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More than a Meal: The Cultural Imaginary and Practices Behind Student Access to University Canteens in Milan

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Abstract

University canteens occupy a structurally significant position within European higher education, functioning simultaneously as food security infrastructures, socioeconomic equalizers, and community-building spaces. Yet, access to these services remains deeply uneven, shaped by financial constraints, logistical barriers, and a frequently underexplored cultural and symbolic dimension that precedes and overrides direct experiential evaluation. Drawing on 56 semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted with university students in Milan between April and May 2025, this paper investigates how students organize and experience their midday lunch break and what motivates them to access or exclude themselves from the university canteen service. The findings reveal that the student sample departs substantially from the dominant framing in the contemporary literature of the canteen as an existential food-security resource, instead deploying a range of domestic and commercial food tactics that bypass institutional catering entirely. More significantly, the data demonstrates that canteen avoidance is driven less by objective assessments of food quality or pricing than by a stratification of memories in which childhood memories of institutional dining spaces trigger pre-emptive rejection of the university facility before any direct engagement takes place. Against this backdrop, peer socialization emerges as a particularly salient counterforce for overriding both affective aversion and economic and logistical inconvenience, symbolically transforming the canteen from a regimented site of institutional constraint into a shared territory of collective belonging. Taken together, these findings suggest that improving canteen access requires intervention not only at the level of food quality and pricing, but at the level of spatial culture, service typology, and the culinary imagery that students carry with them to campus.

Keywords: university canteen; campus foodscape; food insecurity; culinary imaginary; food memory; peer socialization; higher education; Milan; qualitative research; food studies

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1. Introduction

In contemporary higher education, the university canteen (alternatively conceptualized as a student restaurant or campus cafeteria) is not merely a neutral, purely functional infrastructure designed to satisfy basic caloric needs. Rather, it constitutes a pivotal element of student welfare, food security, and academic equity [1]. From this perspective, institutional dining services must be interpreted within a broader campus food environment, defined as the ensemble of physical, social, and organizational contexts through which

students can access, purchase, and consume food. Although the modalities through which universities organize their food services differ significantly across national and institutional contexts, the international literature has progressively moved beyond viewing the canteen as an isolated service. Instead, the scholarship demonstrates that university campuses constitute complex food environments where multiple spaces and modes of consumption coexist [2]. These include institutional canteens, commercial cafés, vending machines, convenience stores, off-campus dining options, and, particularly on North American university campuses, food pantries designed to support students experiencing food insecurity [3–5] by offering free or low-cost groceries [6–8]. Within this framework, the university food system can be understood as an articulated ecosystem in which various infrastructures respond to diverse economic, social, and nutritional needs. The student food experience is not constructed around a single service, but emerges from the interaction between different procurement opportunities, each characterized by specific functions and access modalities [3,4]. Within this ecosystem, the university canteen nonetheless retains a peculiar position as the primary institutional dining service in terms of institutional investment and centrality for university policies, oriented toward guaranteeing economically sustainable and potentially inclusive access to food. For many students, especially during the transition toward greater residential and economic autonomy, which is frequently accompanied by relocation away from the family context and increasing financial constraints, the opportunity to utilize the canteen can represent a significant form of protection against food insecurity and socioeconomic marginalization [9]. This redistributive function, however, does not automatically guarantee equitable access. The literature shows that individual economic resources remain one of the main determinants of service utilization, a vulnerability further aggravated by the rising cost of living and food inflation [9–11]. To address these critical issues, numerous universities have developed complementary strategies aimed at strengthening student food security and mitigating the negative impact of the economic restraints, protecting students' food access through canteens and other means [9–11].

The centrality of the canteen, however, does not depend solely on its redistributive function. Several studies have highlighted how it also constitutes a daily space of sociality, where sharing a meal can foster encounters among students from different economic and cultural backgrounds, thereby contributing to the construction of social networks and a sense of belonging to the academic community [9,12].

Yet, the availability of an accessible and potentially inclusive service does not necessarily translate into its actual use. Precisely because the canteen represents a place where material, relational, and symbolic dimensions intertwine, students' relationship with this service is influenced by a plurality of factors that extend beyond the mere physical presence of the food supply. Research shows that university dining utilization results from an interaction among individual, environmental, and social factors, including convenience, accessibility, dietary identities, and peer relationships [3,4,13]. Great emphasis has been placed on how negative perceptions of menu quality or standardization discourage service use, even when economically advantageous [14–17]. This suggests that the relationship with university dining depends not only on the material availability of the service, but also on how students perceive and interpret the food environment as a whole. To these dimensions, dietary identities and the motivations guiding consumption choices must be added. Recent research demonstrates that ethical choices, food practices linked to cultural backgrounds, health orientations, and personal preferences significantly influence where and how students choose to eat on campus [13]. Food consumption thus emerges not merely as a response to a physiological need, but also as a practice through which individuals express values, affiliations, and personal modes of relating to food. Furthermore, specific dietary requirements can pose a significant barrier to using institutional dining.

