

# FOOD TRADITIONS INTERVIEW

## OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students interview an elder or someone from another culture to learn about foods in different times or places. This gives students broader insight for thinking critically about their own food choices.

GRADE LEVEL: 3-5





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## Learning in the Real World

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# FOOD TRADITIONS INTERVIEW

## **PURPOSE**

Cross-generational exchanges can be deeply enriching for both students and elders. They give older adults a chance to share some of their life experiences with children, and expose children to the information and guidance older people can offer. Likewise, having a conversation about food with someone from a different culture can be enlightening. There are many countries where families eat little or no processed food and some countries where people grow the majority of what they eat. In this lesson, an elder or someone from another culture provides a unique and personal perspective on foods and food traditions, giving students a basis for examining their own eating habits with a critical eye.

## **GRADE LEVEL**

3-5

## **ESTIMATED TIME**

One 30-minute period to plan the interview, one to conduct the interview, and one for discussion and wrap-up

## **BACKGROUND**

From a societal point of view, the American diet has changed dramatically in the last 50 years. Advances in agriculture, transport, and production, as well as greater cultural diversity, have brought us food that is much more varied than it used to be. Technological advances have also increased the efficiency of food production, making food cheaper and more convenient.

However, many of these changes have taken a toll on personal and public health. Pre-packaged and processed foods have decreased meal preparation time and

made it easier to eat quickly on demand. The increased use of products such as high fructose corn syrup has made high-calorie, supersized food items much more available. More meals are being eaten away from the home. As a result, many Americans are eating both more food and poorer quality food than was eaten by previous generations.

Americans' average daily calorie intake increased between 1970 and 2000 by nearly one-quarter (24.5%), or about 530 calories, with a greater proportion of the diet coming from refined flours, sugar, and fats.<sup>1</sup> Larger portion sizes, more snacking, and less nutritious food contribute to the current obesity epidemic and contribute to the significant rise in coronary heart disease, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and other diseases.<sup>2</sup>

While we don't necessarily want to return to what some perceive as the "good old days," we can learn from our elders and those from different cultures about food choices for greater health and satisfaction. Traditional cultures often embody accumulated wisdom about food, with rituals, manners, taboos, and culinary traditions that help people discern what, when, and how much to eat. As food reporter Michael Pollan suggests, eating only things that great-grandmothers would recognize as food would go a long way toward a healthier diet.<sup>3</sup>

## **MATERIALS**

- Sample interview questions
- Video-recording equipment (optional)

## **PREPARATION**

- Identify a guest for the class to interview. The ideal guest grew up in a household that cooked mostly from scratch, using staples and fresh ingredients, and would enjoy talking with students about his or her experiences. The guest may be a grandparent or other elder, or someone who grew up in a culture or country where scratch cooking was the norm.

- Explain to your guest the purpose of the interview, and arrange a suitable time for the interview. If you would like to record the interview, ask permission to do so.
- If you will be recording the interview, set up the necessary equipment.

## **LESSON INTRODUCTION**

Ask students to picture a grandparent or other older person in their lives and think about these questions: How do you think the foods he or she ate as a child were different from what you eat today? Do you know someone from a culture that is different from yours? When you compare your family's foods and eating customs to theirs, how do they differ?

Explain that you have invited a guest to speak to the class about foods and food preparation from the guest's childhood days. Share some information about the guest, and ask students what they might want to learn from him or her.

## **CONDUCTING THE LESSON**

- 1 Give students a copy of the sample interview questions, and read over the questions together.
- 2 Work with students to determine which of the sample questions would be appropriate for your guest, and whether there are any they would like to add or change. Explain that strong interview questions are typically open-ended and elicit stories that are more interesting than one- or two-word responses. Discuss boundaries for questions, making clear what should and should not be asked.
- 3 Plan a logical order for the interview questions, and decide who will ask each question. Point out that the best interviews are typically a combination of planned and spontaneous questions. Encourage students to listen carefully

during the interview so that they can ask further questions about the guest's stories.

- 4 Model good interviewing strategies such as making eye contact, taking notes, and asking follow-up questions (“How did you feel when that happened?” or “Can you tell us more about that?”) to probe for more information. Allow time for students to practice interviewing each other using some of the planned interview questions.
- 5 Discuss expectations for appropriate behavior throughout the guest's visit.
- 6 On the day of the interview, introduce your guest to the class. Have students ask questions as planned. If you are recording the interview, be sure the equipment is ready to go.
- 7 As the interview unfolds, pay attention to student questions and guest responses, and guide further questioning as appropriate. Also notice what aspects of your guest's experiences seem to capture your students' interest, and plan to build on those in the wrap-up.

## **DISCUSSION AND WRAP-UP**

Lead a discussion about the interview, with questions such as:

- What did you learn from the interview?
- How were our guest's foods and eating habits different from yours?
- What was most interesting or surprising to you?
- What food or preparation technique from the interview would you want to try?
- Did the interview help you understand – or make you question – anything about the foods you eat?

Direct students to write personal thank you letters to your guest. In their letters, students should include at least one thing they learned from the interview and one thing they would like to try.

## EXTENSION IDEAS

**Class Cookbook.** Families often pass down favorite recipes from generation to generation or from friend to friend. Have students talk with their family members about family favorites, and bring in a recipe to share with the class. Collect the recipes into a class cookbook, and give each family a copy. Encourage students to try one or more of their classmates' recipes.

**Community Salad.** Ask each student to bring a piece of fruit (or several pieces of small fruits like grapes or cherries) to make a community salad. Be sure to note any food allergies. Collect the fruit the day before you plan to make the salad, and supplement with additional fruit as needed. On salad-making day, have students wash their hands and cut up the fruit. Toss all the fruit together in a large bowl, and serve.

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<sup>1</sup> "Americans Weigh in Over Time - Why Are So Many Americans Overweight?" <http://www.libraryindex.com/pages/2709/Americans-Weigh-in-Over-Time-WHY-ARE-SO-MANY-AMERICANS-OVERWEIGHT.html#ixzz28MDECJ14>.

<sup>2</sup> Cordain, Loren, S, Boyd Eaton, et al. "Origins and Evolution of the Western Diet: Health Implications for the 21st Century" *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*. February 2005, 341-354. <http://ajcn.nutrition.org/content/81/2/341.full>.

<sup>3</sup> Pollan, Michael. "Unhappy Meals." *New York Time Magazine*. January 29, 2007. <http://michaelpollan.com/articles-archive/unhappy-meals/>.

# SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

## PERSONAL HISTORY

- Describe your family and the place you grew up.
- What was your family's cultural heritage?
- Tell us about your favorite food when you were a child.
- What did your family typically eat for breakfast? For lunch? For dinner?
- Where and how were meals served and eaten?
- How often did your family eat at a restaurant or fast food outlet?
- Tell us about a favorite memory from your childhood involving food.

## FOOD PREPARATION AND PRESERVATION

- Who prepared your family's meals? How did you help?
- Tell us about how your family's kitchen was different from your kitchen now.
- Did your family have a garden or farm? What did your family grow?
- Describe where your family got groceries like flour, rice, sugar, milk, or butter.
- Did your family preserve any foods for storing? How?

## FOOD CHANGES

- Describe something you ate when you were a child that might surprise us.
- If you could go back in time and have one food from your childhood that you can't get now, what would it be?
- Describe the changes in people's diets you have observed in your lifetime.
- Which changes do you think have been good? Which have been bad?
- In what ways do you think food here and now is healthier or less healthy than when you were a child?



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