and finally begin to live a life beyond the kitchen.

Quality of school meals: expense or investment?

The New London school district in Connecticut, with support from Brigaid, has completely eliminated frozen convenience foods. Today, nearly everything is cooked from scratch, whether it's a slow-braised pork or fresh salads. This isn't a one-off initiative but a fully established system that serves 3,000 students every day.

What's especially interesting is that working with Brigaid costs the district about three percent of its annual food-service budget. Is that a lot?

It depends on the perspective. If the goal is not simply to "provide food" but to ensure genuinely high-quality meals that children actually enjoy eating, then, as district administration says, this becomes one of the most worthwhile investments they can make.

When school kitchen becomes a place to grow

For Dan Giusti, work in a school canteen is not a "backup plan," but a chance to find purpose, stability, and the kind of real-world experience that is rare in restaurants. The social value of this work is enormous, and it comes with down-to-earth benefits like predictable hours and job security.

Other Brigaid chefs echo this sentiment: school kitchens make people more patient, more attentive, and calmer. And sometimes — simply happier.

Many admit they no longer feel any pull to return to fine dining. No more 14-hour shifts, no more pressure to "always be there." Instead, they get holidays and time for hobbies.

What does this mean for schoolchildren?

Everyone remembers that special moment after class when you walk into the canteen and catch the smell

of something freshly cooked. School is where children spend most of their day: they learn, they get tired, they grow, while their meals directly affect their energy, focus, and well-being.

When food becomes truly good — flavorful, warm, thoughtfully prepared — it is no longer just lunch. It becomes a message to a child: "You are cared for." The atmosphere starts to change right before your eyes, both in the canteen and in the classroom.

Let's be honest: children are the toughest and most honest critics. If they don't like a dish, no trick will convince them otherwise. However, they immediately recognize genuine effort. That's what makes cooking in a school kitchen so rewarding: every day brings a new, small challenge. Thus, seeing kids dig in with real appetite is the kind of reward that warms you from the inside out.

Source: Amanda Schupak. He once worked at the world's best restaurant. Now he wants to make US school food better // The Guardian. – 2025. – 1 October. – URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/oct/01/brigaid-noma-school-lunch-dan-giusti>



Elementary school students eating lunch at Nathan Hale Arts Magnet School's cafeteria on 24 September. Photograph: Josephine Sittenfeld/The Guardian

CHURGOT, OR GOOD OLD YOGURT: SECRET TO HEALTH AND CENTURIES-OLD TRADITIONS

Why do people in some parts of Asia live long, healthy lives? One popular answer is: because they eat churgot (yogurt). We're exaggerating a little, of course, but the idea isn't far from the truth. Dairy products are one of the cornerstones of Tajik cuisine.

Often, the simplest and most natural foods – those invented centuries ago and passed down as family traditions – turn out to be the most reliable and useful.

A BIT OF HISTORY

Just think about it: churgot didn't originate in a laboratory or a trendy restaurant. People were making it long before modern food-processing equipment existed, using clay jugs and allowing the milk to ferment naturally in the sun or near the hearth. Nothing in excess, nothing artificial: only milk, natural bacteria, and time.

In nearly every household, there is a small family secret to making this dairy staple.

STANDALONE FOOD OR BASE FOR DISHES

This thick, slightly tangy dairy product pairs beautifully with many dishes. Take siyohalaf, for example, a nutritious herb-based soup. Add a spoonful of churgot, and it becomes much richer in both flavor and nutritional value. Or try using it as a dressing for a fresh vegetable salad. Thus, you'll boost the benefits twofold, at the very least.

Want to make homemade chakka? You'll need churgot.

Frozen Churgot Pops

Ingredients:

- 200 g churgot
- 100 g berries (fresh or frozen)
- A little natural juice (optional)

Preparation:

1. Mix the churgot with the berries; gently crush the berries for added flavor.
2. Pour the mixture into popsicle molds or small cups.
3. Freeze for several hours (usually 2–4).
4. If using plastic molds, briefly run them under warm water to loosen the pops.

These frozen treats are refreshing, nutritious, and free from excess sugar – a perfect snack for children and adults.



It's also ideal for breakfast, in the evening, or as a quick, wholesome snack. As a fermented dairy product, it's easily absorbed and gentle on digestion.