Medical restrictions such as food allergies, intolerances, celiac disease, or diabetes can make canteen access problematic when adequate options or reliable information about ingredients and allergens are lacking, leading some students to resort to alternative food sources on or off campus [18,19]. In such cases, the accessibility of the service also depends on the campus food environment's capacity to convey trust through accurate information, appropriate cross-contamination prevention procedures, and proper staff training [20–22].

Collectively, the literature demonstrates that students' relationship with university dining cannot be reduced to a single explanatory factor, as research predominantly focuses on the material attributes of the food supply and individual consumer attitudes. Within this framing, however, the critical roles of student sociality and broader cultural imaginaries remain largely underexplored. Advancements in food anthropology, and more broadly in food studies, have stressed the importance of these aspects in shaping the foodways of local communities [23]. It is precisely from this growing interpretative complexity that research must progressively broaden its scope, shifting attention from mere material access to a more comprehensive understanding of the campus dining experience. Consistent with this shifting paradigm, the contemporary literature now considers university dining not merely as a nutritional service, but as a social, cultural, and organizational environment wherein institutional policies, food practices, social relations, and student experiences jointly shape consumption patterns [3,4]. Still, studies have predominantly focused on the factors influencing access and service utilization, analyzing aspects such as economic affordability, nutritional quality, environmental sustainability, food waste reduction, the promotion of healthy choices, and the capacity of campus food systems to respond to increasingly diversified student populations [9,16,24–26]. Conversely, less attention has been dedicated to how students symbolically construct the meaning of the university canteen as a social and cultural space, and to the role that memories, representations, expectations, and past experiences play in shaping their relationship with institutional dining. Understanding this relationship requires moving beyond a conception of food consumption based exclusively on rational calculations regarding price or the nutritional attributes of the offer.

As Lupton [27] highlights, food practices are deeply embedded in networks of cultural meanings, biographical memories, and symbolic associations that guide how individuals interpret both food and the spaces in which it is consumed. From this perspective, the relationship with dining services is determined not only by direct experience, but also by representations and expectations constructed over time. Similarly, recent studies show how food decisions emerge from the interaction between identity, emotions, memories, social norms, and the culturally situated meanings attributed to food environments [13,28]. Past experiences, thus, help shape the expectations through which individuals anticipate and interpret future consumption experiences. From this viewpoint, the university canteen can be interpreted not simply as a place for eating, but as a social and cultural space where students negotiate meanings of quality, care, belonging, affordability, and their relationship with the university based on their broader cultural imaginary. Following Tsékénis [29], culinary imagery is a cultural construction that "extends beyond relations between persons to include relations between persons and collectives." It emerges from individual experiences and shared representations of institutional food settings. This concept differs from food maps (which primarily describe physical places and relationships) [30], or food attachment (which assumes positive emotional ties built over time) [31], as well as Bourdieu's habitus (which emphasizes internalized, class-conditioned dispositions) [32]. Thus, the imaginary associated with the canteen can therefore be understood as a set of images, emotions, memories, and collective representations that develop through individual experiences and socialization processes [33], acting as an interpretative framework through which students

attribute meaning to university dining even prior to direct contact with the service [28]. In this sense, while the broader campus foodscape is frequently romanticized in institutional discourses [34], the actual student imaginary is shaped by a complex negotiation of lived experiences. Furthermore, the materiality of the canteen, encompassing spatial organization, atmosphere, layout, food presentation, and interaction modalities, contributes to the co-construction of the food experience and its cultural interpretation [15,25,35].

To fill the gap in the literature, the present study aims to investigate how students develop their food choices based on their preferences, how they symbolically construct the university canteen, and how these imaginaries influence their relationship with the service. Adopting a qualitative and socio-anthropological lens, this research analyzes how students at a large Milanese university organize, experience, and negotiate their lunch break and the campus food environment. Rather than focusing exclusively on observable dietary behaviors or the frequency of canteen use, the study explores the symbolic frameworks through which students attribute meaning to university dining and how these meanings shape daily practices, consumption strategies, and decisions about service use or avoidance.

Specifically, the research analyzes:

- How students concretely organize and experience their lunch break, considering the temporal, spatial, and economic strategies adopted to procure food within or around the campus;
- The motivations that drive students to access or avoid the university canteen service, paying particular attention to the cultural meanings, expectations, and symbolic representations associated with this space.

