

Food and Culture

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<http://www.kidsgardening.org/node/11782>

Standard

SS5H3 The student will describe how life changed in America at the turn of the century.

d. Describe the reasons people emigrated to the United States, from where they emigrated, and where they settled.

Exploring The Flavors of Your Community



For thousands of years, immigrants to this country have brought foods, culinary practices, beliefs about edibles, and related traditions along with them. Indigenous groups have their own unique "foodways." (This concept can apply to a culture, region, or historical period.) Although it may *seem* as though burgers, fries, and shakes make up our national cuisine, a tremendous diversity of foods and cooking customs flourish in our midst.



In fall, when most school gardens have been put to bed (except for the enviable warm-climate variety), and visions of Thanksgiving feasts prevail, consider engaging students in the fascinating study of food and culture. By examining what different groups eat; how they prepare it; and the role of edible fare in celebrations, social lives, and belief systems, students will have a unique lens on history and culture. Such a project can also be an ideal springboard for exploring and appreciating ethnic and regional diversity.

In this Classroom Project, we suggest ways to uncover the foodways represented in your classroom and broader community. By engaging with and interviewing community members, and creating a thematic cookbook, students will hone communications skills. When they look beyond our own harvest celebration and explore related festivals throughout the world, they'll begin to grasp the power and many faces of the people/food connection. And *that's* just for starters. Read on for ideas and inspiration.

Food for Thought: Digging into Family Traditions



To prompt students' thinking about foodways, start with a focus on special dishes their families prepare (or purchase) for Thanksgiving or other harvest festivals, celebrations, or holidays.

- In preparation for student-to-student interviews about family cuisine and customs, have the class brainstorm questions they might ask their partners. For instance, *What does your family eat for ____? Do any of the dishes (recipes) have family stories or folklore behind them? What are they? Which foods are linked to your ethnic or cultural heritage? What do you know about their history? Which is your favorite dish? Why? Which recipes include fruits and vegetables from a home garden?*
- Assign students, questions in hand, to dig up answers at home. They should take notes so they can share their findings with partners.
- Back in the classroom, pair students up and have them take turns questioning each other, using the list they generated as a guide. Next, each pair should discuss how their families' food traditions compare. Once each pair has a chance to share highlights with the rest of the class, ask the group what they've discovered or what generalizations they can make about food, cooking, and culture. Make a class chart of new questions the exercise inspired and brainstorm how students might find answers.
- **Alternative Activity** - If you have diverse ethnic groups represented in your classroom, have each student keep a list of all the foods they eat in a week (or during a holiday week). Next, have pairs or small groups compare lists and discuss observations and "aha's" that emerge. You may also want to explore questions such as, *How did a*

particular culture (e.g., Mexican) come to value certain plant foods (corn products, beans, and rice)?

Conducting Community Interviews



Once students have examined the food and culinary traditions represented in their classroom, challenge them (individually or in small groups) to interview someone who has emigrated, or whose parents emigrated, from another country to the United States. This could be a family member or other adult from the community. (If they can't locate a person that fits this bill, they might interview a chef who specializes in an ethnic cuisine.) Depending on your students' abilities and available resources, they can document the interviews by taking notes or making audio- or videotapes. (They'll need to get permission from their subject for the latter options.)

- In preparation for interviews, ask students to pose questions that can help them gain a better understanding of a culture's food heritage. For instance, *What foods, herbs, and spices are typically found in dishes from your culture? What drinks are common? What special cooking techniques are used? Can you tell me about a favorite dish (recipe) and any story or folklore that goes with it? What food crops are commonly grown in the country and how do they influence the cuisine? How does the climate or geography of the country influence what's grown and eaten?*

Before they schedule their own sessions, have youngsters discuss what it takes to be a good interviewer. As students share thoughts, you may want to suggest some of the tips listed below. Also consider conducting a role-play exercise so students can practice interviewing skills prior to their visits.

Once the interviews are complete, challenge students to organize and creatively present what they've uncovered. The outcome could be a booklet, edited video, skit, or presentation using Hyperstudio or other computer software. Alternatively, have the group plan a classroom or community feast or multicultural food festival in which each student or group prepares an ethnic dish they've learned about. They can also display and talk about specific ingredients or share related stories they gleaned from the interviews.

Tips for Conducting a Good Interview

- Greet your interviewee by reminding them who you are, why you want to talk with them, and what you hope to find out. If applicable, get permission to audio- or videotape the interview.
- Ask questions that require more of an answer than a "yes" or "no." Choose more open-ended questions that allow the interviewee to answer in his or her own words.
- Be sure to take cues from your interviewee. Ask questions based on answers they give you. Follow your question sheet, but don't be afraid to expand from the discussion.
- If the person is telling a story and you think of another question, don't interrupt; jot it down and come back to it.
- Write a thank-you note to the person you interviewed and immediately put it in the mail.