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Food Literacy Programs, Resources, and Ideas for Libraries

HILLARY DODGE



HILLARY DODGE is a lifelong lover of books and food. When not eating or reading, she can most likely be found wandering into places she shouldn't and meeting characters that would raise an eyebrow. One of the greatest joys in life is exploration, she'd tell you. So go out and explore and try some of the cheese while you're there. Hillary is currently the director of the north region of the Pikes Peak Library District in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

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PREFACE

HOW THIS BOOK CAME ABOUT

n 2016, my husband, daughter, and I decided to pursue a lifelong dream. My husband and I quit our jobs, sold our house and nearly everything in it, and shipped our car to the other side of the hemisphere. On the other end, we met it in Santiago, Chile, a country our little family of three would be calling home for the next two years.

Our dream was to write a cookbook—but not just any cookbook. We wanted to dig into the historical and cultural context of my husband's native cuisine and, in the process, capture recipes that were disappearing from the food landscape of Chile. So we drove the length of Chile, making friends and meeting fellow food enthusiasts from all walks of life. We were invited into homes and kitchens where we would ask our hosts to cook us a meal their mothers used to make. And then, with cameras and notebooks, we would observe, ask questions, and then sit down to eat with our new friends.

It was a fantastic adventure and humbling experience. In the arid *altiplanos* of the north, we dined with descendants of the Aymara people in a part of Chile that used to be Peru, eating llama *tamals* and *kalapulka*, a traditional beef and pork stew reserved for festivals and celebrations, aromatic with spices and herbs we'd never seen in our lives. In the fertile lakes region just south of the central valley of Santiago, we ate *curanto en hoyo*, a feast of seafood and pork cooked in a smoking hole in the ground beneath the pungent *nalca* leaves that were as big as a kitchen table, and afterward, just down the road, we enjoyed raspberry kuchen for dessert. In the far south, in the wet and windswept land of Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego, we watched as a lamb was slaughtered and strung across an *x* of wood, tilted just so above a firepit for hours as it cooked, a meal that would feed many, *cordero al palo*.

Along the way, I became interested in how we see and use food, how food knowledge is passed on from one generation to the next, and how the disruptive factors of a modern world make family meals challenging. In the United States, it's easy to pop around the corner and buy a frozen meal from the grocery and even easier to grab a bag of takeout. But aside from questionable nutritional value and strange additives, those meals aren't fulfilling in the way home-cooked meals are. But not everyone knows how to make a home-cooked meal.

Around the time we were wrapping up our research and preparing to return to the States, I received an issue of *Public Libraries* in the mail. Flipping through its pages, I got to thinking about food programming in libraries, and I began to wonder what was out there on the topic. As I began to search, I quickly came to see that although the topic of food and cooking in libraries was popular, there was no single resource, no book of examples, how-to guides, or even basic reference information about how to design and implement a food program or service in the library.

And that is where this book comes in. Luckily, ALA Editions agreed with me, and together we embarked on the journey of creating this book. With the help of a hugely supportive editorial and marketing team, I reached out to ALA members across the nation to connect with librarians and library paraprofessionals who were using and making food in their libraries. Their stories can be found within the pages of this book as examples of food literacy programs and services that meet the needs of a diverse range of communities around the country.

INTRODUCTION

COME AND GET IT!

imply put, if you love libraries, food, and people, this book is for you. As mentioned previously, this book is meant to be an all-in-one resource to learn about the potential for food literacy in libraries. As such, it will appeal to a broad cross section of library and culinary professionals, including those specializing in programming, reference, collection development, archives, museums, outreach, and community engagement. Beyond libraries, this book will have resources that can also serve culinary educators, literacy coaches, civic activists, and students.

I'll approach the topic in three ways: by deconstructing the concept of food literacy into its key components and demonstrating connections within the culinary arts world, by digging into the process of a community needs assessment and providing a quick-start guide to planning and implementation, and by sharing tangible examples of programs and services, both large and small in scope, in a variety of library settings that could be used as road maps for success.

Part 1, "From Soup to Nuts," is just that: the *ABC*s of food literacy. I'll explain the term and its origin, and then I'll break it down into its component pieces, or domains. This part will also present a handful of key food movements and accompanying terminology that you've probably already heard but maybe would like to understand better. And finally, because not all of us grew up in restaurants, I'll open the door to the culinary arts world and explain how things work, define the various roles and professions within the industry, and talk about culinary education.