This paper proceeds by presenting the research design, its methodological approach, and the findings of the analysis, discussing how to deconstruct and reconstruct the overall cultural imaginary that links the student body to the canteen through their daily practices, representations, and experiences.

2. Research and Methods

2.1. Context and Case Selection

The empirical fieldwork underpinning this study was conducted over a two-month period, from April to May 2025, in Milan, Italy. The selection of this case study is linked to its contextual characteristics.

Milan constitutes one of the most densely populated and institutionally complex higher education environments in Europe. The city hosts fourteen universities, five of which are ranked in the QS World University Rankings: among them, the largest and most structurally significant institutions are the Università degli Studi di Milano, one of the largest universities in Europe, with approximately 64,878 enrolled students; the Politecnico di Milano, a community of nearly 50,000 enrolled students spanning architecture, design, and engineering; and the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Europe's largest Catholic university, attracting over 40,000 students annually. This institutional density positions Milan as the primary national hub of postsecondary education, drawing students from across Italy and abroad into a highly competitive and expensive urban environment. Unlike northern European university cities where student populations are predominantly composed of geographically displaced, independently living young adults, Milan's higher education landscape is structurally characterized by a large commuter-student population (young adults who travel daily from the surrounding metropolitan area and Lombard hinterland while continuing to reside within family households) [36]. This residential configuration, shaped by Italy's broader socio-cultural patterns of extended family cohabitation and the prohibitive cost of independent urban living, produces a stratified food practice ecology in which the canteen plays a structurally divergent role depending on students'

domestic arrangements: an essential nutritional safety net for those living independently, and a logistical or social resource, rather than an existential one, for the commuter majority. It is precisely this internal stratification that provides the contextual foundation for the present study.

2.2. Research Design, Methodology, and Data Analysis

The research was based on a qualitative research design aimed at examining the fluid boundaries between public services and daily consumption practices [15,35]. This study adopts an exploratory, predominantly qualitative research design grounded in an anthropological and consumer-sociology framework [37]. Rather than seeking statistical generalizability or a linear macro-population projection to the university's broader student body (n = approx 40,000) or the metropolitan population of Milan, this inquiry prioritizes structural and interpretive validity. Consequently, sample construction was guided by the principle of thematic and theoretical saturation rather than probabilistic, proportional representation [38]. The research involved 56 individual semi-structured interviews (conducted in Italian) to investigate the plural and situational nature of everyday life, enabling participants to articulate their food preferences and spatial choices without being overly directed or constrained by rigid, pre-formulated structures [39] [Appendix A]. Data collection was guided by a comprehensive protocol designed to stimulate open-ended narrative reflection across key thematic areas of consumption. This guide functioned as a flexible, generative framework rather than a rigid quantitative survey instrument [40]. Consequently, the subsequent analysis did not treat individual questions as isolated, quantifiable variables requiring an item-by-item statistical breakdown. Instead, the entire interview corpus was approached holistically through the lens of thematic analysis to uncover the overarching structural patterns, cultural narratives, and consumer logics that emerged organically across the dialogs [41,42].

The sample comprised university students recruited from the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan using chain-referral sampling. Participation was entirely voluntary; securing informed, uncoerced consent was a deliberate methodological priority, as it minimizes performative compliance and retrospective justification during the interview process [27]. Given our qualitative design and focus on a single university in Milan, these findings provide rich, context-specific insights into how socio-spatial and symbolic dimensions inform campus food choices within a commuter-heavy urban setting. At the same time, the final sample (N = 56) significantly exceeds the empirical baseline of 9 to 17 interviews typically required to achieve saturation in relatively homogeneous cohorts with specific consumer research objectives [43,44]. Moreover, the sample offered an in-depth perspective on the underlying socio-spatial and material dynamics that lead students to either engage with or exclude themselves from the canteen service.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to thematic analysis (a systematic process of data reduction, inductive coding, and conceptual aggregation designed to isolate recurring patterns, common behavioral responses, and meaningful socio-cultural themes) [15,45] (see Supplementary Materials for the outputs). The analytical framework moved beyond a surface-level evaluation of what was explicitly stated, attending equally to how subjectivities were physically and discursively communicated [35]. Close attention was paid to the emotional intensity, affective responses, and structural levels of construal that students associated with specific food spaces and materials [28]. By systematically tracking both explicit expressions and latent indicators of spatial discomfort, financial strain, systemic alienation, and collective belonging, this analytical strategy reconstructed the complex cultural imaginaries, spatial strategies, and emotional calculations that govern the contemporary university lunch hour [2,33].

