

Culinary Literacy

A Toolkit for Public Libraries



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Contents

- Concept.....3
 - Inspiration and Origin.....3
 - A Note from the Culinary Literacy Center Administrator.....4
- Advocacy: Making the Case for Culinary Literacy.....5
- Fundraising.....6
- Space & Equipment Options.....7
 - Commercial-grade Kitchen.....7
 - Mobile Kitchen Cart.....7
 - Kitchen in a Box.....8
- Safety.....9
 - City Government Licenses and Certifications.....9
 - Servsafe.....9
 - Food Safety.....9
 - Knife Skills.....10
 - Food Allergies.....10
- Food Procurement.....11
- Community Partners.....12
- Programming13
- Resources.....15

Concept

Inspiration and Origin



Siobhan Reardon in the Culinary Literacy Center with Administrator Elizabeth Fitzgerald.
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The Culinary Literacy Center is the first kitchen-classroom in a public library in the United States of America. The Culinary Literacy Center was the brainchild of the President and Director of the Free Library of Philadelphia, [Siobhan Reardon](#). It was built as part of renovations to the Parkway Central Library, the flagship location of the Free Library. ***The mission of the Free Library of Philadelphia is to advance literacy, guide learning, and inspire curiosity.*** Under the visionary leadership of Ms. Reardon, the Free

Library has committed to supporting its mission through innovation and creativity. The Culinary Literacy Center was created with the understanding that cooking and eating are educational acts. According to Ms. Reardon, [Library Journal's 2015 Librarian of the Year](#), "Nothing is more literacy-based than cooking. It is all basic literacy, math, and science. It is tactile learning, and it is social." There are many opportunities that food and cooking present to advance literacy: reading a recipe and understanding the vocabulary of the ingredients and cooking tools, knowing the math of measurements and how to scale a recipe up or down, the science of cooking and growing food, understanding the connection between our health and the food that we eat, exploring the culture and history in cuisine. With 54 neighborhood libraries throughout the city, the Free Library of Philadelphia is the heart of every Philadelphia community. Cooking and eating provide ample opportunity to build and sustain community. The Culinary Literacy Center brings Philadelphians of all backgrounds together to learn and have fun around a shared experience.

The mission of the Culinary Literacy Center is to advance literacy through food and cooking around a communal table. We are a center in the Free Library that serves Philadelphians of all ages, from pregnant mothers and preschool students to senior citizens, and we function as a unique gateway to the library.

A Note from the Culinary Literacy Center Administrator

Since opening the Culinary Literacy Center in June 2014, libraries and community centers from around the country and world have contacted us to learn how to bring culinary literacy to their communities. We are thrilled to be sharing our story, and this toolkit, with the library leaders and innovators of Next Library 2017 as a part of our presentation [Eat This Workshop](#).

The answers we give now are different from the ones we gave in the beginning and reflect our own journey. The early days of the Culinary Literacy Center involved a lot of throwing pasta at the wall to see if it stuck, which meant trying so many different things out. We knew what it meant to be librarians, but weren't so sure about how to open a cooking school or a restaurant, which was what it felt like we were doing some days. We were inventing what it meant to do culinary literacy programming in a library. It was exciting and a little terrifying. The biggest difference between now and then—besides the size of our staff—is that now we rely much less on our partners to determine what our programming looks like. We found our voice. We defined our mission.

Define the mission. That is the best piece of advice I have to give when speaking with the people who contact us to learn about how to open a kitchen in their library. I ask people to tell me: *What is it you want to do? Why do you want to bring culinary literacy to your community? Who are you hoping to serve?* Once you know that, you can begin to identify programs to create, organizations with which to partner, materials to share, library resources to tie in. I can, and will, tell anyone who wants to know what it cost to build the space, how many mixing bowls and spoons to have on hand, the quantity of towels you'll need each week, how to order food, what kinds of organizations make the best partners. You'll find much of that in this toolkit. It will be inordinately useful to have insight on the logistics of running the Free Library's Culinary Literacy Center, the *hows* of the program. My challenge to you is to think strategically on the *whys*. For us, the answer is ***to advance literacy through food and cooking around a communal table***. By that, we mean ***learning through cooking and learning about cooking***, which is how we define culinary literacy. It means using the cooperative nature of cooking to build community. It means being a space that elevates hands-on, project-based learning, that celebrates diversity, that is open and inclusive.

