

Handed Down at Home

November 2025 Lesson: *The Stories We Eat* (Foodways and Material Culture)

Lesson Objective & Connection to Folklife

Food is one of the most powerful ways traditions are shared and remembered. The recipes we cook, the smells that fill our kitchens, and the rituals of gathering at the table all tell stories about who we are and where we come from.

Across cultures, food carries memory, comfort, and identity — a single dish can hold generations of wisdom, from ingredients to family stories. This activity teaches families that food is more than nourishment; it's a living record of tradition, connecting the past and present through shared experience.

Foodways and Material Culture

Foodways is the study of how food connects to culture — from how ingredients are sourced to how meals are prepared, served, and shared. Every step reflects who we are. A single dish can carry generations of knowledge: farming methods, family tastes, and regional histories. By preparing or talking about a meaningful meal together, families become part of this living tradition.

Material culture is the study of the physical things people make, use, and keep — objects that carry meaning, memory, and connection. From cookware and utensils to recipe cards, garden tools, and even the table where meals are shared, these everyday items help tell the story of how families live and pass down tradition.

When combined, ***material culture and foodways show how deeply food is woven into our identities.*** The dishes we cook, the tools we use, and the memories attached to them all become part of a living history. By exploring the stories behind a recipe or a family meal, we preserve cultural knowledge in one of the most nourishing ways: through food, memory, and togetherness.

Activity: The Stories We Eat (*Foodways and Material Culture*)

You don't need a big meal to share this lesson — even a simple dish, snack, or story will do. What matters most is talking about what food means to your family: where recipes come from, who taught them, and why they matter.

1. **Choose an object:** Pick something meaningful from your home like a photo, recipe card, heirloom, favorite mug, or old toy.
2. **Share its story:** Talk about who it belonged to, when it was used, or why it matters.
3. **Ask questions:** Encourage your child to wonder. Ask things like: "Who gave this to us?" "What did it mean back then?"
4. **Imagine together:** Ask how this object might be used or remembered in the future.
5. **Reflect:** Talk about how the story connects your family across generations.

Ways to Expand the Lesson

- Write down the recipe and its story in a small Family Recipe Journal.
- Create an illustrated menu of your family's favorite meals and who taught them.
- Record a short video of a family member explaining how they make a dish.
- Cook a meal from a friend's or neighbor's tradition — talk about what's similar or different between the dishes!

Fun Folklife Fact: Foodway Edition

The Long, Flavorful Journey of Chili Con Carne

Did you know the official state dish of Texas is *chili con carne*? *That's Spanish for chili with meat.* This beginning of this legendary meal has roots that reach back hundreds of years! Indigenous communities in the region cooked early versions of chili by simmering meat with local chile peppers, onions, and herbs. Mexican and Tejano families continued these traditions, using dried chiles and slow-cooked beef to create hearty stews meant for sharing.

In the late 1800s, chili became famous thanks to the ***Chili Queens of San Antonio*** — Mexican and Tejana women who served spicy bowls of chili in the city’s nighttime plazas. Their food drew travelers from near and far, and newspaper writers helped spread the dish’s reputation.

Chili’s popularity grew even more after a chili stand from Texas appeared at the **1893 Chicago World’s Fair**, introducing thousands of visitors to the “Texas red” that would soon become iconic.

Cowboys on cattle drives made their own versions using dried beef and chile peppers, sometimes forming “chili bricks” that could be boiled back into a hot meal on the trail. And as chili moved into new kitchens, families added their own twists — new spices, tomatoes, or beans. That’s why Texans still playfully debate the big question: **Should chili have beans?**

No matter the recipe, every bowl of chili carries a story of creativity, community, and the many cultures that shaped Texas!

Share With Us!

What recipes tell your families stories? Does your family have their own take on chili?

Share a photo, short video or a family recipe using **#HandedDownAtHome** or tag **@TexasFolklife** to join next month’s feature!

About Handed Down at Home

Handed Down at Home is a monthly family activity series from Texas Folklife. Each lesson celebrates the everyday traditions — stories, songs, foods, and crafts — that connect us to one another and to the many cultures across Texas.