2.3. Methodological Boundaries and Limitations

Certain methodological and contextual boundaries frame this study. First, focusing on a single higher education institution in Milan means the findings offer localized structural insights rather than statistically generalizable conclusions for the broader European student population. Second, the sample reflects the cultural specificities of the Italian commuter-student model, whereas dining practices may vary in cohorts dominated by independently living or international students. Third, as with all qualitative interview research, self-reported narratives remain subject to participant presentational strategies and recall bias. In light of these limitations, the research should be considered an exploratory study aimed at opening intellectual space for future research and a deeper comparative understanding of the cultural practices and cultural production that underpin the use of university canteens among student populations in Europe and beyond. At the same time, however, the study provides a robust empirical foundation for both practical interventions and future theoretical debates.

3. Findings

The sample was predominantly composed of young adults aged 19 to 25 years enrolled in undergraduate programs. Reflecting broader socio-legal patterns observed across Italian educational frameworks [46], a significant majority of respondents (71%) lived with their families, did not hold stable or continuous employment, and maintained an omnivorous dietary regimen (which is a consumption pattern that includes both plant- and animal-based foods and the absence of explicit ethical, philosophical, cultural, or medical exclusions; see: [13]). Moreover, with a mean age of 21.4 years, the typical student operates within tight budgetary parameters and relies heavily on either institutional or domestic food provision to cover midday nutritional needs (37 out of 56).

The data reveals that the midday lunch break is far from a passive, spontaneous occurrence in the daily lives of university students in Milan. Rather, it constitutes an active, multi-layered logistical negotiation in which temporal, spatial, and financial constraints are continuously balanced against one another.

The compressed architecture of consecutive lecture schedules leaves students with narrow windows to secure a meal, making speed and proximity decisive factors in their food choices. Spatially, the physical distance between classrooms and canteen facilities emerges as a critical friction point: when canteens are decoupled from the campus buildings, the travel time required to reach them consumes what is perceived as a disproportionate share of the available break, effectively pricing students out of the service in terms of time even when the financial cost remains manageable. In response, students adopt a range of compensatory strategies: bringing pre-prepared meal boxes from home; the so-called schiscetta (pronounced /skiʃˈʃet.ta/). This represents the most widespread domestic solution, prioritizing ingredient control and cost savings over the social and institutional dimensions of campus dining. Others, gravitating toward commercial alternatives in the surrounding urban environment, trade financial efficiency for spatial flexibility, accepting higher costs in exchange for faster services and proximity to their classroom buildings.

Overall, the majority of students (37 out of 56) do not use the canteen service, and, among those who do, use is sporadic. The barriers to access are powerful and varied. Financially, the data confirm that cost remains a structuring variable, ranking third among student food value priorities with a mean score of 2.98 out of 5 (1 min. priority, 5 max priority), behind taste (4.55) and health (3.66). While this positioning might suggest that price is a marginal concern, it must be read against the backdrop of the sample's low labor market participation and family-dependent residential arrangements. Thus, on the one hand, many students rely on financial support from their relatives, so they do not feel

the direct burden of managing their income. On the other hand, for students without independent income, even subsidized canteen pricing requires careful financial planning to cover costs that not all students can afford on a regular basis.

Among the other barriers, physical distance is key. Even more than that, however, students' culinary imagery plays a fundamental role, as they perceive and represent canteens as overcrowded, noisy spaces, framing them as high-friction, low-reward environments for a significant portion of the student body. This entails a psychological dimension of exclusion. First of all, the students do not distinguish among the several canteens run by the University, producing a flat description of their experience with the service; their perception of the space and food is anchored more in memories than in direct experience of the university's services. Over 37% of respondents spontaneously mapped their emotional associations with the word mensa (pronounced /ˈmɛnsə/, canteen in English) not onto their current university facility but onto childhood memories of elementary and middle school dining halls: spaces coded by institutional noise, forced consumption, bland and static menus, and a pervasive loss of individual agency. Rather than a real-time cognitive evaluation of the actual food and facilities offered by their university, the choice of the students is driven by culturally embedded spatial memories and inherited representations of institutional dining [35]; in other words, by their culinary imagery. Early institutional dining encounters function as deeply sedimented spatial and culinary images that activate inherited cultural meanings of institutional constraint, triggering preemptive spatial avoidance long before any direct engagement with the service occurs. Thus, students experience visceral avoidance of the university canteen before ever directly engaging with its actual current offer. In this respect, following an established paradigm in rhetoric and linguistic anthropology that considers verbatim participant quotes as primary empirical resources [47], the words of the participants are particularly useful to portray and give concreteness to this understanding.

