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“Tasting Memories”

10 Minute Free writing exercise:

Please choose a food item, and in the form of a poem, dialogue or direct free write, connect with a memory this food evokes. Feel and smell the item. Take a minute to capture the memory and then begin writing.

SAMPLE FOOD ITEMS

Uncooked rice

Loose tea

Papaya

Okra

Pineapple

Black eyed peas

Lemon

Cornmeal

Guava

Banana

Like our language, the food we eat is an important part of our culture and identity. Food can be used in an English or writing classroom of diverse learners as a way for students to connect with their culture, teach others about their background and explore memories through their food voices. Regardless of our place of origin, we each celebrate special moments with friends and family, and often food is present during these special events.

At Kingsborough Community College, many of my students are of African American and Caribbean descent. I have used the “Tasting Memories” exercise with them for several semesters. With some research and an adjustment in food items, this freewriting exercise can be used with students of various cultural backgrounds.

Many of my Caribbean students are second generation Latino-American, Haitian-American and Jamaican-American, while others are recent immigrants from various parts of the Caribbean. My heritage as an African American with Bajan

roots my father is from Barbados means that I am familiar with some of the food items used in Caribbean cooking. When I have a large number of Caribbean students in my class, I often bring in the following food items: tropical fruits, rice and grains. I bring in several examples of each item. Students are encouraged to select a food item, smell it, feel it, and connect with a memory involving that food. What happens next is amazing.

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Many students do not write about the food item directly, but about deceased grandmothers, aunts, mothers and other family members who cooked the food item for them. Sometimes students write about the first time they visited the home of their parents, or their visit back home after their migration to the United States, and the food celebration in honor of that visit. Still, other students write about how they use food to connect their children to the culture of their childhood. This exercise leads students to recall both pleasant and unpleasant memories. For example, Patsy, a twenty-seven year old Guyanese mother of two boys who came to the United States with her mother and aunt when she was 12 years old, chose to write a poem about a dark period of her childhood after selecting tea as her food item.

I Remember
Those days
When I ate bread with butter and drank a cup of bush tea
for breakfast.
I remember those days when I didn't have butter for my
bread or sugar for my tea,
but I still had my breakfast.
When I ate a plate of rice when one piece of stew chicken
and drank salted water
from the pipe for dinner.
I remember the days
When I ate with my hand when there was no silverware.
When I drank rainwater when there was no pipe water.
but I still had my dinner.
Those were the days of poverty
Nowadays,
bread and butter with bush tea
one piece of chicken with salted or rainwater is not
on my menu.
Eating a plate of rice with my hand is not in my vocabulary.
I remember those days
The poor days,
but I like nowadays... Better!

After the exercise, students are asked to reflect on the process. Sometimes in their journal or in discussion with each other in pairs, small groups or with the entire class, they use their reflection to further explain the context of the writing and how it felt to use food to connect with memories. In her journal, Patsy explained, "My aunt used to bring a large bag of bush tea to my mom every Tuesday. At first I loved it, and I loved for

my aunt to visit too, but after a while, after having anything over and over, you begin to get tired of it, even hate it.”

In her poem, Patsy deals with the issue of poverty, however she also includes a message of triumph and pride in her ability to provide for herself and her two children.

Tasha, a student of African American decent, selected a bowl of uncooked rice. She wrote in her journal, “I closed my eyes. I began to let the grains slip through my fingers, and I thought about how I used to beg my mother to let me cook rice for my father. Rice was his favorite dish.” The writing exercise uncovered Tasha’s longing for her father. She wrote:

Father
I remember being home alone,
wondering will my father ever come home.
Does he know I love him dearly?
But my question is does he fear me?
Oh god, I love him so.
Someone please tell me
Why doesn't he just come home?
Daddy, daddy, can you hear my cries?
Just to have you by my side
Until the day you here with me
My love for you
Will always be.

After sharing her writing with the entire class, Tasha told us that her dad left her and her mom when she was ten years old. Feelings of abandonment still haunted her even though she was twenty-three years old and living on her own.

It must be noted that these two writing examples are from students who usually struggle with their essays for content and structure but their writing exercises were clear and easy to understand. In this exercise they were able to connect with powerful memories, and food was the catalyst for it.

The food we eat is an important aspect of who we are. Not only can food be used to celebrate special life events and recall memories. I’ve witnessed how it can be used in a classroom to allow students to connect with their culture and help create a community of sharing in the classroom.