

THE PRESIDENTIAL PALATE

A CULINARY HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY

Educator Companion
Social Studies & American History
Grades 7 – 12

NATIONAL FOOD MUSEUM

nationalfoodmuseum.org

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PURPOSE

This companion helps educators use the National Food Museum's *The Presidential Palate* online exhibition to support classroom learning in grades 7 through 12.

Open-ended questions ask students to look at what presidents ate and think about what those choices say about power, labor, public image, and how food reaches the table.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

There are five main themes. Within each, there are topics that open with a short summary from the online exhibition, then poses open-ended questions with no single right answer. These can be used for individual student writing prompts, for group discussion, or a combination of both.

Everything in the topic summaries comes from the presidential profiles in the online exhibition.

Some topics include a Try It! activity for classroom students or anyone who wants to go further.



THEME 1: FOOD AND PUBLIC IMAGE

A Man of the People
In 1840, William Henry Harrison ran as the “log cabin and hard cider” candidate, even though he grew up on a wealthy Virginia plantation. That same year, a congressman attacked Martin Van Buren for serving strawberries, raspberries, celery, and cauliflower at the White House. Van Buren had grown up above his father's tavern.

Questions

- Why do you think food works so well as a sign of whether someone is “one of us?”
- Which foods would a candidate today want to be photographed eating and which would they avoid?

Try It!

Choose a food that sends a strong signal about class, region, or politics today. Write a two-sentence campaign ad built around it using it to either build up a candidate or attack an opponent.

The Public Plate versus the Private Plate

At a French dinner held in his honor in New Orleans, James K. Polk quietly asked for corn pone and boiled ham. Grover Cleveland once swapped a formal French meal for the staff's corned beef and cabbage. Ulysses S. Grant liked plain food at home but hosted lavish state dinners.

Questions

- What does a state dinner need to do that a family dinner doesn't?
- If you were hosting a world leader, would you serve your own favorite food or something more impressive?



Do As I Say

John Adams lectured the country about temperance, which means avoiding alcohol, yet he also started most mornings with a drink of hard cider. Franklin Pierce banned alcohol from White House functions while, by most accounts, drinking heavily in private. The Hayes White House went completely dry and the first lady became known as "Lemonade Lucy."

Questions

- Should what a leader eats or drinks in private matter to the public?
- When does a gap between public rules and private habits become a real problem and not just a curiosity?

THEME 2: THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE PLATE

Who Set the Table?
On August 24, 1814, Paul Jennings, who was enslaved in the Madison household, set the table for a forty-person dinner and chilled the drinks. British troops arrived before the guests did. Much of Benjamin Harrison's family cooking came from Dolly Johnson, a well-known Kentucky cook who was born enslaved. Even George Washington's dentures likely included teeth taken from enslaved people.

Questions
- Menus and guest lists from the White House often survive in detail, while the names of the people who did the cooking are much harder to find. Why might that be?
- What does it mean that so much of the history of presidential food rests on labor that was forced, unpaid, or unrecorded?



The Pen
Zephyr Wright cooked for Lyndon Johnson for years. On road trips through the Jim Crow South with the Johnson family, she was barred from restaurants and restrooms. Johnson directly observed the discrimination she encountered and drew on her experience when he built support for civil rights legislation. After he signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, he gave her one of the pens he used, saying she deserved it more than anyone.

Questions:
- How does knowing Zephyr Wright's story change the way you think about the Civil Rights Act?
- How does a law move from someone's lived experience to the people who write and pass it?

Try it!

Think of a rule or law that affects your daily life. Whose experience do you think shaped it? Whose experience might have been left out?

THEME 3: FOOD, POLICY, & SAFETY

Who Checks the Food?

After Upton Sinclair's book *The Jungle* exposed conditions in Chicago meatpacking plants, Theodore Roosevelt didn't rely on the USDA, whose ties to the industry he distrusted. He sent two independent investigators instead. They confirmed nearly everything, and in 1906 he signed the Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food and Drug Act.

Questions

- Why did it matter that the investigators were independent?
- Today, who do you trust to tell you that your food is safe: government agencies, companies, journalists, scientists, or your own judgment?



A World without the Basics

After a hot July 4th in 1850, Zachary Taylor ate cherries and drank cold milk and ice water. He died five days later. The most likely cause was ordinary foodborne illness in a city with no sewers, no pasteurization, and almost no refrigeration.

Questions

- Which food safety systems do you rely on every day without thinking about them?
- Who builds and maintains them, and who still lives without them today?

Try It!

Pick one system, such as refrigeration, clean water, or food labels. List three meals from your last week that wouldn't have been safe without that system.



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Hunger Has a Name

During World War I, Herbert Hoover's Food Administration asked Americans to observe meatless and wheatless days, and sauerkraut was renamed "Liberty Cabbage." Hoover organized food relief that likely saved millions of lives in Europe. A decade later, during the Depression, a soup kitchen dish of macaroni, hot dogs, and canned vegetables was called "Hoover Stew."

