

# LET THEM READ COOKBOOKS

Food Literacy Is Literacy



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Teachers and school librarians know that giving students the freedom to choose what to read from a variety of materials is the most effective way to foster a love of reading. Curiosity, pre-existing interests, or even a desire for connection cause students to reach for books that inform instead of entertain (Ahlfeld 2020). But a genre of books is often left out of a school library's nonfiction collection: cookbooks. Food is our greatest common denominator, which makes books about food our most-accessible subject. Cookbooks and food-related books are perfect for fostering connections among learners as they read to improve their literacy skills. I recommend that teachers and school librarians consider cookbooks or nonfiction food stories when offering reading materials to students. Now is an optimal time to embrace the promotion of cookbooks to support multiple literacies. The isolation during the pandemic was tough on kids in the moment and caused a real setback in practicing social skills, but now our students have opportunities to reengage with one another. I see cookbooks as a prompt towards connection. Having a project (cooking) or a conversation starter (food) can ease the tension in many social interactions with friends,

family, and community. As a bonus, in these times of acrimonious social divides and the need for greater connections within our populace, sharing food and food stories can build bridges between learners bringing various experiences and cultural heritages to the discussions.

Unfortunately, nonfiction, including cookbooks, is often an underappreciated aspect of the school library. Jennifer M. Graff and Courtney Shimek, professors at the University of Georgia and West Virginia University respectively, have described the impact of children's nonfiction literature as profound. Their research suggests that nonfiction could "demonstrate and invite interconnectedness among people and disciplines rather than individualism" (2020, 224). The potential for incorporating exciting and beneficial nonfiction books in school libraries has never been greater. With many textbooks, required readings, and nonfiction reference resources moved out of the library onto online digital platforms, the nonfiction section is no longer primarily the realm of instructors.

As a grad student, I interned with Stephanie Steele, a middle school librarian at Culbreth Middle School in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. She told me that during her six years at

that library she has experienced this shift firsthand. I benefitted from seeing what she had done to change the focus of the Culbreth school library's nonfiction collection away from teacher resources and toward students' interests. Of course, the transition from a textbook-like nonfiction collection to a student-centered one can have only a positive influence on student interest in reading. A 2007 study from Western Michigan University found that for best student engagement, "[t]he largest portion of the nonfiction collection... should be devoted to books for student voluntary reading" (Young, Moss, and Cornwell 2007, 7).

The cookbook collection in your school library can also serve to supplement the digital media consumed by kids. YouTube and TikTok are popular sources for cooking instruction. Netflix has several food shows that are of interest to kids, such as the *Great British Baking Show*, *Nailed It!*, and *Salt Fat Acid Heat*, all of which have companion cookbooks. In addition, food historian Jessica B. Harris's book *High on the Hog* was the basis for the 2020 Netflix limited series of the same name. Reading *High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America* (Bloomsbury USA 2012) would support the American

History essential standards for high school students who are required to analyze cultural contributions because of voluntary and involuntary immigration trends.

Many popular movies, television shows, and books have companion cookbooks (both official and unofficial) based on food inspired by the original production. *Star Wars*, *Doctor Who*, *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, *Little Women*, and *Hunger Games* are just a few examples. A quick online search will yield many more! Adding these books to the nonfiction shelves—or better yet, putting them on display—could encourage kids who’ve seen the movie or show that inspired a cookbook to read it. Judith Hendershot and Barbara Moss studied sixth-graders’ engagement with nonfiction and found that one in four sixth-graders chose nonfiction books based on personal connection they feel to the material (2002, 13). Let’s help young readers make those connections.

Additionally, cookbooks not already affiliated with other media could be paired with fiction books to increase students’ interest in reading. Fiction fans who lack culinary literacy and kids interested in cooking who are not passionate readers would all benefit. Display books designed to be checked out together. For example, pair Jenna Evans Welch’s YA novel *Love and Gelato* (Simon & Schuster 2016) with a gelato cookbook. For younger readers, present classics like Lucy Maud Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables* with a cookbook featuring summer drinks or layer cakes, and C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* with a candy cookbook bookmarked at a recipe for Turkish Delight.