In Part 2, "Take the Cake," I'm going to show you how to design and implement successful food literacy programs and services in your own library. I'll start with an in-depth discussion of the benefits of a community food assessment. Then I'll guide you through the process step-by-step, from building a team and defining your scope to planning and conducting research. Following that is a quick-start guide for designing and implementing a food program or service in response to a community need. This section is filled with a lot of tools that you can get started using right away.

Part 3, "Proof Is in the Pudding," is especially exciting because it's filled with real-world examples. I've divided this part into two sections: "Short Orders" features smaller-scope services and one-off programs, such as cooking demonstrations, nutrition classes, and hands-on contests; "House Specials" features larger-scope services and programs, such as cookbook book clubs, food business workshops, and library-led community gardens. No matter the size of your library or the makeup of your community, you are bound to find great ideas to tuck into.

Finally, in the last bit of the book, I offer a couple of appendixes with collection management and program planning tools as well as further resources and contributor bios for all those who shared their food literacy projects with me.

Food is a topic that appeals to library customers of all ages and life stages, but for various (and outdated) reasons, it hasn't been at the forefront of library services. In the past, issues of safety, cleanup, and old-fashioned notions of what libraries should be have prevented food programs from taking hold. And if it was allowed in the building at all, food was mostly used to lure patrons into our programs or entice them to join in community focus groups. But the power of food doesn't stop there, as this book will illustrate.

In this age of modern libraries, public librarians are easing up on the barriers that prevented them from exploring more innovative and creative services and programs, such as makerspaces—collaborative work spaces with specialized tools and technology—and food labs. It is my hope that you'll find this book to be a valuable resource in learning about food literacy and in engaging your community in its food information needs.



"FROM SOUP TO NUTS"

WHAT IS FOOD LITERACY?

ood is a basic human need. We eat for a number of reasons—to fill our stomachs, nourish our bodies, participate in a social or cultural event, or practice a religious belief. What we eat depends on this context and the context of a number of different interrelated conditions at the individual, household, community, national, and global levels. For example, an individual's income, a community's proximity to fresh produce, a nation's policy on food distribution and storage, and a global market environment all play into the systems that make food available and affordable or not. Further complicating this food system are different cooking styles, food trends, education accessibility, scientific discoveries and developments, and political movements at all levels.

In an effort to make such a complicated system relatable, the term "food literacy" emerged. Interestingly, the first time the term reared its head, it was thrust into the spotlight with no firm definition or defined parts, identified as a goal by the American Dietetic Association in its 1990 response to a senate inquiry on food labeling.¹ In the following years, "food literacy" and similar terms began to surface with attached definitions in a variety of professional and educational literature of multiple industries, organizations, and governments.

Today, "food literacy" is still a somewhat subjective term. Some industries apply the term to a finite set of skills, whereas others use it to encapsulate a much broader set of experiences. The most comprehensive and scalable definition to date among all the competing interpretations and uses would be Australian public health nutritionist Helen Vidgen's definition and components.² Dr. Vidgen's study of the term and her subsequent research into the various appearances and uses of it in

health and policy literature have resulted in a solid research-supported definition. And it is this definition that this book will be referencing throughout.

A Definition and Its Parts

According to Helen Vidgen's studies, food literacy is best defined as a "collection of inter-related knowledge, skills and behaviors required to plan, manage, select, prepare, and eat foods to meet needs and determine intake. Food literacy is the scaffolding that empowers individuals, households, communities or nations to protect diet quality through change, and support dietary resilience over time."3

In a way, food literacy can be understood as a range of literacies required for the various processes, skills, and experiences related to food and eating in everyday life. The concept can be divided into four domains: planning and management, selection, preparation, and eating. Each domain, in turn, can be subdivided into two to three components, or subcategories, that encompass a distinct set of knowledge and skills that fall within that overall domain.

Within the domain of planning and management are the subcategories of prioritizing available resources for food, planning food intake, and making informed decisions based on needs and available resources. What this amounts to is understanding one's available time, money, and skills and using these to plan for and meet the food needs of an individual or group. This does not necessarily imply that the decisions made meet health needs; it merely means that food and meals are planned in advance. Although it goes without saying, healthy meals are easier to prepare and serve when conscious consideration is given to the planning and executing of the meals. And from a nutritional perspective, planning and management are a crucial domain to changing unhealthy patterns of eating.