> *"Honestly, the second I hear the word 'mensa,' my brain immediately glitches back to elementary school. I don't even know where the actual university canteen is on this campus, and I don't care to look. The word alone carries a shadow of institutional punishment."*
>
> —Interviewee 2

> *"When I walk past the university dining hall here in Milan, even if the menu changes, that childhood trauma blocks me. I see the metal counters, and I instinctively run to a local bakery instead."*
>
> —Interview 8

However, against this landscape of avoidance, the data isolate a single but decisive counterforce that moves students to challenge their culinary imagery and use the canteens: peer socialization. Even students who harbor strong cognitive and affective aversion to the canteen (rejecting its food quality, atmosphere, or institutional identity) will nonetheless enter the space when it functions as a node of peer connection and collective ritual. Commensality and peer conviviality (the affective pleasure of sharing a meal, decompressing, and maintaining peer relationships [48]) represent forces that effectively override individual resistance. As students report, the canteen functions as a "meeting point" and an opportunity to "strengthen bonds" or simply to "be together" with their classmates outside class hours. This relational pleasure overrides individual cognitive and affective aversion: the space is symbolically repurposed from an unpleasant institutional facility into an extension of the campus social fabric; a shared territory defined not by its menu but by the group identity performed within it.

> *"If I were acting purely on my own taste preferences, I would never cross that threshold. But lunch isn't about nutrition; it's a collective performance. I go there to ingest peer solidarity, not the food."*
>
> —Interviewee 20

> *"My friends transformed it into 'our spot.' The space stops feeling like a cold, public cafeteria the moment it becomes the backdrop for our group laughter."*
>
> —Interviewee 50

4. Discussion

Taken together, these findings point toward a core conclusion: student behavior toward the university canteen in our sample appears to be strongly shaped by the culinary imagery students share alongside their operational experiences. Specifically, this cultural perception is delineated by the sense of uneasiness that is expressed through three main dimensions:

- Historical memories of childhood school dining characterized by forced consumption and lack of choice;
- Procedural opacity regarding badge rules, pricing tiers, and access modalities;
- Rigid spatial–temporal friction marked by tight lecture schedules, long queues, and overwhelming institutional noise.

Given these constraints, the decision to use or avoid the service constitutes an act of self-determination. It is shaped by inherited symbolic imagery, childhood memory templates, and peer group spatial rituals rather than by real-time assessments of nutritional value, food variety, kitchen quality, or pricing adjustments [49]; all aspects of which the students possess limited or no knowledge. These results force a critical re-reading of the role of the canteens for the student population.

In the eyes of the students, canteens are something different than a universal safety net against food insecurity [9,11]. Although cross-country data from the FINESCOP consortium position the institutional canteen as a primary survival mechanism for the student population, serving as a buffer against the severe food insecurity affecting approximately 27.5% of European university students [10], the overall majority of the respondents are insulated from the acute nutritional vulnerability that the European literature treats as the principal driver of canteen dependence. For the Milanese sample, canteens do not serve as a key food-security resource because the domestic sphere remains the primary site of nutritional provision; they appear to be a significant stage for personal and cultural expression.

While both price and logistics are considered by students in their decision-making, culinary imagery plays a crucial role. The early institutional encounters students had with canteens in their lives function as what Lupton [27] terms "food memories," deeply sedimented affective structures that continue to organize gustatory and spatial preferences long after the original experience. The research shows how the space of the university canteen is governed by processes of spatial signification and cultural perception. As Martin-McAuliffe has shown [50], spaces are never neutral containers and are always invested with shared cultural imaginaries, symbolic boundaries, and bodily memories that organize everyday consumption. In this respect, the canteen is culturally coded as a regimented, standardized, and somehow unpleasant environment. In line with the analysis of Piqueras-Fiszman and Jaeger [28], food memories operate below the threshold of rational evaluation, leading students to reject the canteen not because its menu has been assessed and found wanting, but because its symbolic and material vocabulary triggers inherited associations. Avoidance operates here as a primary affective coping strategy, allowing students to bypass the emotional discomfort generated by these inherited institutional associations [28,33].

Closely related to this affective dynamic is the cultural meaning attributed to the canteen's service typology and spatial architecture. Lupton [27] has argued that food practices are never reducible to their nutritional or economic content: they are embedded in systems of cultural meaning, social distinction, and bodily memory that invest particular eating spaces with complex symbolic valences. The line-service format of the institutional canteen is experienced by the sample not merely as inconvenient, but as incompatible with the cultural expectations students bring to the midday meal. The ritual of eating is understood as a moment of personal autonomy, comfort, and social intimacy; the architectural grammar of the canteen, as codified in the students' culinary imagery, directly violates these expectations [15]. Students who bring their schiscetta and consume it in informal campus spaces, such as corridors, stairwells, courtyard benches, are not simply making a logistical choice; they are performing what Oldenburg [51] would recognize as a search for a "third place," an informal environment liberated from both the domestic sphere and the university's institutional apparatus. This active spatial re-appropriation reflects a broader pattern in which students construct their own campus foodscapes in resistance to the top-down infrastructural logic of public catering [34].

