

# Exploring the Flavors of Your Community

**Overview:** Our communities are made up of individuals from a diverse array of cultural backgrounds. One way to explore different cultural heritages is for students to learn about the traditional foods, culinary practices, and celebrations of their classmates and neighbors. In this lesson, students will conduct interviews to explore the flavors of their community.

**Grade Level/Range:** 6th – 8th Grade

## Objective:

Students will:

- Learn and share about foods important to their own cultural heritage
- Explore the foods and culinary traditions of their peers and community
- Celebrate the similarities and differences they discover and begin to understand the benefits of ethnic and regional diversity

**Time:** 2+ hours

## Materials:

- Paper
- Pencil
- Clipboard (optional)
- Audio recording device (optional)

## Background Information

By examining what different cultural groups eat; how they prepare it; and the role of edible fare in celebrations, social lives, and belief systems, students gain a unique lens on history and culture. For hundreds of years, immigrants to this country have brought foods, culinary practices, beliefs about edibles, and related traditions along with them. Indigenous groups also have their own unique "foodways." (This concept can apply to a culture, region, or historical period.) Although burgers, fries, and shakes are often thought of as our national cuisine, a tremendous diversity of foods and cooking customs flourish in the United States.

## Laying the Groundwork

In preparation for student-to-student interviews about their 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? Are these dishes part of special holidays or celebrations? 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? Do you grow these in a home garden?

Once you select the questions you want to ask, make copies and send them home with each student so they can have their families help them



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prepare answers. They should take notes so they can share their findings with partners.

\*Before you begin class discussions, you may also want to discuss the importance of cultural sensitivity to students by mentioning something like: "Remember that we all have different tastes when it comes to food, and that it's never okay to tell another student or community member that the foods their culture values are "gross" or "yucky" just because they're not foods that you may not have experienced or enjoyed."

## Exploration

1. In the classroom, pair up students and have them take turns questioning each other, using the list they generated as a guide.
2. Next, each pair should discuss how their families' food traditions are similar or different and take notes.
3. Give students a chance to share what they have learned about each other's cultural traditions. 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.
4. Make a class chart of new questions the exercise inspired and brainstorm how students might find answers such as "How did a particular culture (e.g., Mexican) come to value certain plant foods (corn products, beans, and chiles)?"
5. Move your activity beyond the classroom and challenge students (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 video recordings. (They'll need to get permission from their subject for the latter options.)
6. 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 characteristic?
  - 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, also have students discuss what it takes to be a good interviewer (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.

### 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 record 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.

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- 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.
7. 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. Alternatively, have the group plan a classroom or community feast or multicultural food festival in which each student or group prepares a dish they've learned about. They can also display and talk about specific ingredients or share related stories they've gleaned from the interviews.

## Making Connections

### Create a Classroom or Community Cookbook

Consider creating a print or online cookbook that features culturally important dishes (or just favorite recipes) from students' families or from community residents whom students interviewed. Have small groups discuss what types of recipes they'd like to include and how they might organize them. For instance, they might decide to create a cookbook of family holiday recipes or dishes from the garden, or have a "flavors of the community" theme. Recipes could be organized by meal course (e.g., salads, main dishes) or by regional or cultural group. Once teams share their ideas with the class, have students try to reach an agreement on how to proceed.

Ask students to bring in and browse through cookbooks and review the information they gathered during interviews. Next, discuss what categories of information to include with each recipe, such as the name of the dish, cultural origin, when it's consumed, associated folklore, ingredients, and how to prepare and eat it. Consider incorporating original drawings or photos. After creating the book in a print version (on computer or by hand), students can copy and sell it to raise funds or give copies as gifts.

## Branching Out

### Where in the World?

By focusing on the origins and travel tales of plant-based foods, students will have an intriguing lens for studying geography and cultures. You might begin such a study by challenging students to identify the origin and history of each plant (e.g., wheat) or plant-based ingredient (e.g., flour) in one of the recipes they gathered. Here are some questions they can pursue:

- Where did this plant originate? What is the climate in that region?
- Is the food native to North America? If so, who first used it and how? How did it travel from here to other parts of the globe?
- If a food plant is not native to this country, how, when, and why did it travel here? Challenge students to map the (sometimes circuitous) route from its country of origin.
- What myths or folklore are associated with it? Does it appear in historical works of art, music, or writing? What can you infer from answers to these questions about its value to a culture?
- How was the plant food historically processed or preserved? How is this accomplished today?
- How do humans use this plant for other (nonfood) purposes (e.g., corn is used in paints, plastics, soaps, fuel, and even cosmetics)?
- Which foods that originated in other cultures have become popular staples or "novelty foods" here (e.g., tortilla chips and salsa, pizza)? When and how did they move into the mainstream in the U.S.?

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