WHY CHURGOT IS MORE THAN JUST FOOD

There is a reason churgot has been passed down through generations and survived through the centuries. Its very existence reflects traditional wisdom: it is a natural source of vitamins and essential nutrients that people need at any age. Churgot delivers protein, calcium, and B vitamins, all fundamental for maintaining health and strength.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN IN EVERYDAY LIFE?

Calcium: Essential for strong bones and teeth.

Protein: The building block for cells, which is important for both children and adults.

B vitamins: Help the body absorb nutrients, convert food into energy, and use that energy efficiently.

Including churgot in the diet is a simple and reliable way to support healthy eating habits, especially for school-age children who need steady energy, strength, and a strong immune system.

That's not all. Churgot promotes healthy digestion by supporting beneficial gut bacteria and limiting the growth of harmful ones. It may help reduce levels of "bad" cholesterol and is also a natural source of antioxidants, which contribute to the body's protective functions.

WHO BENEFITS MOST FROM CHURGOT?

Children. A growing body needs enough calcium, protein, and useful bacteria. Churgot provides all of these naturally.

Pregnant and breastfeeding women. Churgot helps strengthen the mother's bones and supports the development of the baby's skeletal system. During breastfeeding, it can aid digestion for the mother and indirectly support digestive comfort for the infant.

Fruit and Yogurt Parfait (Churgot Parfait)

Ingredients:

- 150 g churgot
- 1 banana
- A handful of berries (such as strawberries or blueberries)
- A drizzle of honey or syrup (optional)

Preparation:

1. Slice the banana and cut the berries into pieces.
2. In a clear glass, layer the ingredients: churgot → fruit → churgot → berries.
3. Sweeten with honey if you like.
4. Add a sprinkle of granola or nuts on top for extra texture.



This bright and appealing snack provides children with protein, calcium, and fruit-based energy.

Vegetable “Tsatsiki” Dip with Churgot

Ingredients:

- 200 g churgot
- ½ cucumber
- 1 garlic clove
- A splash of lemon juice
- A pinch of salt
- Fresh herbs (dill or mint)

Preparation:

1. Grate the cucumber and squeeze out excess liquid.
2. Finely chop or press the garlic.
3. Combine churgot, cucumber, and garlic; add lemon juice, herbs, and salt.
4. Mix well and let rest for 10–15 minutes so the flavors deepen.



Serve with fresh vegetable sticks (carrot, bell pepper, celery) or lavash. This dip is a great alternative to store-bought sauces, and kids love dipping crunchy vegetables into it.

Athletes and anyone with high physical activity.

The protein in churgot supports muscle recovery and growth, which is useful after workouts as well as after a long, busy school day.

SAFETY AND MODERATION

Like any food, churgot is healthiest when consumed moderately. In certain cases, such as intolerance to specific components or digestive disorders, it should be included in the diet with caution.

Choosing high-quality churgot is just as important: look for a natural product with no artificial additives or preservatives to ensure maximum nutritional benefit.

SIMPLE CHOICE FOR BETTER HEALTH

Imagine a familiar scene. It’s morning, everyone is rushing, and your child barely has time to get dressed for school, let alone sit down for a proper breakfast. That’s when churgot comes to the rescue. It’s an ideal

choice for a quick, healthy, and delicious start to the day.

Here are a few simple options:

- stir in a spoonful of honey and some cereal
- mix it with peaches or apricots
- serve it with fresh mulberries or apple slices

These simple combinations help children develop a taste for gentle, wholesome flavors, while giving parents peace of mind that their child won’t go to school on an empty stomach.

Another advantage is that churgot pairs beautifully with many foods. You can experiment freely, trying new recipes and flavor combinations. For example, serve it with colourful fruits and berries, and children are sure to enjoy it.

All of this makes one thing clear: churgot remains an important part of family nutrition in Tajikistan.

UN SOUNDS THE ALARM AS CHILDHOOD OBESITY OVERTAKES UNDERWEIGHT

The latest data from UNICEF are alarming: one in ten school-aged children worldwide is living with obesity. That is roughly 188 million children, an entire “nation” of young people for whom excess weight has already become a serious health risk.

TAJKISTAN IS NO EXCEPTION

Research shows a sharp increase in the share of children aged 5–14 with obesity between 2017 and 2021: from around 28 to 102 per 10,000 children, with the rise particularly notable in cities and several provinces of the country.

