

Exploring the Flavors of Your Community

Overview: 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: Adaptable K-6th grade

Objectives:

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: 1 Hour

Materials:

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

Background Information:

By examining what different foods cultural groups eat; how they prepare them; 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.) A tremendous diversity of foods and cooking customs flourish in the United States.

Introducing and discussing the topic of culturally diverse foods should be done in an intentional and thoughtful manner. Food preferences and behaviors are both complex and deeply personal. Here are a few things to consider as you plan for diving into cultural cuisine with your class:

- Establish the classroom expectation that students must show respect towards all kinds of food. Lessons around culturally diverse foods should be done in a judgement-free environment which must be supported by and appropriately modeled by the educators leading the exploration. Before beginning your lessons, spend time making sure students understand the important role traditional foods play within a culture and the personal connections individuals have with traditional dishes. Enforce that everyone has different taste buds and it is okay if you don't like all foods and that in fact, this is to be expected as we're all individuals with a unique set of preferences. But it is never okay to shame or insult someone else for having different food preferences and tastes than yourself. Teach students vocabulary that can aid in your discussion such as when talking about or being offered tasting samples of food that does not sound good to them or they do not like instead of saying "I hate it" or "This is gross!" encourage youth to say thing such as "No, thank you," "This isn't for me," or simply "I don't like it."



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[FoodCorps](#) models this by teaching kids about the importance of “Don’t Yuck My Yum!” To explore this further, read the article [“How to Help Your Kids Eat Healthy without Calling Foods Good or Bad”](#) from EatingWell Magazine.

- If you have opportunities to taste prepared foods, youth should not feel pressured to try them or to say they like something, nor should they be faulted for disliking something or deciding not to partake. Also, introduce the concept of a “Try a Bite” (or “Try a Sip” if you happen to be making a liquid such as a smoothie, soup, etc.) as a way to encourage youth participation. After they take the one Try a Bite, they can choose to take more bites if they like it or say “no thanks” and be done with the taste test. Also, encourage students not to let their preferences influence others.
- In addition to cultural heritage, food accessibility and insecurity can play a role in the foods youth eat at home. Keep in mind that both everyday and holiday/celebratory meals may not be representative of their cultural heritage.
- Students come from a wide array of home situations with regards to the grownups caring for them. For example, they may be living with foster families or adoptive families who provide foods that are not reflective of the cultural background they identify with. Provide opportunities for youth to explore and share about foods they feel connected to whether or not it represents what they are currently consuming.
- Since food is such a sensitive topic, always allow students to share and complete assignments only as they feel comfortable. Brainstorm ways to adapt your lesson for hesitant students so they can feel included without feeling pressured.

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:

- Do you have any foods you eat for special occasions such as a holiday or celebration?
- Are there any special stories behind any of these foods? Do you know any of the history about why you eat these foods?
- Do you feel like any of these foods are special to your cultural heritage?
- Which is your favorite dish? Why?
- Do any of these recipes include herbs, fruits, and vegetables that you grow yourself? Do we or could we grow any of them in our school garden?

Once your students select the questions they want to ask, make a worksheet to send home with each student to complete so they can have their grownups help them prepare answers. Suggest that they can also bring in any favorite recipes if they would like.

If student-to-students interviews are not an appropriate or ideal activity for your classroom, another option is to bring in guests representing different cultures from your community for kids to interview. The interviews could be conducted as a class or small group activity depending on time and available volunteers. Potential guests to recruit may include school staff members, school volunteers, parents, neighbors, community gardeners, or local restaurant owners.

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Exploration:

Choose student-to-student or guest speaker interviews:

Student-to Student Interviews

1. Before you begin the interviews, 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."
2. If conducting student-to-student interviews, pair up students (or arrange them in small groups) and have them take turns questioning each other, using the list they generated as a guide.
3. Come back together as a group and 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. After each student gets a chance to share, encourage them to talk about how their food traditions are similar or different. Things of note may be ingredients discussed, cooking methods, and special occasions where food is important. Make a classroom chart of these important points.

Guest Speaker Interviews

1. If bringing in guest speakers seems like a better fit for your classroom, try to look for volunteers who come from a diversity of backgrounds and perhaps people who have recently moved to the United States. You may want the class to brainstorm additional questions for their guest than they would have used for student-to-student interviews. Some possible additions include:
 - What foods, herbs, and spices are typically found in dishes from your culture?
 - 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 where your culture originates and how do they influence the cuisine?
 - How does the climate or geography where your culture originates influence what's grown and eaten?
2. Before conducting the interviews, spend a little bit of time preparing them to be good interviewers and good listeners. You can even consider conducting a role-play exercise so students can practice interviewing skills prior to their visits. Here are some tips you could share:
 - Greet your interviewees 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 the answers they give you. Follow your question sheet, but don't be afraid to expand on 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.

Whether you choose to do student-to-student or guest speaker interviews, conclude by engaging students in talking about the diversity of foods available around the world. Why do you think there are differences? What role do you think the availability of different kinds of spices, plants, and animals play in cultural cuisines?

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What are the benefits of eating foods that grow well in your region? What are some of the benefits of having lots of different kinds of foods available in our communities?

You can also challenge students to organize and creatively present what they've discovered. The outcome could be a booklet, edited video, skit, or presentation.

Making Connections:

Using the information gathered in the interviews, lead students in creating a classroom or community cookbook. They can create a print or online cookbook that features culturally important dishes (or just favorite recipes) from students and/or from community residents whom students interviewed. Begin by having 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 holiday recipes or dishes using garden harvest 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 they decide what they would like to feature, the next step is for them to decide what information they want each recipe to include. At minimum, they will want the recipe's name, ingredients, and cooking instructions. They may also want to include special information on the cultural origin if it is eaten as part of a celebration or tradition, and associated folklore. They may also want to consider incorporating original drawings or photos. Help them prepare a worksheet to gather this information that can be sent home or to volunteers to gather the recipes.

Once recipes are returned, allow students to help compile them as their skill levels allow. Once compiled, you can give a copy to each student and could make additional copies for gifts or to use as a fundraiser for your school garden.

Branching Out:

School lunches are an integral part of a student's day. A fun extension of this lesson can be for students to research school lunches from around the world. Here are a few videos that can help launch their investigations:

- [School Lunches Around the World](#)
- [School Lunch in Japan – It's Not Just About Eating!](#)

You may also want to invite a speaker from your food services department to talk to your class about how lunch meals are planned at your school or in your school district.

Connections to Standards:

This lesson could be expanded and adapted to incorporate activities that would meet the following Next Generation Science Standards:

K-LS1-1. Use observations to describe patterns of what plants and animals (including humans) need to survive.

K-ESS3-1. Use a model to represent the relationship between the needs of different plants or animals (including humans) and the places they live.

3-LS2-1. Construct an argument that some animals form groups that help members survive.

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4-LS1-2. Use a model to describe that animals receive different types of information through their senses, process the information in their brain, and respond to the information in different ways.

5-PS3-1. Use models to describe that energy in animals' food (used for body repair, growth, motion, and to maintain body warmth) was once energy from the sun.

Resources:

How to Help Your Kids Eat Healthy Without Calling Foods Good and Bad by Lucy Clark. *EatingWell*. 11 January 2021.

<https://www.eatingwell.com/article/7884412/kids-eat-healthy-without-calling-foods-good-bad/>

School Lunches Around the World. BuzzFeed Multiplayer. *YouTube*. 8 October 2014

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Po0O9tRXCyA&t=2s>

School Lunch in Japan – It's Not Just About Eating! CafCu Media. *YouTube*. 19 April 2015

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hL5mKE4e4uU>

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