Yet the data also isolates a critical force capable of disrupting this logic of avoidance and overcoming the stratified culinary imaginary: peer socialization arising from commensality [48]. In line with Ayllón and Lado's [12] findings on campus dining as a mechanism for community building, the students who do regularly use the canteen do so predominantly for social rather than gastronomic reasons. Students who express aversion to canteens will nonetheless cross their threshold when their peer network uses the space as a central gathering point. In this respect, commensality and relational pleasure play a central role in giving meaning to the canteen space, while sharing food at a common table serves as a primary practice for creating emotional solidarity, social belonging, and daily respite [48]. The students seek conviviality, relief from academic stress, and the simple pleasure of shared meals; in so doing, through and thanks to commensality, the canteen becomes an infrastructure that nurtures social capital by fostering peer networks and inter-student connections. Thus, the desire for commensality and participation in shared group rituals (what Hochschild [33] theorizes as the place-work through which individuals transform cold institutional spaces into home territories) overrides individual cultural resistance to the environment. Crucially, this socialization effect operates through a symbolic re-coding of the space: the canteen ceases to function as a corporate feeding station and is re-invested with the affective qualities of a shared lounge, a stress-relief venue, or an informal extension of the lecture hall. Students in the sample describe occupying fixed corner tables, bringing their own food into the dining space, using it as a study space, and treating the canteen visit as a daily collective ritual entirely independent of its culinary offer. This represents a form of tactical appropriation in de Certeau's [52] sense: users subordinate the space's prescribed function to their own social logics, reclaiming agency within an environment originally designed to process them efficiently and anonymously, and reshaping its boundaries.

In effect, the research suggests that the everyday reality of a canteen is not just defined by top-down administrative regulations and corporate catering supply. Rather, the data reveal that its spatial boundaries are inherently porous, blurry, and hybrid. The canteen space functions as a liminal territory where domestic foodways and institutional architecture intersect. While university management structures the dining hall around an institutional logic (line-service layouts, badge validation, structured pricing tiers), students deploy bottom-up spatial tactics by introducing domestic food into the facility. In doing so, they effectively "domesticate" the institutional sphere, producing a grassroots strategy to counter the stratified meanings associated with the place as well: the physical table is

detached from the institutional kitchen behind the counter and re-signified as an informal "third place" [51] dedicated to peer conviviality.

To be clear, this finding does not contradict the broader European evidence so much as it contextualizes it. First of all, the Italian residential model, in which students are far more likely to remain in the family home throughout their degree [46], produces a distinct configuration of food practices that sits largely outside the frameworks developed from northern and central European data [14] that limits the relevance of the economic levers [26]. More than that, the research results align with the literature on physical and logistical barriers to canteen access [15,16]. Convenience is highly regarded among the students, reflecting the extent to which logistical efficiency shapes students' food choices, and this reinforces Schaubroeck et al.'s [16] argument that even well-subsidized institutional catering is undermined when its physical geography conflicts with the temporal architecture of student academic life. Thus, while materiality still matters, the research suggests going beyond it to explore the cultural understanding of services and places, and the cultural motivations that underpin food practices. In this case, the use of the canteen demonstrates that student agency does not merely manifest through absolute rejection or avoidance of the canteen, but through the active, tactical renegotiation of its symbolic and material borders. In this, commensality constitutes the main pathway through which old negative meanings and associations are overcome, and new positive ones are associated with the canteen, making the service and the place meaningful for the students and central to their lives.

5. Conclusions

5.1. Theoretical Implications and Policy Recommendations

This study investigated how university students organize and experience their midday lunch break, examining the underlying motivations that lead them to access or avoid the campus canteen service. The findings offer qualitative insights into how student engagement with university dining is meaningfully informed not only by operational realities—pricing, menus, or nutrition—but also by cultural imaginaries, inherited memories, and spatial perceptions. Rather than acting as purely rational economic actors performing objective cost–benefit evaluations, students navigate campus foodscapes as social and biographical subjects whose spatial habits are shaped by past institutional encounters and peer dynamics.