I look forward to seeing what culinary literacy programming means to you.

Cheers,

Liz Fitzgerald

Administrator, Culinary Literacy Center - June 2017

Advocacy: Making the Case for Culinary Literacy

Cooking is a vehicle for strengthening math skills.¹

A plant-based diet can improve health.²

Using data to support statements like those above can strengthen your proposal and help you get the support you need from your library's administration and board. To help make the case for how culinary literacy programming can advance literacy, improve community health, and support your library's mission, please consider the following benefits:

Advancing Multiple Literacies

At the Culinary Literacy Center we advance multiple literacies through cooking. In our [Edible Alphabet](#) class, students learn English in our kitchen classroom. In her book *How to Bake Pi*, [Dr. Eugenia Cheng](#), a theoretical mathematician, explains math concepts through cooking. Library users can [read nutrition labels](#), mix [math and cooking](#), and explore the [science of cooking](#). There is also the importance of a community-based understanding of [food literacy](#). Your program can guide learning about the [hands that feed us](#), cultural [foodways](#), [environmentally sustainable eating](#), and [food insecurity](#) in your community. What will your patrons learn in *your* library's culinary literacy program?

Improving Community Health

The Pew Research Center's report [Libraries at the Crossroads](#) found that library users "view public libraries as important resources for finding health information" and that "73% of all those ages 16 and over say libraries contribute to people finding the health information they need." Find information about your community's health needs and let what you learn guide your programming. Look for government resources like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's [Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity: Data, Trends and Maps](#), which provides information about the health status and behaviors of Americans, state-by-state, via clickable maps, charts, and tables, and Eurostat's [Health in the European Union - facts and figures](#), which provides recent statistics on health in the EU, focusing on areas like health status, health determinants, and health care. For a global perspective, explore the World Health Organization's [Nutrition Landscape Information System](#), the [Global Nutrition Report](#), or the [Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation](#). Zoom in, if data is available, to look for local information about your city. We use the City of Philadelphia's [Community Health Explorer](#), which includes important indicators like low-to-no walkable access to healthy foods and Philadelphians living in poverty.

Resources

1. The calculus of do(ugh)nuts
cheng.staff.shef.ac.uk/misc/cheng-doughnuts.pdf
2. Vegetarian Diets Linked to Lower Mortality
nih.gov/news-events/nih-research-matters/vegetarian-diets-linked-lower-mortality

Fundraising

Building the Culinary Literacy Center cost a total of \$1.2 million dollars. The funds for this construction project were procured from a public/private venture combining contributions from the City of Philadelphia with a robust fundraising campaign from the [Free Library of Philadelphia Foundation](#). The Foundation continues to raise money for Culinary Literacy Center programming through grants, sponsorships, private donations, ticket sales, and program fees.

While many of the programs at the Culinary Literacy Center are free, we charge a small fee—from \$5 to \$35 per person—for some programs, which goes toward covering the cost of ingredients and other program materials.

Nutrition, health, and food access are currently popular subjects for grant funding. We have been successful securing funding from small family foundations. For your program, look for funding through local grocery store chains and hospitals. Check out larger, regional, and national corporate foundations. Ask your library Friends' Group or a local politician's office to invest in your culinary literacy programming.

Space & Equipment Options

What kind of space and tools will you need for your culinary literacy program? Here are kitchen space and equipment options for three different budgets.

1. Commercial-Grade Kitchen

The culinary kitchen and classroom space is approximately 1,700 square feet. Our restrooms and locker area is an additional 250 square feet; the office is 200 square feet; and the terrace, where we have a small container garden of herbs, is approximately 800 square feet.