At the same time, Tajikistan continues to struggle with significant levels of undernutrition, especially in rural and remote areas, as well as deficiencies in essential vitamins and micronutrients.

GLOBAL SHIFT: FROM UNDERNUTRITION TO OBESITY

Today, the problems of underweight and obesity are nearly on the same level.

Not long ago, global concern focused primarily on malnutrition. However, the picture has changed dramatically: rates of underweight are declining while obesity is rising quickly, steadily, and persistently.

The most troubling part is that this trend spans every region, regardless of a country’s level of development. According to data from 190 countries, only in parts of Africa does underweight still occur more frequently than obesity.



OBESITY: A PERSONAL CHOICE OR A TRAP?

Some might say, “Just eat less, and the problem will be solved.” However, reality is far more complex.

Supermarket shelves are packed with brightly colored bags of chips, snacks, and sweets. Turn on a TV or open a video on your phone, and you are instantly bombarded with enticing ads for soda, burgers, and sugary bars. Outside, billboards promote “affordable” fast-food meals that are hard to ignore.

Anyone living in the 2020s is familiar with this landscape. If resisting temptation is difficult for adults, imagine how hard it is for teenagers.

In short, the environment itself pushes young people toward foods that gradually undermine their health.

You may ask, “Don’t parents see what’s happening?” They do, but it is still not simple. Ultra-processed foods have long become part of everyday life: they are accessible, convenient, and often cheaper than healthier options.

Many low-income families rely on inexpensive, calorie-dense foods that fill children up quickly but offer few essential nutrients. This creates a vicious cycle: food is affordable, but it does not support health.

REVERSE SIDE OF CONVENIENCE AND COST-CUTTING

The price of everyday convenience becomes unacceptably high when health problems begin to appear as early as childhood.

A regular diet of sweets, refined flour, and fatty foods leads to higher blood pressure, elevated sugar levels, and disruptions in lipid metabolism.



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN IN PRACTICE?

• Elevated blood pressure

When blood pressure rises, the heart and blood vessels are forced to work under strain, as if carrying an extra load.

• Abnormal blood lipids

Levels of “bad” cholesterol and triglycerides increase, while “good” cholesterol drops. Excess sugar and calories disrupt the body’s normal metabolic rhythm.

• High blood sugar

The body becomes less efficient at processing glucose, leading to insulin resistance.

WHERE DOES THIS LEAD?

If these changes persist, the risk of type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and severe forms of obesity increases significantly. Add to this bad mood, fatigue, and declining self-confidence, and it becomes clear that the issue goes far deeper than “a few extra kilos.”

NOT INDIVIDUAL BUT SOCIETAL PROBLEM

Marketing is designed to maximize profit. If regulations are weak, families find it much harder to shield themselves from the influence of companies producing ultra-processed, high-calorie foods.

The data are clear:

- children and teens are constantly exposed to advertising for sugary drinks, snacks, and fast food;
- four out of five say that advertising directly influences what they want;
- even adolescents living in conflict-affected countries encounter aggressive marketing.

Economists warn that without immediate action, the economic losses associated with obesity-related diseases could exceed

four trillion dollars annually, which is a staggering burden on health systems, national budgets, and families.

Meanwhile, money is not the most important part of the story. Behind every number is people’s health.

WHAT CAN BE DONE NOW?

Many countries have already taken bold steps. Some have banned junk food in schools; others have restricted advertising or introduced taxes on sugary drinks. In several states, governments are making healthy foods more accessible through subsidies and, of course, through school feeding initiatives.

TAJKISTAN IS FOLLOWING A SIMILAR COURSE

In Tajikistan, children’s nutrition has long moved beyond the boundaries of school kitchens. It has become a cornerstone of the country’s broader commitment to protecting the health and future of its children. Across national strategic documents, from the Strategy on Nutrition and Physical Activity 2015–2024 to the National Development Strategy 2030, one message is clear: children’s health begins with what’s on their plate.

This policy shift is steadily turning into real change. The country is implementing a multisectoral nutrition improvement plan and a state programme that brings together the efforts of the health, education, agriculture, and social protection sectors.

School meals are the central element of this work. Today, the scale is impressive: every day, more than 430,000 children in 2,000 schools receive a hot meal.

