ASK AN ELDER: WHAT DID YOU EAT GROWING UP?

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About the Activity

What’s for dinner? The answer to that question has changed over the years. In this activity, kids will interview someone who grew up at least 30 years ago to get a sense of how advertising, costs, accessibility, and trends have affected their food choices at different points in their life. What did older adults eat when they were growing up decades ago, and what changes have they noticed? Let’s find out.

Supplies

These simple supplies are all you’ll need for this activity.

- Sample talking points
- Food Pyramid and MyPlate
- An Elder’s Story of Food Systems Worksheet
- Note-taking tools
- Video-enabled, internet-connected device (optional)

Grades: 7-10

Topic: Food Systems, Civic Engagement
Time: 1 hour
Activity Steps

1. Find somebody in your family or community (it can be a parent, grandparent, relative, neighbor, or teacher, for example) who is at least 30 years older than you, and ask to have a 30-minute interview about food with them.

**DID YOU KNOW?** The USDA released the Food Guide Pyramid in 1992 as a visual guide to nutritional recommendations. Over time, recommendations changed, and in 2011 the USDA released the MyPlate diagram, which illustrated the latest evidence-based nutritional guidance.

2. **To prepare for the interview:**
   a. Choose a comfortable setting with few distractions. Or find a good time and place to talk to them on a video call.
   b. Introduce yourself and explain that the interview is for a 4-H project for you to learn about food culture and food systems from a person from a different generation.
   c. Let your interviewee know that the interview will take around 30 minutes.

**DID YOU KNOW?** Since the 1970s, Americans are spending more on food away from home while less on food at home. However, this trend reversed in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as people were eating more at home.

3. For the first few minutes, use the USDA Food Guide Pyramid and MyPlate to guide the first part of the interview (see sample talking points companion sheet to this activity).

**DID YOU KNOW?** Globally, people have been consuming more calories as time goes by. From 1961 to 2011, Americans’ consumption of vegetable oils more than doubled, accounting for a more than 26% increase of calorie consumption over that 50-year span. Check out this interactive website to see changes in people’s diet over time around the world.

4. For the second part of the interview, ask your interviewee about their experiences regarding food culture and food systems. Talk about how cultural backgrounds and time periods influence the types of food they eat, their food traditions, and changes they have witnessed in the food system (see sample talking points).

**DID YOU KNOW?** Comfort food is food that brings you joy and satisfaction, connecting to emotion, memory, and culture. It can be your family meal or a traditional dish unique to your heritage. It can bring you back to a familiar sense of home if you are in a new place.

5. Use your notes to compare your interviewee’s experiences with your own experiences on the worksheet. For example, reflect on changing attitudes toward food choices.
Test Your Knowledge

Visit 4-H.org/AskAnElder to put your knowledge to the test with an interactive game.

Reflection Questions

Bonus questions for after the interview

• What new ingredient or dish from the conversation do you want to try?
• What are some major differences between MyPlate and the Food Pyramid? How do those updates influence your and your interviewee’s food choices?
• If you were born in the same year as your interviewee, how might your food be the same or be different from now? Why?
Investigate & Explore

Take your new knowledge to the next level.

Science is always changing – that’s why some of the things people thought were good and safe to eat 30 years ago aren’t anymore. Think about the food you consume now. What are some things you consume now that 30 years from now you might not? Maybe there are foods that have sustainability concerns, like seafood and beef. Maybe there are nutritional supplements you consume that have a lot of ingredients that, much like processed foods today, we’ll later know aren’t the healthiest (that’s just an example). Think about what you consume now, and how you consume it, and what might change over time.