### Food-Focused Books Support Standards

There is no shortage of food-centric books for kids. In fact,

some publishers focus exclusively on books about food. Readers to Eaters of Bellevue, Washington, was cofounded in 2009 by Philip Lee and June Jo Lee with the mission to promote food literacy. According to Philip Lee’s bio on the Readers to Eaters website, his work in educational reporting showed him that “youth obesity, hunger, and lack of access to good foods are major obstacles for children learning in school” (Readers to Eaters n.d.). In 2021 Ten Speed Press, an imprint of Random House, launched 4 Color Books, a new imprint in partnership with award-winning chef Bryant Terry. This new imprint collaborates with BIPOC chefs and other creatives to produce nonfiction books “that inspire readers and give rise to a more healthy, just, and sustainable world for all” (Penguin Random House 2021). While not focused exclusively on children’s publishing, the titles from 4 Color Books will appeal to high school students. For example, *Black Food*, edited and curated by Bryant Terry (4 Color Books 2021), includes essays and recipes from dozens of Black voices, as well as interviews, artwork, and a music playlist for each chapter. If your collection is light on books about cooking and healthy eating, looking at the offerings from these publishers—and others—is a good place to start.

If a buy-in to cookbooks as legitimate reading is proving to be a challenge at your school, consider sharing with classroom teachers the potential for multiple literacies that cookbooks and food-centric books can provide. Cookbooks and food-related books can be tie-ins to standards for almost any subject. Most obviously, cookbooks easily incorporate math and chemistry lessons through their recipes. On the humanities side, social studies standards from early elementary through high school incorporate the

concepts of culture, values, beliefs, people, places, and environments (NCDPI 2021). Each of the concepts addressed in social studies standards can be examined through food. For example, the popular picture book *Magic Ramen* by Andrea Wang (Little Bee Books 2019) tells the story of how Momofuku Ando invented instant ramen in response to seeing hungry people waiting in long lines for food. Andrea Wang, along with illustrator Jason Chin, received the 2022 Caldecott Medal for their book *Watercress* (Neal Porter 2021) about an immigrant family’s connection with the food from their homeland and family members’ varying perspectives on food and food insecurity.

Supporting the elementary history essential standard of understanding how individuals have influenced the history of local and regional communities can be shown through the reading of *Sweet Justice: Georgia Gilmore and the Montgomery Bus Boycott* by Mara Rockliff and illustrated by R. Gregory Christie (Random House 2022). *Our Little Kitchen* by Jillian Tamaki (Abrams 2020) is a colorful picture book in celebration of the vibrancy of community kitchens, inspired by the author’s time volunteering in her neighborhood’s community kitchen. In my state, middle school educators will be able to support students in the Career and Technical Education (CTE) North Carolina Standard Course of Study program areas of agricultural education, and marketing and entrepreneurship education through the reading of Mark Kurlansky’s *Frozen in Time: Clarence Birdseye’s Outrageous Idea about Frozen Food* (Delacorte 2014).

### Food-Focused Education Resources Abound

School librarians are not alone in promoting literacy through food. Dozens of farms, culinary centers,

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and food education organizations are working with schools across the country to promote literacy through a focus on food and awareness of healthy eating habits through hands-on experiences. For example, the Jones Valley Teaching Farm in Birmingham, Alabama, collaborates with teachers from local schools to use a food-based education model for academic exploration, leadership, and pursuit of post-secondary pathways (JVTF 2022). Through the Jones Valley Teaching Farm's Center for Food Education, students in grades K–12 participate in inquiry-based learning at school-based farms supporting all subject areas. For example, third-grade students learn the origins of Soul Food and how it played a part in the Civil Rights Movement (Fifolt 2018). Maybe you can find a similar organization in your area.

School Garden Doctor based in Napa, California, collaborates with teachers and students through food-centered programs such as Dirt Girls and Common Core Cooking. Their website <<https://schoolgardendoctor.org>>

[org](https://www.midwestfoodconnection.org)> might give you inspiration for programs at your school.