Step by step, Tajikistan is making school menus more diverse. Fresh vegetables, dairy products, eggs, legumes, and wholegrain baked goods are being introduced. In some schools, the smell of freshly baked bread comes straight from the school’s own bakery, and the herbs served at lunch are grown in a school greenhouse right before the children’s eyes.

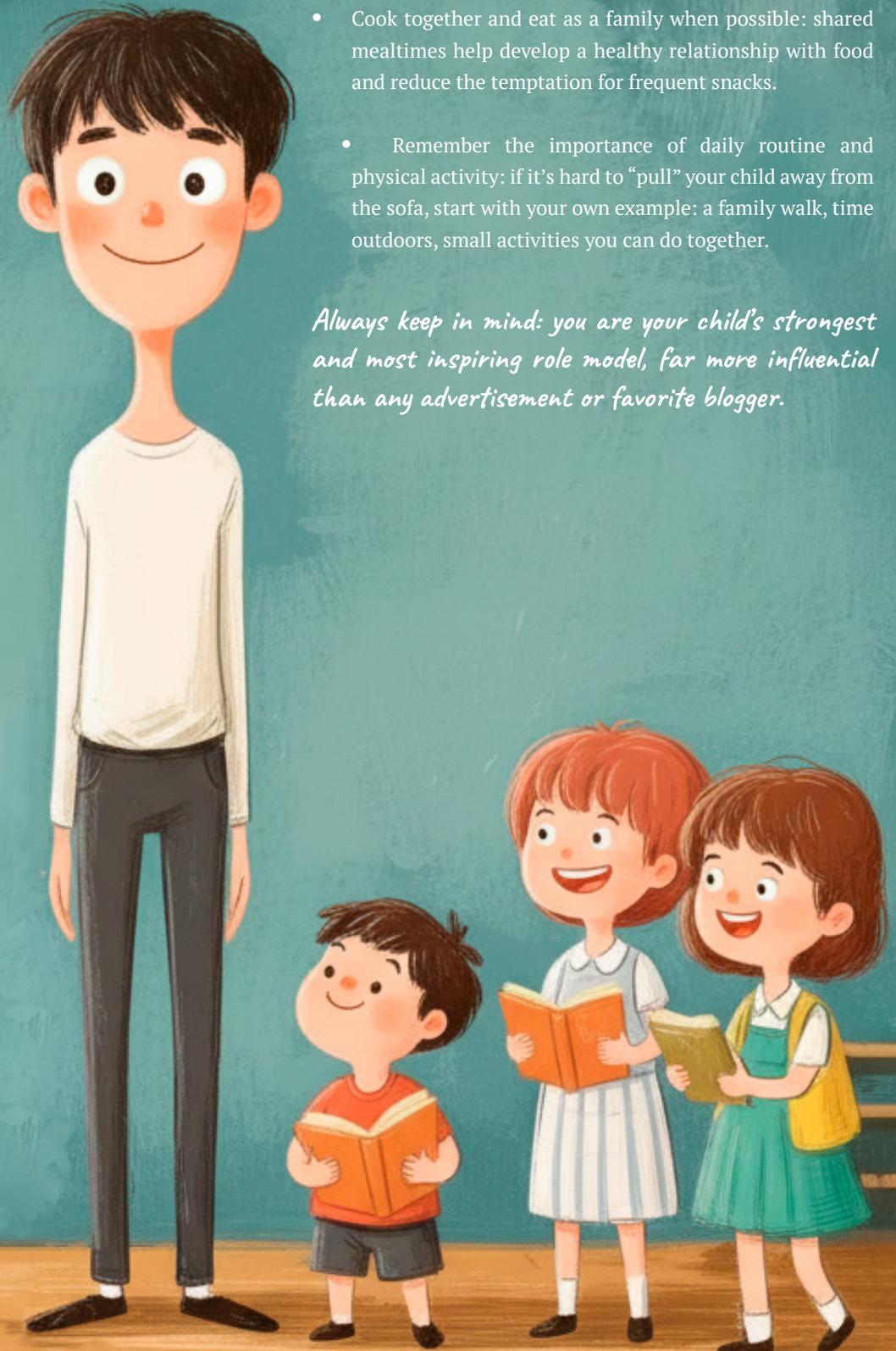
Much of this progress is driven by partnerships. The UN World Food Programme (WFP), the Government of Tajikistan, support from the Russian Federation, and the Russian Social and Industrial Foodservice Institute (SIFI) are helping transform schools into modern nutrition centres. They are upgrading canteens, training cooks, and supporting the development of menus that children genuinely enjoy.



