

Tabletop Stories

“You might not have considered food as being connected to family history, but it is. Good food has a way of bringing families together, and anytime families gather – even to eat – family history is made.” – Family Search Blog

SOCIAL HISTORY CLUES

We better understand our ancestors when we look at the everyday events and artifacts that shaped their lives – including what they did to prepare and share food.

- How does what your family/ancestors ate tell you about their cultural identity, financial status, religious beliefs and overall health?
- How was what they ate impacted by historical events such as times of war or famine?
- What can foods and recipes reveal about female ancestors? What material artifacts do you have that can help document and preserve your female ancestors’ stories?
- How was every-day food different from special occasion meals?
- What tools were used for cooking, preserving, and farming? What does this tell you about their lives? How have things changed?

MEMOIR & INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Not sure where to start? Here are some questions that you can ask family members or use as a jumping off place in your memoir.

- What dishes could tell the story of your life?
- What foods did/does your family eat on a regular basis?
- Did your parents/grandparents, or loved ones teach you to make certain foods?
- What food(s) do you look forward to on special occasions/holidays?
- What foods do you associate with good memories?
- What is one of the most memorable meals you shared with your family? Describe in detail where it was and what made that meal so enjoyable.
- Do you have any food-related family traditions? What are they and what makes them special to you and your family?
- What is your favourite food? Where do you eat it? What makes it your favourite?
- Describe your mother’s/grandmother’s kitchen.
- Describe your typical school lunch.
- Do you own any kitchen heirlooms? Who did they belong to? When were they used?
- What is your favourite family recipe and why? Is it part of a holiday tradition?
- Whose recipe is it? Did you make it with this person? What did it smell like? What does it taste like? How long has it been in your family?
- What’s the best part about making the recipe? Making it? Eating it? Both? Why?
- When is the last time you ate it?
- Did the person hand-write the recipe? Where is the recipe now?
- What was your favourite meal growing up? Did you eat anything then that your family would not be willing to eat now?
- How did you learn to cook? Who taught you? What was the first meal you prepared?
- Who was the best cook in the family? Why? What did they prepare?
- What did your in-laws prepare that was different? What were their food traditions?

- Was any of the food you ate handed down from immigrant ancestors? If you were an immigrant, what foods did you continue to prepare once in Canada? What ingredients were hard to find? Did you change the recipe at all?

Family Food History Heirlooms

- Cookbooks, recipe cards, kitchen tools, linens, aprons, china and silver

TABLETOP ACTIVITY PROMPTS

Food is a collaborative, sharing activity. Get others involved in sharing their memories, recipes, photos and cooking.

1. Pick a favourite family recipe and write down a memory or story to go with it. Make a special recipe card with the story and a photo and send it to your relatives or create a blog post.
2. Post a family food photo or recipe on social media and ask your family members to share their memories about the photo with you. What was happening? Who was there? Combine the memories into a short story.
3. Select foods that represent each decade of your life. Write a mini-memoir of your life through food. Add photos and recipes and share with your family.
4. Create a cookbook of current favourite family recipes. Use your own recipes or ask family members to contribute.
5. Interview a family member, asking some of the interview prompt questions above. Record their answers and use them in your family history.
6. Make a family recipe and record your memories, thoughts and feelings. Write a poem or essay about your memories.
7. Plan a family gathering where you will make and share special family foods. (Grandma's peach pie, Grandpa's cookies, etc.)
8. Gather and scan or photograph hand-written recipes. Document who wrote them. If they are in another language, translate them for family members. Document cultural or historical significance.
9. Display kitchen heirlooms. Document their story: who did they belong to? How or when were they used? How did you get them?

WRITING TIPS

Food evokes memory and emotion. Use descriptive writing to bring your family food memories to life.