Questions

- Why do people attach a leader's name to food in hard times?
- Is it fair that Hoover's name ended up there?
- What do the renamed foods of wartime tell you about how food and national identity are tied together?



THEME 4: FOOD AT THE TABLE OF NATIONS

A Menu as a Message

In 1939, Eleanor Roosevelt served visiting British King George VI his first hot dog at a picnic at Hyde Park. George W. Bush hosted world leaders over simple grilled burgers, which the press called “cheeseburger diplomacy.” John F. Kennedy invited forty-nine Nobel Prize winners to dinner. James Monroe bought a gilded French centerpiece more than fourteen feet long that still appears at state dinners.

Questions

- Each of these meals sent a message. What was each host trying to say?
- When does a casual meal carry more meaning than a formal one?

Try It!

Imagine you are hosting a visiting head of state. Plan a three-course menu that tells your guest something true about your town, region, or country. For each course, describe the food and write one sentence explaining what you think it means or represents.

Gifts for the President

Americans have always been sending food to the White House. Andrew Jackson received a 1,400-pound wheel of cheese, which more than ten thousand visitors ate in about two hours. Calvin Coolidge received a raccoon meant for Thanksgiving dinner and kept it as a pet. When George H.W. Bush banned broccoli from Air Force One, California growers sent ten tons of it, and Barbara Bush gave the shipment to a food bank.

Questions

- Why do people send food to a president?
- What is the difference between a gift, a joke, a protest, and an advertisement, and which of these do you think each gift described above was intended to be?

Small Bite, Big Story

In 1976, news cameras captured Gerald Ford biting into a tamale without removing the corn husk and local news replayed clips of it for days. George H.W. Bush's broccoli ban made national headlines. In 1992, *Family Circle* magazine ran a cookie bake-off between Hillary Clinton and Barbara Bush after Clinton said she could have "stayed home and baked cookies."

Questions

- Why do small food moments become big news?
- What was the cookie bake-off really about?
- Does how a leader eats tell us anything meaningful or is it just a distraction?

Try It!

Find a recent news story about a public figure and food. In a few sentences, explain what the story was really trying to say about that person.

THEME 5: MAKE IT PERSONAL

Your Presidential Profile

The presidents in this exhibit are remembered partly through their plates: Nixon's cottage cheese, Reagan's jelly beans, and Eisenhower's alphabetized recipe files. Their meals were shaped by where they grew up, their health, their budgets, the people who cooked for them, and the image they wanted to project.

Questions:

- If the National Food Museum wrote a food profile of you, what would it say?
- Which of those forces have shaped what you eat?
- Which president's eating habits are closest to your own?
- Which are furthest from them?

Try It!

Write your own profile in The Presidential Palate exhibit's format. Give it a punchy title, a "Fast Fact" about your eating habits, two or three sentences on what your food says about your life and times, and a "Try it at Home" recipe that represents you.

Alignment with United States History Content Standards – Grades 7–12
phi.history.ucla.edu/nchs/united-states-history-content-standards

An exploration of The Presidential Palate online exhibition along with the activities in this guide can support standards-aligned classroom practice that align with the National Center for History in the Schools' curriculum frameworks in the following ways.

Historical Thinking Standards Alignment (Cross-Cutting)
The open-ended inquiries and activities across all five themes align directly with the NCHS Historical Thinking Standards:

- Standard 1: Chronological Thinking
  - Theme 3 & Theme 5: Analyzing changes over time in technological systems (refrigeration, pasteurization, public sanitation) and how daily life and health evolved across different presidential eras.
- Standard 2: Historical Comprehension
  - Theme 1 & Theme 4: Reading presidential dining habits, public imagery, and menus as cultural texts to comprehend the broader societal values and political pressures of each era.
- Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation
  - Theme 1, Theme 2, & Theme 4: Analyzing how political images are constructed versus private realities; examining primary historical accounts versus omitted histories.
- Standard 4: Historical Research Capabilities
  - Theme 2 & Theme 3: Formulating historical questions about unrecorded/marginalized labor and investigating independent scientific/journalistic inquiries.
- Standard 5: Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision-Making
  - Theme 2 & Theme 3: Evaluating how lived experiences and public crises lead to policy choices, federal regulations, and civil rights legislation.

Alignment by Topic & NCHS Era
The open-ended inquiries and activities across all five themes align with the following eras:

Theme 1: Food and Public Image
- A Man of the People (William Henry Harrison vs. Martin Van Buren, 1840)
- Era 4: Expansion and Reform (1801–1861)

    - Standard 3B: Demonstrate understanding of the operational nature of Jacksonian democracy and the emergence of second-party competition (analyzing campaign strategies, political symbolism, and the populist "Log Cabin and Hard Cider" election of 1840).
    - *The Public Plate versus the Private Plate* (Polk, Cleveland, Grant) & *Do As I Say* (Adams, Pierce, Hayes)
    - Era 3: Revolution and the New Nation (1754–1820s) & Era 6: The Development of the Industrial United States (1870–1900)
    - Era 6, Standard 2C: Evaluate how reformers addressed social, moral, and political problems (e.g., the Temperance Movement, moral politics in executive leadership, and “Lemonade Lucy” Hayes).