The government is also preparing new school feeding standards, which are strict, carefully designed, and focused on health: less salt, sugar, and trans fats, and more foods that provide real energy rather than harm.

All of this makes school more than just a place where children have lunch. It becomes a space where they discover the taste of healthy food, learn how vegetables are grown, observe how a real kitchen operates, and make their first independent choices in favour of healthy habits.

Step by step, Tajikistan is building a system that helps children grow strong, active, and confident about the future.



FAMILY ROLE: CREATING ENVIRONMENT WHERE HEALTH COMES FIRST

No heroic effort is needed. Often, the simplest habits bring the best results.

- Explain to your child why fruits, vegetables, dairy products, meat, and fish matter, and include them in daily meals.
- Offer variety: let your children explore, choose, and develop their own taste preferences.
- Cook together and eat as a family when possible: shared mealtimes help develop a healthy relationship with food and reduce the temptation for frequent snacks.
- Remember the importance of daily routine and physical activity: if it's hard to "pull" your child away from the sofa, start with your own example: a family walk, time outdoors, small activities you can do together.

Always keep in mind: you are your child's strongest and most inspiring role model, far more influential than any advertisement or favorite blogger.

THE ADVENTURES OF POTATO MASH IN JUNGLESHIRE

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE ATTACK

Tomatini was the first to wake up; he found that it was already one o'clock in the afternoon and immediately began waking everyone up.

"Get up! Hit the deck!"

Annoyed, the other vegetables opened their eyes, yawning, and then closed them again.



"Do you remember: we have only two days in Jungleshire!" Professor was indignant. "Wake up, otherwise we will not find any rhizanthella."

Finally, everyone got up, had breakfast and the team got down to business. They armed themselves with potato peelers to dig the soil, and also prepared steel shovels and sharp four-pronged forks.

Seed explained in detail how to look for rhizanthella. It usually grows in damp spots where there is no light. So their task was to find such a place in the forest and carefully examine it. The flower's delicate aroma coming from under the ground would be their main and only hint.

Honion asked a lot of questions, trying to understand what an underground flower smells like, and how to distinguish rhizanthella's aroma from the smell of other plants.

Seed only smiled:

"You can't confuse it with anything else. This smell is extraordinary."

"Nah," Honion waived this explanation away. "I can't make any sense out of you!"

Friends had been working for several hours and had moved far away from the tent. Suddenly Mash noticed attentive green eyes watching them from behind the bushes.

Potato poked Honion in the side. Honion quietly drew the others' attention to someone's spying on them. Everyone tried to act as if they were calm, but, to be honest, they were very nervous.





Soon it became clear that there was someone behind almost every tree and bush. The travellers were encircled.

"I guess they are from the Fragrant Herbs Tribe. They are just watching us, that's all," suggested Honion in a trembling voice.

Potato whispered through his clenched teeth:

"Well... Didn't I tell you that..."

But before he could finish the sentence, tall savages jumped out of the bushes. They looked like parsleys, but there was something strange about them. Deft and fast, they attacked the travellers entangling them with long strong stalks, wrapping them up like in a cobweb.

The friends resisted, fought back, bit and pushed, but the forces were unequal. Before the travellers had time to understand what was happening, the parsleys tied them up, threw them into a cave and blocked the entrance with stones.



CHAPTER EIGHT

IN THE CAVE

"Hey, open up!" Cucumbert kept shouting, on and on. "We made a deal: you gave us two days in Jungleshire!"

"Listen, they are herbs of another kind," said Rosaline, in surprise. "They speak a different language."

"What language?"

"They spoke in Cilantro."

"Yes, that's true!" said Seed and slapped on his forehead. "This is cilantro, or, more correctly, coriander. I've read about it in the encyclopedia. It is difficult to distinguish it from parsley by appearance, but this is a completely different plant. Shout out something in their language!"