The domain of selection is subdivided into the subcategories of accessing food, determining the makeup of a food product, and judging the quality of a food or food product. This domain focuses on access and understanding the food systems that are at play in the availability and affordability of food. It means understanding the advantages and disadvantages of various food sources or understanding systems to access food when money and time are in short supply. At a more granular level, it means being able to read and understand food labels, identify ingredients used in food products, know how best to store and use a food item, and make a determination on a product's healthiness.

Preparation is the domain most closely associated with the term "culinary literacy." It involves the subcategories of demonstrating kitchen skills with quality outcomes and applying kitchen safety and hygiene. Quality outcomes are key with this domain. Being able to prepare and cook a good-tasting meal is what counts. This ability includes an understanding of kitchen equipment and methods of preparation. It also involves artistic touches, such as garnishing and plating. A high level of



Table 1.1 Food literacy in a nutshell

Domain	Components	Application examples
1. Planning and management	Prioritizing resources for food	Setting aside time and money for food
	Planning food intake	Making a meal plan for the week
	Making informed decisions about food	Choosing whole foods over processed foods
2. Selection	Accessing food	Knowing the difference between foods available at a convenience store and the local farmers market
	Determining what's in a food product	Being able to read and understand a food label
	Judging the quality of food	Being able to tell when a fruit is ripe and knowing how long it can be stored
3. Preparation	Demonstrating kitchen skills	Knowing how to use a knife to make different cuts
	Applying kitchen safety and hygiene	Understanding how to avoid food contamination
4. Eating	Understanding the impact of food choices	Understanding the nutritional difference between choosing a soda versus a glass of water
	Demonstrating self-awareness of health and food needs	Knowing to prepare meals low in sugar if diabetes runs in the family
	Being able to join others and eat socially	Demonstrating social awareness when eating with others

skill in this domain also results in the ability to adapt to changes in environment and access to kitchen tools and equipment in order to produce predictable outcomes in meal preparation.

The final domain, eating, aside from being the most satisfying, is also the most individual. Subcategories included within this domain relate to personal well-being. They include understanding the impact of food choices, demonstrating self-awareness of health and food needs, and being able to join others and eat in a social way.

RELATED TERMS

In lay communication, many of these terms are used interchangeably. But it is important to realize that many of these terms came into use from a distinct industry-based perspective, and as such, professional use of these terms is often limited to that industry's understanding of the terminology.

Culinary literacy is concerned with the skills involved in preparing and cooking foods.

Foodwork is used to describe a set of domestic skills involved in the process of meal selection, including shopping, preparation, cooking, and eating. This term is often used from a sociology context.

Health literacy is characterized by the development of skills and capacities that enable individuals and communities to obtain, process, and understand basic health information, including services, required to make health-related decisions. Health literacy is normally viewed through two lenses: that of the individual and that of the community.

Nutrition literacy focuses on food intake, how the body converts food into nutrients and waste, and how the body uses nutrients for growth, development, and health

This domain ties eating and the consequences of eating together. It connects nutrition and health literacies with self-efficacy and balance. The social aspect of eating is also crucial to this domain; eating communally lends to a sense of well-being and inclusion. In both family and larger group settings, cooking and eating together has been connected to improved health and wellness outcomes as a direct result of the need to plan for these larger meals.

Why Does a Definition Matter?

Defining food literacy helps us break down the term into its component parts or domains to allow us to see the various facets that are at play. From farm to stomach, food moves across the purviews of multiple disciplines. Having a common understanding of a term allows for easier exploration and application of the term and its components within various fields of study and production.

Food literacy is a topic of interest in national and international policy. The term has been used in Canada's What's to Eat? report, the European Union's discussion paper on sustainable food consumption, and the United States Institute of Medicine's committee report Accelerating Progress in Obesity Prevention, among others.4



Alongside policy, the term "food literacy" is used in application-based contexts by governments and practitioners. For instance, in the human services sector, food literacy is aligned with workforce development and life skills. In the agriculture and production sectors, it is a term that helps define food systems, environmental impact, and sustainability. Governments capitalize on the term in relation to food tourism and culture.

In regard to responding to literacy gaps, having a defined term also opens possibilities for pinpointing exact needs and being able to understand the approaches that can be taken to meet the needs. Definitions allow us as library professionals to speak to our stakeholders, our community, and each other from a common point of understanding.