Theme 2: The People behind the Plate

- *Who Set the Table?* (Paul Jennings/Madisons, Dolly Johnson/Harrisons, George Washington)
    - Era 3: Revolution and the New Nation (1754–1820s) & Era 4: Expansion and Reform (1801–1861)
    - Era 3, Standard 3B / Era 4, Standard 2D: Analyze the institution of slavery, the experiences of enslaved individuals in early national domestic spaces, and the unrecorded labor that sustained major historical figures and executive households.
- *The Pen* (Zephyr Wright & Lyndon B. Johnson, Civil Rights Act of 1964)
    - Era 9: Postwar United States (1945 to early 1970s)
    - Standard 4A: Demonstrate understanding of the struggle for racial equality and civil rights legislation (analyzing how Jim Crow segregation directly impacted citizens and how personal/lived experiences informed political advocacy and executive action on the Civil Rights Act of 1964).

Theme 3: Food, Policy, & Safety

- Who Checks the Food? (Theodore Roosevelt, Upton Sinclair, Pure Food & Drug Act of 1906)
    - Era 7: The Emergence of Modern America (1890–1930)
    - Standard 1A: Evaluate Progressive Era reforms and the role of investigative journalism (“muckrakers”) in expanding federal regulatory power over industry and public health.
- A World without the Basics (Zachary Taylor, 1850; public health & sanitation)
    - Era 4: Expansion and Reform (1801–1861)
    - Standard 4B: Assess the impact of urban growth, public health infrastructure, technological limitations, and social change in mid-19th-century America.

- *Hunger Has a Name* (Herbert Hoover, WWI Food Administration, Great Depression)
    - Era 7: The Emergence of Modern America (1890–1930) & Era 8: The Great Depression and World War II (1929–1945)
    - Era 7, Standard 2C: Evaluate home front mobilization during WWI (food rationing, voluntary conservation, propaganda, national identity).
    - Era 8, Standard 1A: Analyze the impact of the Great Depression on everyday American life and public perceptions of presidential leadership.

Theme 4: Food at the Table of Nations

- *A Menu as a Message* (Eleanor Roosevelt, Bush's "Cheeseburger Diplomacy," JFK, James Monroe) & *Gifts for the President* & *Small Bite, Big Story*
    - Era 3 (Monroe), Era 8 (FDR), Era 9 (JFK), & Era 10: Contemporary United States (1968 to present)
    - Era 10, Standard 2A & 2E: Analyze the role of media, public diplomacy, soft power, and cultural messaging in shaping domestic politics and international relations.

Theme 5: Make it Personal

- *Your Presidential Profile*
    - Cross-Era Integration / Historical Inquiry: Synthesizes historical empathy and self-reflection by asking students to analyze regional, economic, and cultural influences on everyday human choices, connecting historical presidential profiles to contemporary civic and personal identity.

Alignment with NCSS Curriculum Themes – Grades 7–12
socialstudies.org/standards/national-curriculum-standards-social-studies-introduction

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NCSS Theme	Activity & Topic Connection	Learning Objective / Alignment
Theme 1: Culture	• *Theme 1: A Man of the People* • *Theme 4: A Menu as a Message* • *Theme 5: Your Presidential Profile*	Analyze how food choices, culinary traditions, and dining rituals reflect regional, national, and class identities, as well as cultural diplomacy.
Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change	• *Theme 3: A World without the Basics* • *Theme 3: Hunger Has a Name*	Trace how food safety, public health infrastructure, and home front mobilization (rations/slogans) have evolved over different historical eras.
Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity	• *Theme 1: Do As I Say* • *Theme 4: Small Bite, Big Story* • *Theme 5: Your Presidential Profile*	Examine how personal habits, public image, and media scrutiny shape public perceptions of leaders and influence individual political identities.
Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions	• *Theme 2: Who Set the Table?* • *Theme 3: Who Checks the Food?*	Evaluate the roles of investigative journalists, regulatory institutions, and unrecorded domestic laborers in shaping American history and executive life.
Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance	• *Theme 2: The Pen* • *Theme 3: Who Checks the Food?*	Explore how lived experiences of discrimination directly inform federal legislation (Civil Rights Act of 1964) and how governments exercise power to protect public safety (Pure Food and Drug Act).
Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices	• *Theme 1 (Try It!): Campaign Ad* • *Theme 2 (Try It!): Examining Rules & Laws* • *Theme 4 (Try It!): Media Analysis*	Develop critical media literacy and civic inquiry by evaluating how political campaigns use symbolism, propaganda, and public messaging to influence.