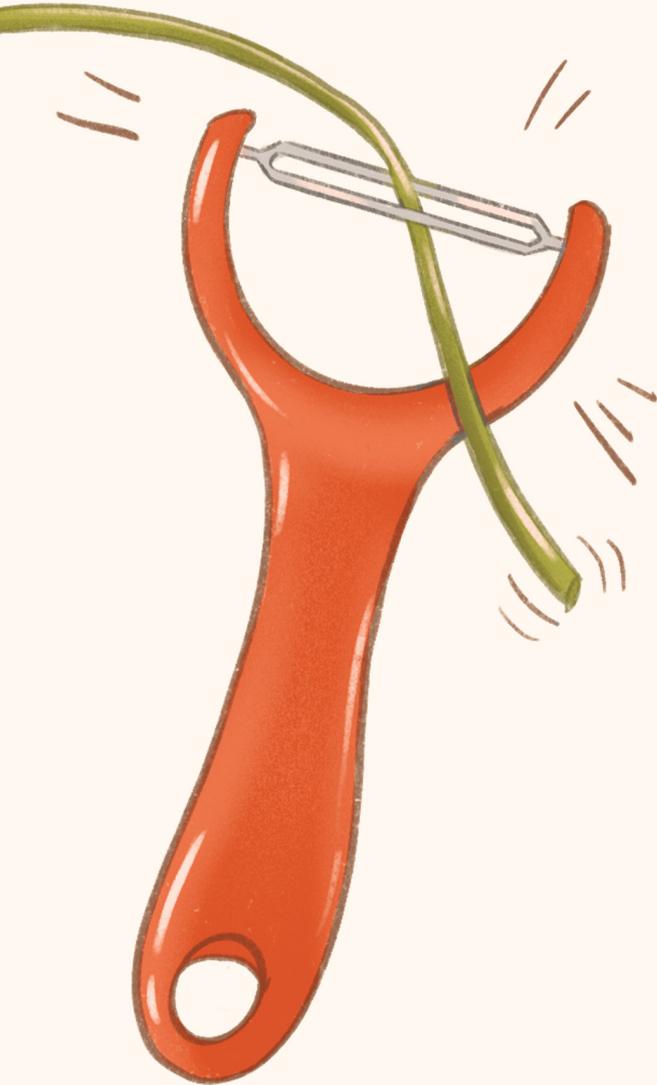
"They won't hear us," sighed Rosaline. "They must have left: there is silence outside."

"Well... we have to get out of here," said Professor. "The ropes are so tight, they are just smashing me."



"It's a pity they have taken our tools," sighed Honion. "We have nothing sharp."

"I still have a potato peeler with me!" Professor discovered it, feeling in his pocket with his bound hand. "I'll try to cut the ropes



With great difficulty, Tomatini managed to free himself. After that he helped Seed and Rosalina, and then Honion. Fortunately, everyone had flashlights with them. Friends turned them on and looked around.

"Where's Captain Mash?"

"He is not here!" exclaimed Honion.

"Maaaash! Where are you!?"

Silence.

"Oh," whispered Rosaline. "What happened to him?"

"He was right saying we shouldn't go here," said Honion and shook his head.

"Let's try to get out. He may need our help."

But the exit was securely blocked. No matter how hard they tried, the stones lay firmly, and they were unable to pop them out.

"There are tunnels here leading in different directions," said Rosaline.

"Let's split and look for another way out."

So they did.

Honion, having walked for a few minutes, came to a cave that ended in a blind wall. Dead end



"So strange," said Honion to himself. "It smells like soap or shampoo here. What do they have here, an underground bathroom?"

He was about to leave and stumbled over a white root sticking out from the ground.

"Bother! Getting in my way!" With these

words, he threw it aside.



Honion came back and met with the others. Unfortunately, no one had found a way out. The friends tried again to move the stones blocking the exit but failed.

"Well, shall we die of hunger or shall we not?" asked Honion philosophically, and at that very moment, the stones began to move.

CHAPTER NINE

MIRACULOUS ESCAPE

Everyone was happy to see Potato Mash. Yes, it was him, armed with a shovel and a fork.