Food Literacy in Libraries

Libraries not only are home to information champions but also have a long history of being propagators of social good. "Social good" is defined as an action that provides a benefit to the general public. As such, libraries have served as hosts, promoters, and also designers of social good. Think about the programs and services that libraries have created or enabled to support or directly benefit their communities: storytimes with literacy tips, book clubs, teen councils and volunteer programs, adult education classes, and many more.

Food literacy is yet another kind of social good that libraries have begun to offer their communities. Food literacy ties into a library's mission by supporting and educating for multiple literacies, including reading (reading recipes), mathematics (measurement conversions), kitchen science (safety and sanitation), and health literacy (understanding a nutrition label). Food literacy initiatives in libraries also support and improve community health as well as serve and engage as another form of community making. Some of the more common examples have included book clubs focused on cookbooks, health and nutrition workshops, and hot-plate cooking demos. More recently, libraries have upped their game through summer lunch programs, mobile kitchens, and community gardens.

One of the most progressive and perhaps best-known examples of a library taking on food literacy is the aptly named Culinary Literacy Center in the Philadelphia Free Public Library. The first of its kind in the US, the center "was created with the understanding that cooking and eating are educational acts." It was designed in response to a social need within the greater Philadelphia community—not just in terms of literacy but also in regard to building community and bringing people together to sustain it. The programs and series that the center has developed do just that. For example, in their Edible Alphabet class students can acquire English, Spanish, Italian, or Mandarin language skills by learning to cook a culturally relevant meal using recipes and instruction in that language. (For libraries looking to

ESSENTIAL COLLECTION The Science and Sociology of Food

Alton Brown, chef and television host, made cooking fun again by explaining the science and history behind certain foods and meals. Have the same experience with these fun titles.

- Did You Just Eat That? Two Scientists Explore Double-Dipping, the Five-Second Rule, and Other Food Myths in the Lab. Dawnson, Paul, and Sheldon, Brian.
- → A Moveable Feast: Ten Millennia of Food Globalization. Kiple, Kenneth.
- → On Food and Cooking: The Science and Lore of the Kitchen. McGee, Harold.
- Moveable Feasts: The History, Science, and Lore of Food. McNamee, Gregory.
- Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat: Mastering the Elements of Good Cooking. Nosrat, Samin.
- → Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation. Pollan, Michael.
- → The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals. Pollan, Michael.
- → Gulp: Adventures on the Alimentary Canal. Roach, Mary.
- → Ratio: The Simple Codes behind the Craft of Everyday Cooking. Ruhlman, Michael.
- → Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human. Wrandman, Richard.

embark on a similar journey, the Free Library of Philadelphia has created a stepby-step guide, "Culinary Literacy: A Toolkit for Public Libraries," available on their website for free.)

But even libraries without \$1.2 million commercial kitchens have been finding ways to offer food literacy programs to their communities. The Camden County Library System in New Jersey offers Books and Cooks, a mobile kitchen program that focuses on healthy eating and consumer literacy and serves a community with only one grocery store and a number of street-corner bodegas. Flavor Lab, out of the Chattanooga Public Library in Tennessee, operates their program using a Charlie Cart, a successfully kick-started kitchen on a cart, a primary goal of which is to train teens on how to cook the foods available to them in the summers when school lunches aren't available and parents are at work.

Food literacy can be scaled even smaller. Seed libraries are popping up all across the nation—both within small communities (Missoula Public Library; Montana and Richmond Public Library, California) and cities (Pikes Peak Library



District, Colorado)—with the goal of enabling personal and community gardens through classes and seed sharing.⁷ Fort Hays State University in Kansas has the Tiger Food Exchange—located on the first floor of Forsyth Library—a food pantry dedicated to eradicating student food insecurity via a university garden and community donations.⁸ Ottawa Public Library in Ontario, Canada, has rolled out their food literacy project, Á la Carte, in the form of an online resource center geared toward helping patrons learn from and connect with food movers and shakers within their city.⁹ And at the very least, nearly every library is already providing food literacy through the thoughtful curation of their collections.

As our world continues to change and our communities with it, it is important for libraries to think ahead about their value and purpose. With consumer markets becoming even trickier to navigate and understand, will we help our users meet their food literacy needs? Will we empower them to make the best choices for themselves, their community, and the environment? Can we respond to the changing shape of the global food supply and the way it impacts our most basic need for food and nutrition? By considering food literacy as an important addition to the values and services that libraries support, we can do just that.

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