

# Cultural Food Diversity – Eating in America

**Objectives:** Participants will learn about cultural diversity and respect for cultural differences through the foods of different cultures.

You may want to start your lesson with a brief statement such as: *“Have you ever had a strange or different food placed before you to eat? How did you feel about trying the food?”* (Have participants relate their experiences with strange and different foods.) Explain to the group that people all over the world tend to regard their own diet as sensible and the diets of other cultures as bizarre or strange. Amazingly, many common foods of the American diet, from hamburgers to Jell-O, are disliked by non-Westerners. Once people understand their own cultural foods are not widely accepted by other cultures, it’s easier to view other cultural food choices with less suspicion.

## 1. Exploring Our Own Cultural Sensitivity

To help us understand the cultural reasons for our own food practices, ask the participants the following questions:

1. What is a healthy diet? Unhealthy diet?
2. What foods or food groups must be included in the daily diet?
3. What foods are appropriate at different stages of the life span?
4. What are my food likes and dislikes? Why?
5. What are my food taboos?
6. What foods do I eat for celebrations?

Have them brainstorm and see that even within their group there are differences. – we are not all alike in our food choices/preferences.

## 2. Cultural Values

Understanding your own cultural values is the first step. The second step is to develop understanding of and respect for the cultural values of other people. The handout “Diversity of Cultural Values” gives examples of how different cultures have different cultural values. Although it does not address individual differences, it can help in the understanding of the similarities and differences among cultural groups.

One cultural celebration that seems to be universal is celebrating a person’s birthday. Refer to the handout “How Birthdays are Celebrated Around the World.”

## 3. Cultural Diversity in America

Cultural diversity has become an important issue in American eating. Ethnic restaurants, popular with American consumers today, often is their first introduction to foods from different cultures. Many ethnic dishes are joining the American mainstream food culture, and others are seeing a tremendous boost in familiarity, acceptance and consumption.

Ask participants: *“Do you remember the first time you ate at an ethnic restaurant or were introduced to foods from another culture?”* You may want to relay your own stories of when you were introduced to foreign foods.

The research indicates that Italian, Mexican and Chinese (Cantonese) have become adapted to such an extent that "authenticity" is no longer a concern for customers. In fact, they are so well known that many non-ethnic restaurants typically offer a variety of dishes from these regions on their menus.

#### **4. What's hot...what's not?**

While some ethnic foods have been incorporated into everyday life, many others are growing in consumer recognition and popularity. Between 70 and 80 percent of consumers are familiar with Hunan, Mandarin and Szechwan variations of Chinese cuisines, German, French, Greek, Cajun/Creole, Japanese (including sushi), Indian, Soul Food, Scandinavian, Caribbean and Spanish cuisines. The diverse immigration into the United States is the reason for the popularity of these cuisines. As ethnic groups grow larger, the number of restaurants that offer a taste of their home grows, again demonstrating that restaurants are the gateways to other cultures.

The number of individuals who have tried German, Soul Food, French and Scandinavian dishes has declined. Additionally, the awareness of French cuisine has tapered off slightly among Americans. The changes in American cuisine tastes is because the Old European cuisines such as French, German, Greek and Scandinavian have long been familiar to American diners, however, many younger consumers are actively seeking spicy foods. Consequently, this important age group has played an important role in the rising popularity of various ethnic cuisines. In addition, as the restaurant industry is the cornerstone of career opportunities, providing individuals with the ability to own their own business, more and more immigrants are opening restaurants representing their own culture.

#### **Websites for instructors:**

<http://monarch.gsu.edu/nutrition/download.htm> -- Food guide pyramids in 37 different languages (American version translated into these languages). Also it has other materials in these 37 languages.

<http://www.semda.org/info/#pyramid> – food guide pyramids from different cultures featuring foods of that culture. Also a recipe typical of the culture is provided.

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