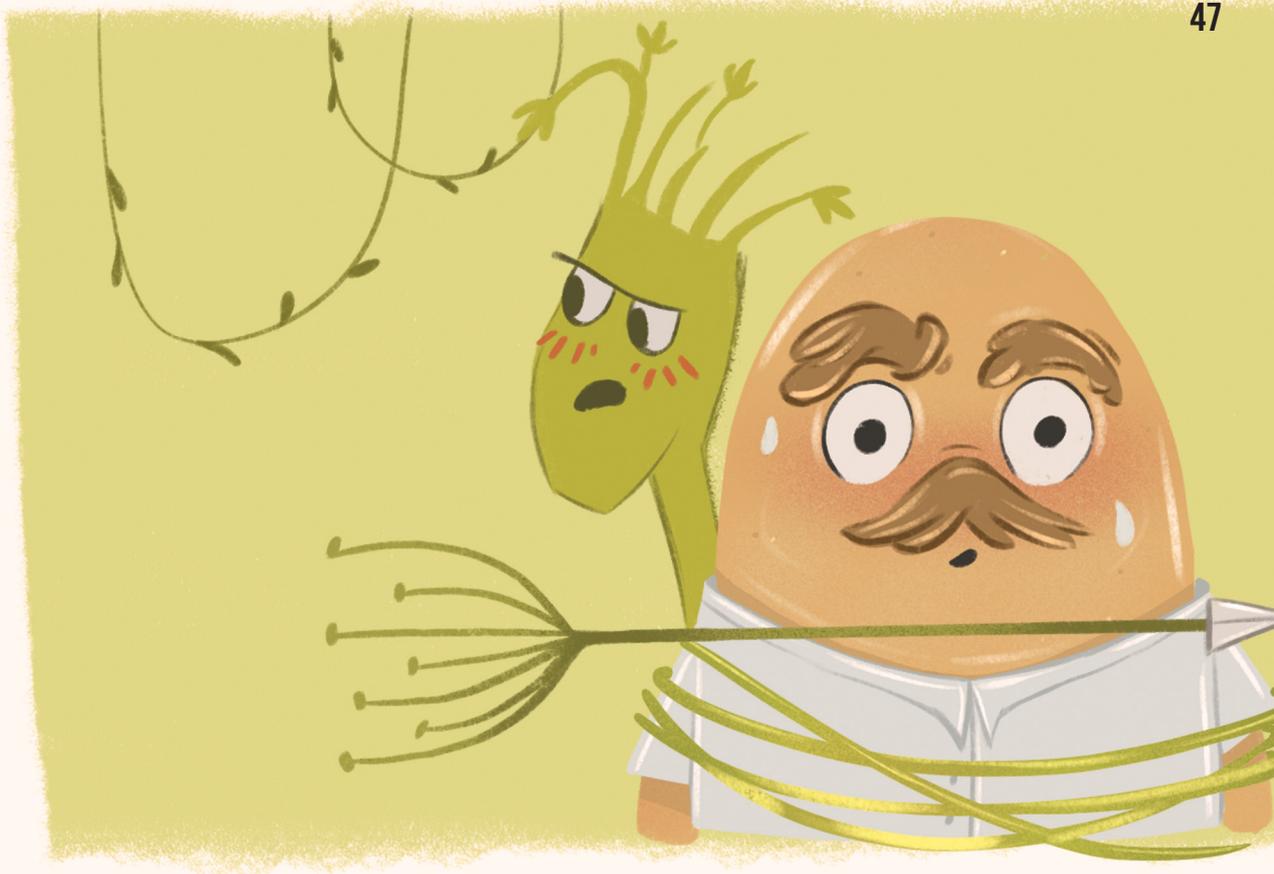
Their joy was boundless. Everyone hugged Captain Mash and, vying with each other, asked him how he had managed to defeat the evil coriander



Mash gladly began:

"It's an amazing story! These, as you call them, Corianders turned out to be keen on antiques. I saw you being thrown into the cave. For some reason, they dragged me aside and tried to take my watch off my hand. No one in my life has shown so much interest in grandpa Leopold's watch! I fought back as best I could but thought I was going to lose. They threw stalks over me and began to wrap me in a cobweb.





But suddenly I felt the dill smell in the air. Remember that wonderful aroma by the fire? A fragrant arrow with an umbrella-shaped tip whizzed right in front of my nose. They were Fragrant Dill warriors, and they were shooting at my kidnappers. I was shocked: I was sure Dills were shooting at Parsleys from their own tribe; at that time, I did not realize those herbs were different. The battle began, and the Corianders instantly lost interest in me.

I managed to rip the ropes and escape under a hail of dill arrows. I rushed to the cave and tried to move the heavy stones away, but I was helpless with my bare hands. Then I ran back to the tent and fetched the tools. All the rest you already know."

"I wonder what they need grandpa Leopold's watch for?.." asked Honion.