1. **Find your voice** – Tell the story that only you can tell. What is important to you? How can you reveal yourself through your storytelling? Be genuine, be yourself.
2. **Use vivid description** – Evoke all of the five senses; describe body language and the surroundings. What do you see? Hear? Smell? Make details pop.
3. **Use humour** – Reveal eccentricities and funny mishaps or stories.
4. **Reveal emotion** – What does this memory reveal about underlying feelings and family themes? Does it tie into significant family events?
5. **Develop characters** – Make your family members come alive through dialogue, actions and personality quirks.

Add flavour to your writing by opening your eyes, mind and heart. Think: what does this memory or story tell you about your family or ancestor?

FAMILY FOOD STORY WRITING EXAMPLES

Sometimes it helps to look at what others have done. Here are some good examples of family food writing, representing many different cultures and ethnicities. What did you like? How could you use these ideas in your writing?

Faruqi, Saadia. "Remembering my Mother's Table with Fresh Roti in America." *The Kitchn*, November 2, 2017.

www.thekitchn.com/remembering-my-mother-with-fresh-roti-in-america-248533

Food52. "My Family Recipe" series. Writers share the story of a single dish that's meaningful to them and their loved ones. <https://food52.com/tags/my-family-recipe>

Harlan, Becky. "Students Serve Up Stories of Beloved Family Recipes in a Global Cookbook." *The Salt*, March 25, 2017.

www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2017/03/25/519041220/students-serve-up-stories-of-beloved-family-recipes-in-a-global-cookbook

Inkster Vance, Karen. *Cooking with Great-Grannie*. October 21, 2020.

<http://www.kareninkstervance.com/home/cooking-with-great-grannie>

Inkster Vance, Karen. *A perfect recipe for remembering*. October 22, 2019.

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Jacob, Dianne. "The Meaning of Mangoes." *Lucky Peach*, n.d.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20170702004942/http://luckypeach.com/the-meaning-of-mangoes/>

Koul, Scaachi. "There's No Recipe for Growing Up". *BuzzFeed*, November 2, 2016.

www.buzzfeed.com/scaachikoul/looking-for-my-mother-at-the-bottom-of-a-pot?utm_term=.gg1bwQ4yZ#.mtlWdbjyQ

Lee, Chang-rae. "Magical Dinners in America." *The New Yorker*, November 22, 2010.

www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/11/22/magical-dinners

Rodell, Bessa. "Pleasure, Pain, and Hot Fudge Stains." *Taste*, August 14, 2017. www.tastecooking.com/recipe-journals/

Roth, Tspora. "Rivka's Recipes." *Jewish Journal*, September 6, 2017. <http://jewishjournal.org/2017/09/06/the-personal-essay-rivkas-recipes/>

Severson, Kim. "A Mother's Cookbook Shares More Than Recipes." *The New York Times*, May 5, 2015.

www.nytimes.com/2015/05/06/dining/a-mother-s-cookbook-recipe-cards-share-more-than-recipes.html

FAMILY COOKBOOK EXAMPLES

Thinking about making a family cookbook? Here are some examples to inspire you.

Around the Table – Cooking Together with Love

by Butterworth, King, Kochmann

www.blurb.ca/b/9219086-around-the-table

The Norwegian Cookbook by Richard & Debra Oliphant

www.blurb.ca/books/9217654-the-norwegian-baker

Pawmaw's Cookbook by Marie Maines

www.blurb.ca/b/7328378-pamaw-s-cookbook

Nos Dimanches à la Carpière by Vincent Girodet

www.blurb.ca/b/7209956-nos-dimanches-la-carpi-re

Dear Elizabeth by Deborah LeMoine

www.blurb.ca/b/7177690-dear-elizabeth-softcover-kitchen-edition

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Want to learn more about how to use food in your family history? Check out these resources.

FamilySearch. (2017, February 8). *Share your family's food story*. <https://www.familysearch.org/blog/en/recipes/>

Philibert-Ortega, Gena. (2012). *From the family kitchen: Discover your food heritage and preserve favorite recipes*.

Cincinnati, OH: Family Tree Books.