

How teachers can use *Chinese Menu: The History Myths, and Legends Behind Your Favorite Foods* in their classrooms

It's not unusual for schools with a demographic of diverse students to include as part of their cultural programming the bringing in of "ethnic" foods or holding extracurricular cooking clubs to reflect students' identities. Such foods and their associated contexts however should not be limited to designated days and festivals, but rather used to positively energize, empower, and embolden standards-based learning. How so? Invite students to the metaphoric table of reading, researching, primary source interviewing, outlining of food preparation steps, narrating food myths and sorting them out from facts, connecting menu choices to political and historic events, and analyzing markets for culturally derived dining in the United States.

Even though such standards-based skills fall within food studies, why choose this topic over others especially for English Language Arts and Social Studies students? Because their strengths, passions, and talents can be challenged and tantalized with student owned voice and agency projects involving food. As any teacher knows, a slice of pizza, a promise of tacos, or a scoop of ice cream are sublimely motivating incentives. Why not study foods seriously through student developed products, productions and portfolios positioning them in such study as cultural affirming citizens?

But how can food studies be readily and accessibly infused into ongoing upper and middle school curricula? Luckily, there is an evolving genre of award winning fiction and informative books for student readers that eliminate the need for teachers to compile grade and age-appropriate resources for food studies from scratch. Among these are "Sankofa: A Culinary Story of Resilience and Belonging" by Eric Adjepong (Ghanaian culture); "Let Me Fix You a Plate: A Tale of Two Kitchens" by Elizabeth Lilly (Colombian culture); "Fry Bread: A Native American Family Story" by Kevin Noble Maillard and Juana Martinez-Neal (Native American culture); and "History is Delicious" by Joshua Lurie (global foods). Furthermore, there also are non-fiction writings about food including from Anthony Bourdain, Julia Child, Mark Kurlansky (who wrote a book about salt), Tom Standage, Michael Pollan, and Heather Arndt Anderson (who wrote a book about breakfast).

For the purpose of this modeling, Grace Lin's authored and illustrated "Chinese Menu-The History, Myths and Legends Behind Your Favorite Foods" was selected. While the following teaching suggestions specifically reference this book, they can and should be applied to any food history text.

1. Engage students in thinking about and then illustrating their following favorites: utensils, hot drink, soup, side dish or dip, main meal, dessert. Grace Lin artfully formats her table of contents with these styled after a Chinese restaurant menu. Have students create their own menu or a favorite family menu. Distribute takeout menus to inspire them depending on demographics and neighborhoods. If accessible, students may also work on experiential charts

or submit their personal choices using pear deck anonymous shares. Give them time to share, then ask if they know any stories about their food choices that relate to their culture or history. Matzah for example, is said to have originated when Jewish slaves were escaping from Egypt, so their bread had no time to rise. The crispy tacos we enjoy now developed in Mexico from soft, flat corn tortillas. Save the students' graphics, art and shared responses to reference as the study continues.

2. Ask students to think about one family dish or favorite cooking tradition. Ask them to share stories or memories of it or alternatively, to photograph or film the making/eating of it. Short videos (under 2 minutes) can be shared on site, at a PTA or other meeting. A demonstration or display of the dish might be part of a cultural festival; a podcast can focus on the commonalities or uniqueness of the selected dishes or traditions.

3. Challenge students to provide information they already have about a food that is cross-cultural. Fortune cookies are a great example. Have students speculate about the origin of this familiar food. Allow them to come up with their own ideas, perhaps illustrating them. Afterwards, the teacher can show the beautifully illustrated answer in Lin's book or her video "One Minute Myth: Fortune Cookies" <https://gracelin.com/videos-one-minute-myths/>. Students then discuss how Lin uses investigative journalism techniques to find the facts behind the origin of fortune cookies while adding her own elements of fiction and cultural history into the mix.

4. Have students research independently or as a group the actual history versus the myth, legend, or marketing behind familiar foods associated with various cultures. For instance, in what country or culture did ice cream originate? How Italian is pizza? What is the Quaker connection to oatmeal? Is apple pie as American as it can be or does another country claim it? Are baseball fans eating hotdogs really enjoying a snack that is American? Once the students use their own choices to formulate inquiry, facilitate their use of secondary online or print sources as well as qualified primary sources to get factual answers, and in some cases, the beloved stories behind the facts.

The results of these "answered questions behind food myths" can be filmed as a student news broadcast in the style of Entertainment Tonight or the Inside Report. It can be shared as a Power Point or even "exposed" as the facts behind food marketing in an iMovie or retold as part of a TRUE FACTS graphic narrative.

5. Have students share their experience of eating noodles and any preparation of them, even if it is just opening a package and adding hot water. Ask them to watch Lin's video "One Minute Myth: Noodles" <https://gracelin.com/videos-one-minute-myths/> or read the section about noodles in her book. Challenge students to note what parts of her discussion are factual and where she infuses her account with storytelling. Ask them to design a t-chart with at least four fictional and four factual details.

6. Challenge students to focus on a culinary task that is part of their personal or family foodways such as chopping carrots, grating potatoes, cubing cheese, or coring fruits. Have them detail the steps in these tasks, make a video or photographs of each step and compare them with the preparation of processed or take out foods from a store or restaurant. Their visuals also can document the natural state and look of foodstuffs before chopping, grating, cubing, etc. Students may reflect on the steps and the artistry of such processes in a culinary endnote.

7. Show students the table of contents in Lin's book. Tell them that she is an award-winning fiction writer. Ask them based on the title of the book, its beautiful artwork and cover design, Lin's videos, and their previous discussions whether "Chinese Menu: The History Myths, and Legends Behind Your Favorite Foods" should be classified as a work of fiction or nonfiction. Separate them into small groups to share or argue for a classification. (Of course, Lin's use of timelines, maps, endnotes, bibliography-with multilingual resources, extensive research and careful differentiation between facts, events, myths, legends and her own stories, determine that the book is a history of food.)

8. After using Lin's book as a model text for student owned voice and agency projects, extend the food study by having a team of student editors develop a jigsaw publication of the projects inspired by Lin's writing. They could shape this into their own book including a welcome to readers followed by sections on favorite foods, family stories about food, investigations into factual food origins and their origin myths, plus a final group note. The format for this class publication can be adapted from Lin's table of contents.

In her author's note at the close of the book, Grace Lin shares that beyond Asian American storytelling and research, she hopes that experiencing her history of American Chinese foods gives "all readers a new respect for a part of their own culture." Certainly, in students identifying, sequencing recipe steps, listing ingredients, investigating, documenting, narrating, communicating and creating digital or print stories about selected foods, they gain a respect for their cultures and others. Even more importantly however, they literally "taste and experience" a viable sample of personal agency, creativity and communicative powers as a thinking citizen of the world. Begger's Chicken anyone? Come experience Buddha's delight! Any one of these suggested student projects could become the seed for a next food history series, or food journalist's beat, or even a well-researched graduate student paper inspired by food studies.

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