"I don't know about the watch," answered Seed. "But we can learn about corianders in the encyclopedia.

CORIANDER (cilantro)

VITAMINS AND MINERALS:

vitamin A, B vitamins, C, E, K, potassium, calcium, silicon, magnesium, sodium, phosphorus.

INTERESTING FACTS:

coriander leaves contain essential oils that give the plant its specific smell

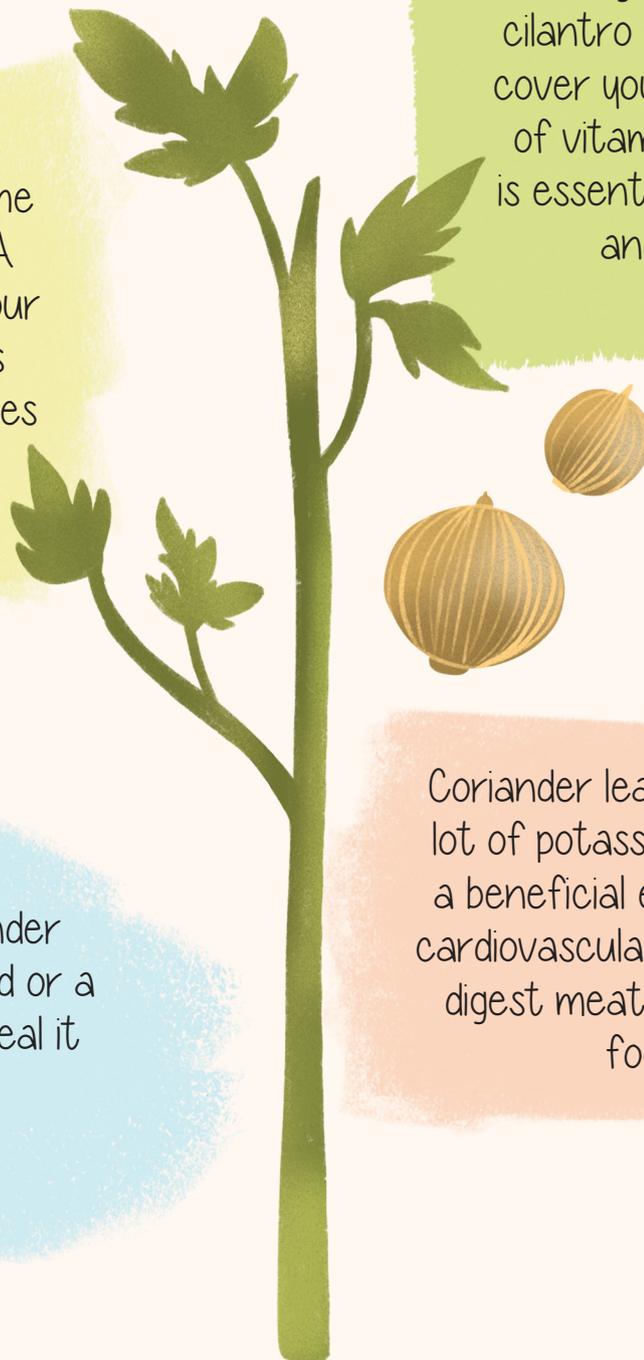
HEALTH BENEFITS OF CORIANDER:

100 grams of cilantro contains one-third of the daily value of vitamin A which is good to keep your skin, teeth, and bones healthy, and also improves night vision

Eating a bunch of cilantro is enough to cover your daily value of vitamin K, which is essential for bones and teeth

Applying fresh coriander leaves to a small wound or a scratch can help to heal it faster

Coriander leaves contain a lot of potassium which has a beneficial effect on the cardiovascular system, helps digest meat and high-fat foods.



"We were soooo lucky," said Cucumbert gloomily. "But for the warriors of the Fragrant Herbs Tribe, what would have happened to us? We need to leave this place immediately: Corianders can return anytime."

The friends checked the map, took a bypass way, and quickly left the coriander domain. The smell of dill arrows was still in the air.

But when the travellers found a suitable place for spending the night and started putting up their tent, the bushes rustled nearby. Horrified, the friends saw strange plants, looking like large leaves, approaching them.

"Run!" shouted Mash.

But the strangers smiled and said in a bad Fruit-and-Vegetable language: "Welcome! We have been waiting for you for such a long time





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