By capturing these lived experiences, the paper makes three distinct contributions to the literature on higher education foodscapes and student welfare. First, it contextualizes European student food security frameworks within commuter-heavy southern European settings. For students living in extended family households, the canteen does not serve as an existential buffer against acute food insecurity, but rather as an optional logistical resource; within this context, domestic food tactics like the schiscetta function as active strategies of economic and spatial self-determination. Second, the study highlights the powerful role of historical school dining memories in structuring current avoidance behaviors, showing how negative childhood representations of institutional constraints generate pre-emptive spatial aversion. Third, it conceptualizes the canteen as an inherently porous and hybrid space. When students bring home-prepared meals to canteen tables, they actively "domesticate" the public sphere, demonstrating that spatial boundaries are continually negotiated and that peer conviviality can symbolically re-code cold institutional facilities into shared community territories.

These theoretical insights offer direct guidelines for university administration, student welfare agencies, and campus planners. Service avoidance is not just about the actual service provided; it is the result of sedimented culinary imagery that must be deconstructed to help students appreciate and use the service. In this respect, standard policy responses,

such as tweaking menus, expanding price subsidies, or introducing digital nutritional labeling, will yield limited behavioral change as long as the material and spatial grammar of the canteen reproduces the rigid institutional atmosphere that triggers avoidance. However, while socialization and conviviality are key drivers for students to overcome their imagery, actions should be taken to transform canteens into an inclusive community space. This requires operationalizing concrete spatial and service improvements desired by the student body within the limits imposed by the legislation. For example:

- Humanizing the Dining Environment: Campus planners must redesign dining halls to mitigate sensory overload, harsh lighting, and acoustic stress, while dismantling the operational pressure for rapid table turnover. Rethinking layout and seating to prioritize comfort helps reshape the hall from an efficient feeding station into a relaxed campus "third place".
- Dismantling Spatial Segregation: Canteen policies should eliminate artificial spatial divides that separate students bringing home-prepared food from those purchasing catering meals, allowing mixed peer groups to sit together and practice unrestricted commensality.
- Promoting Spatial Multi-Functionality: Institutions should extend operating hours and allow canteen spaces to be repurposed as informal study, lounge, or meeting areas during off-peak morning and afternoon hours.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research

This study entails limitations concerning its design (a qualitative and exploratory research based on one single city and higher education provides data that prioritize interpretive depth over statistical generalizability) and methods employed (self-reported interview narratives always carry the potential for retrospective justification, presentational strategies, or subtle interviewer effects) that correspond to the exploratory nature of this study. Nonetheless, the core insights offer clear, actionable guidance for both campus administrators and food scholars. Ultimately, university canteens should not be treated merely as functional feeding infrastructures to be optimized, but as flexible community institutions to be inhabited—where long-term engagement depends far less on what is served behind the counter than on the social meanings and sense of belonging cultivated around the table. This holistic approach is fundamental to developing and improving the service for the future.

Building on these exploratory findings, future research could employ multi-site, comparative qualitative frameworks across diverse university towns (at the national or international level) to examine how differing residential patterns and regional food cultures influence engagement with campus canteens. Moreover, longitudinal studies tracking students during their careers could clarify how childhood food memories evolve and interact with newly formed peer networks over time. Additionally, mixed-method inquiries that integrate qualitative ethnography with spatial analysis would offer deeper insights into how physical architecture and digital interventions reshape students' foodways. Finally, comparative investigations focusing specifically on international and independently living students would help tailor inclusive institutional food policies to increasingly diverse postsecondary populations. Overall, the field of study appears open to new contributions that would make the collective catering sector more sustainable and better align with the needs of students and institutions.

Supplementary Materials: The table "Summary of the results emerging from the qualitative interviews", including an analytical summary of all the interviews, has been provided for download. This material can be downloaded at https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/soc16080264/s1.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. The study adopts a qualitative and non-interventional design, primarily based on an anonymous questionnaire and complementary qualitative materials. The study included only adult participants and did not involve any clinical procedures, interventions, or vulnerable populations. No identifying personal data was collected. In the Italian context, mandatory Ethics Committee approval is required for clinical trials and biomedical interventional studies. In particular, Legislative Decree No. 52/2019 (implementing EU Regulation No. 536/2014) regulates clinical trials on medicinal products and does not apply to non-interventional social science research such as anonymous surveys. The study was conducted in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, Regulation (EU) 2016/679) and Italian privacy legislation (Legislative Decree No. 196/2003, as amended by Legislative Decree No. 101/2018), ensuring informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity, and data minimization. For these reasons, ethical approval was not required for this type of study and was therefore ethical review and approval were waived for this study.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article/Supplementary Material. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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Appendix A

The following is the interview protocol used in the research.

"My name is [Name], and I am conducting ethnographic research on the meaning of food in the lives of university students, with a particular focus on the university canteen (cafeteria) experience. The goal is to understand how food influences relationships, daily habits, and cultural identity.