In Minnesota, Midwest Food Connection (MFC) has been teaching food lessons to children in the Twin Cities since 1994. MFC instructors guide students in grades K–8 through lessons that explore native foods such as wild rice and local foods from Minnesota farms while focusing on the connection between food and health. Of interest to educators outside the MFC service area are recipes and links at the website <[www.midwestfoodconnection.org](https://www.midwestfoodconnection.org)> to resources from other organizations.

The Food Project based in Lincoln, Massachusetts, employs 120 diverse teenagers every year to cultivate land in urban and suburban areas. In addition to agricultural tasks, the teenagers in the program work with hunger relief organizations and study ways to improve food access to underserved neighborhoods. You can download their free cookbook, *Sprouting Chefs*, and see other resources at <<https://thefoodproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Sprouting-Chefs.pdf>>.

The Food Literacy Center in Sacramento, California, instructs students at sixteen local under-resourced elementary schools about nutrition and gardening. In conjunction with a local farm, the Food Literacy Center opened a brand-new cooking school in November of 2021 adjacent to one of the elementary schools. You and your students can see a wealth of recipes (some with videos) at the website <[www.foodliteracycenter.org](http://www.foodliteracycenter.org)>.

### Partnerships

Advocating for food literacy in the library and classroom need not be a solo endeavor. To help you encourage learners' enthusiasm and curiosity about reading, food, and the world around them, consider reaching out to local chefs, restaurant owners, or teachers for food-related lessons from an expert. Ideally, these lessons are hands-on opportunities. For example, Hillary Marshall, a librarian at Washougal High School in Washington state (D'Orio 2022), partnered with her school's culinary instructor who prepared Puerto Rican food with the kids after they



## COOKBOOKS and FOOD-RELATED BOOKS can be tie-ins to standards for almost any subject.

read Elizabeth Acevedo's *With the Fire on High* (Quill Tree 2019). In this way, cookbooks can be made appealing to all readers, especially kids and teens who prefer to learn by doing. Having a tangible representation of their reading in the form of a drink, baked good, or meal is a way for students to see the impact learning from books can have on their lives. We can offer no better genre than cookbooks to help young people produce physical (and delicious) results at school and at home.

Maybe a local restaurant or store would be willing to provide supplies to make tea at school. This activity could be paired with *Luli and the Language of Tea* by Andrea Wang (Neal Porter 2022), a book that discusses various methods of preparing and drinking tea around the world. The picture book *Chaiwala!* by Priti Birla Maheshwari introduces the spices involved in making chai tea. If you are lucky, someone in your school might know someone who could demonstrate the Japanese tea ceremony or whip up a batch of chai tea in your library. Even showing a food- or beverage-preparation video can introduce kids to different cultures and perspectives, show students how reading connects to their physical world, and help them associate reading with exciting and new experiences.

For students or schools without access to the resources to make food, book clubs involving cookbooks and food-related nonfiction could still be a vehicle for connection, literacy, and learning. Community members could get involved here, too. Guest speakers at a book club meeting could participate in a discussion about recipes in a cookbook focused on a specific country's cuisine. Learners could share descriptions of similar recipes or meals that their family makes. These opportunities could encourage connection between students as well as between

individuals and books. On a broader scale, for National Hispanic Heritage Month, Asian Pacific American Heritage Month, and Black History Month, your library could feature cookbooks and food-related stories as part of the celebration. Community members could be involved here, too.

## Capitalize on Personal Connections with Food

In my peripatetic life two types of spaces have been constant for me: libraries and kitchens. As a recent library school graduate and a former pastry chef I know the potential of both books and food to nourish our minds and our overall well-being. Of all the strategies used by teachers and school librarians to promote reading, finding a topic of common interest is one of the most effective. Because we all eat, cookbooks and stories about food are sure to entice readers of all ages. Everyone has a personal connection with food. As educators, let's take advantage of that fact. Culinary literacy resources are abundant in a variety of formats and can be used to support teachers and students across multiple disciplines.



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to refugee farmers with *Orange Literacy at Transplanting Traditions Community Farm*. She has been a middle school art teacher, tutored middle school ELLs, and a public library volunteer. She is interested in the opportunities and connections between libraries and culinary literacy, food, and food insecurity. She grew up on a campground in southeastern Ohio and now resides in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where she checks out as many cookbooks from the public library as she can carry.

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