

Community Foods

Overview

How do communities and beliefs shape how and what people eat? And conversely, how do food values and preferences help people find and create communities? In this lesson, students examine communities that come together around shared beliefs about food and food production, and then construct their own philosophy of food.

Standards

SS3G2 The student will describe the cultural and geographic systems associated with the historical figures in SS3H2a.

e. Describe how the regions in which these historical figures lived affected their lives and had an impact on their cultural identification.

Materials

- Oversized sheets of drawing paper (one per student)
- Markers (class set)
- Computers with Internet access (one per student)
- Research materials on food communities and movements (class set)

Warm-Up

Tell students that today you will be studying communities that come together around shared beliefs and preferences relating to food. This topic can be woven into a curriculum that touches on the role that food plays in culture, and the roles that food production and consumption play in struggles for economic justice or environmental protection. This lesson can also easily be woven into units on health and nutrition.

To begin this conversation, have students draw visual representations of the ways that community and food overlap in their own lives. On large pieces of paper, students will draw maps or diagrams that illustrate one or more examples from their own life of how people come together around food.

If students are having trouble getting started, you might suggest mapping the places they like to eat and the people they like to go to those places with; creating a family tree of people who come together for holiday meals and what foods are served; drawing a network of the friends that they eat lunch with and what foods they can generally find in the school cafeteria; listing their dietary preferences and restrictions; and showing visually how their “food rules” lead them to visit certain places or interact with certain people.

When diagrams are complete, have students pair up to share their creations and discuss the following questions: What is this illustration depicting? How does it illustrate the relationship between food and community in your own life? Do you think that you and the people depicted here have shared values about food? If so, what are they? If not, what commonalities do you share? What do you know about how the foods that are depicted in this illustration were prepared, grown or harvested, and sold? If you expanded your diagram to show a broader community that included all of the people, places and materials that went into making this food, who and what would you have to add?

Reconvene the class and have pairs share their ideas; write them on the board. Are various students in the room connected via food in some ways that they may not have realized before? What else do students have in common, looking at their lives through the lens of food? Let students know that they will now further examine food communities that are centered on food consumption and food production.

Related

In the Times Magazine article [“Growing Together.”](#) Christine Muhlke examines how communities are grown out of people’s shared interest in food and food production. She begins: “Community is built upon conversations. People like to eat, and they like to talk about it. Ask a stranger anywhere in the world what or where he likes to eat, and chances are he’ll open up.” She continues:

Food communities take many forms. Not all of them have the righteous, rarefied aura of the Ferry Plaza Farmers Market in San Francisco or the cool graphics of the food vendors at the Brooklyn Flea. And not all of them begin with a financial transaction. There are cookie swaps, canning parties, community-supported agriculture, crop mobs, cooking clubs, cow shares and more — all of which are subject to the preciousness, insularity and childish infighting of a self-selecting group. (The politics of potlucks.) And then there is the Web, where strangers bond over their lack of conviction about a certain pizzaiolo, form underground restaurants based on a chef’s disregard for the place of figs in California cooking or cheer on a home cook from Tel Aviv in an online recipe competition.

Read the entire article with your class, using the questions below.

1. Why do you think so many people who are interviewed about food end up talking about community?
2. Ms. Muhlke says that some food communities have a “righteous rarefied aura.” What do you think she means by this? Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. What types of food communities are mentioned in the article? Can you think of any others? If these communities had been mentioned, how might the article be different?
4. Do you agree that struggling communities can be “rebuilt” around food? Why or why not?
5. Ms. Muhlke mentions that food production and preparation skills are not passed on to younger generations as much as they used to be. Do you think this is true? If so, why do you think this is the case?

Activity

Inform students that they will be examining communities that connect around their shared philosophies about food and food production. Explain that they will now work in groups to do some research to understand an assigned food community (listed below).

Split the class into five small groups. Assign each group one of the following food-related communities and provide the groups with the related resources to get them started.

In addition, all groups might use [On the Table](#), the former Times blog of the food writer Michael Pollan, as well as [his Web site](#), including his June New York Review of Books article [“The Food Movement, Rising.”](#) They might also look into the issues of [food security](#) and the

[food justice movement](#) and how these relate to their assigned community. They should also consider looking into criticisms of these movements.

As outlined here, the focus of the lesson is on the communities that have convened around certain values with respect to food, but it could easily be adapted to include a look at the political issues and related questions and criticisms about the practices and practical implications.