The interview will last approximately 30 min. The questions will be open-ended: there are no right or wrong answers, I am simply interested in your personal perspective. All information will be kept anonymous and used solely for research purposes. If at any point you wish to stop or choose not to answer a question, you may do so without any problem.

Before we begin, I kindly ask you to confirm your consent to participate and to the audio/video recording.

Do you have any questions before we proceed?"

Personal Data/Demographics

Section 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics

- **Age:** _____

- **Gender:**
  - ☐ Male
  - ☐ Female
  - ☐ Prefer not to answer
- **Residency:**
  - ☐ With family
  - ☐ With friends/roommates
  - ☐ In a university residence/dorm
  - ☐ Alone
  - ☐ Other (please specify): _____
- **Are you a student who:**
  - ☐ Attends classes regularly (On-campus/Attending)
  - ☐ Does not attend classes regularly (Distance/Non-attending)
- **Do you have a part-time or full-time job?**
  - ☐ Yes, part-time
  - ☐ Yes, full-time
  - ☐ No
- **Nationality:**
  - ☐ Italian
  - ☐ Foreign (please specify: _____)
  - ☐ Dual citizenship (please specify: _____)

Section 2: Health and Lifestyle

- **Do you have any specific dietary restrictions or allergies?**
  - ☐ Yes (please specify): _____
  - ☐ No
- **Do you follow a specific diet?**
  - Omnivorous
  - Vegetarian
  - Vegan
  - Raw food (Crudivore)
  - Paleo
  - Keto (Ketogenic)
  - Mediterranean
  - Gluten-free
  - Fruitarian
  - Flexitarian
  - Other (please specify): _____
- **Are you currently trying to modify your weight?**
  - ☐ No, I am not trying to change my weight
  - ☐ Yes, I am trying to lose weight
  - ☐ Yes, I am trying to gain weight
  - ☐ Other (please specify): _____
- **Do you smoke?**
  - Yes
  - No

- **Do you engage in physical activity or sports?**
  - ☐ No, I do not practice physical activity or sports
  - ☐ Yes, occasionally (less than once a week)
  - ☐ Yes, regularly (1–2 times a week)
  - ☐ Yes, frequently (3–5 times a week)
  - ☐ Yes, very frequently (more than 5 times a week)

Section 3: Food Choices and Awareness

- **How much do the following factors influence your food choices on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 = not important at all and 5 = very important?**
  - ☐ Taste
  - ☐ Cost
  - ☐ Health
  - ☐ Convenience
  - ☐ Ethical/Environmental aspects
  - ☐ Family traditions
  - ☐ Other (please specify:_____)
- **How would you define your diet? Please mark with an (X) the point on the scale that best describes your eating style (semantic differential):**
  - Healthy ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ Unhealthy
  - Varied ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ Repetitive
  - Balanced ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ Unbalanced
  - Traditional ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ Innovative
  - Tasty ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ Tasteless/Bland
  - Caloric (High-calorie) ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ Low-calorie
  - Sustainable ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ Unsustainable

Interview Questions
Introduction

- Introduction of the researcher and explanation of the interview objectives.
- Information on confidentiality and request for informed consent.

Social and Cultural Dimension of Food

- What role does food play in your life today?
- Are there any dishes that you feel are linked to your identity, your community, or your place of origin?
- In what ways is food important in your relationships with others?
- Have you ever cooked or shared meals with people from cultures different from your own? If so, what was that experience like?
- Do you think the way people eat today is different compared to the past? In what way?
- Are there any dishes or foods that hold a special meaning for you? Why?
- Are there specific places where food is sold or consumed that are particularly important to you? Which ones and why?

Daily Dietary Habits

- Can you describe a typical day for you from a food perspective?
- Are there any particular routines related to food in your daily life?
- How important is mealtime to you? Do you eat alone or in the company of others?
- Where do you usually buy your food? What factors influence your purchasing choices?
- How does your awareness of food's effects on health influence your daily food choices?
- Where are the places you usually eat? Why?

The Canteen and Its Meaning

- What thoughts and emotions do you associate with the word "canteen" (*mensa*)? Why?
- Have you ever used school or workplace canteens in the past? If so, what memories do you have of these places?
- How would you compare the experience of eating at a canteen to eating at home? And compared to other dining contexts? (e.g., cafés, restaurants. . .)

Current Use of the University Canteen

- Do you use the university canteen? If so, which one and how often?
- What are the reasons why you choose to go (or not go) to that canteen?
- What does the university canteen represent to you?
- If you could change anything about the university canteen, what would it be?

Conclusion

- Is there anything else you would like to add or share regarding your experience with food?

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