Our commercial-grade equipment includes 16 burners, 4 convection ovens, 2 salamanders (cheese melters), a grill top, a walk-in refrigerator, 4 reach-in refrigerators, a freezer drawer, an ice maker, and a large prep table at the front of the classroom that has a sink and 4 of the burners on it. There is also a scullery, or dishwashing room.

The classroom area seats 36 people at 9 high stainless steel work tables. We have three cameras that feed to a large-screen TV at the front of the classroom, giving every one of the 36 seats a view to what the instructor is doing. We often use the camera's zoom feature, so students in the back of the room can see the details of a small culinary technique, like the dicing of onions. Technological capabilities also include a sound system and the capability to record programming and to stream a live feed.

2. Mobile Kitchen Unit

Libraries across the U.S. are exploring culinary literacy programming using mobile kitchens. The Camden County Library system in New Jersey uses a mobile kitchen in its [Books and Cooks](#) program. The kitchen is complemented by a collection of books about nutrition, healthy eating, and consumer literacy. Camden County transports the kitchen to its eight neighborhood libraries and other community locations to demonstrate cooking techniques and recipes. The San Francisco Public Library rolls the [Biblio Bistro](#) out to farmers' markets and library branches for culinary literacy programming.

The Culinary Literacy Center has recently purchased a [Charlie Cart](#), a mobile kitchen classroom that comes with kitchen tools and a hands-on, multidisciplinary nutrition-education curriculum for children.

3. Kitchen in a Box

You do not need a commercial-grade kitchen, or even a mobile kitchen unit, to offer culinary literacy programming in your library. If your budget is tight, the only thing you need is a table, an outlet, running water, and the most basic cooking tools. Ideally, you would have meeting-room space. We use a Kitchen in a Box to offer culinary literacy programming at our neighborhood libraries throughout the city of Philadelphia. All of the kitchen tools, including an electric skillet and an immersion blender, fit inside of a large lidded plastic storage bin, which we can transport through our interlibrary mail system. The cost of a deluxe Kitchen in a Box kit is approximately \$800 for a fairly exhaustive [list of equipment](#), which we have included in the resources section. We have also worked successfully with a smaller, less robust inventory list, which cost approximately \$350 to compile.

Safety

One of the biggest concerns with any cooking program is safety. People have questions about giving knives to the public and how we keep from contaminating the food we prepare and eat. We take safety very seriously at the Culinary Literacy Center. Here are some of the safeguards we employ to protect our visitors and our staff.

City Government Licenses and Certifications

The Culinary Literacy Center is certified by the city of Philadelphia's [Department of Public Health](#) as a Demonstration Kitchen. We are licensed for Food Preparing and Serving by the Philadelphia [Department of Licenses & Inspections](#). We are subject to routine, unannounced [food-facility inspections](#) conducted by the Environmental Health Services division of the Department of Public Health. Most inspections occur once a year, and inspectors stress the prevention of foodborne illness and the education of our staff on proper food-handling techniques. At the end of the inspection, the sanitarian gives us a report that itemizes any food safety violations and explains how to correct them. Environmental Health Services has the authority to order an establishment closed if it poses an imminent health hazard. Our kitchen also follows stringent fire codes, to help ensure a safe environment for cooking with industrial-grade equipment. Contact your local fire department to better understand what it means to be in compliance with the fire codes in your area. Philadelphia provides [this instruction manual](#) that serves as a guide to permits and licenses related to opening a stationary food business in the city of Philadelphia. Contact your city government to learn more about the laws and regulations around opening a kitchen classroom in your library.

ServSafe

To support our compliance with health regulations, to be informed food handlers, and to help keep our community safe, the staff members of the Culinary Literacy Center are all ServSafe Certified. [ServSafe](#) is a training program developed by the National Restaurant Association that offers food- and alcohol-safety training and certification exams. All of the Culinary Literacy Center's staff members are certified at either the ServSafe Food Handler or ServSafe Manager levels. We are moving toward a policy of having all of our instructors certified as Food Handlers, which costs \$15. If your library is outside of the U.S, consider the [Food Safety and Quality trainings](#) available from NSF International.

Food Safety

[Proper handwashing technique](#) is the most important way to prevent the spread of germs to others. Practicing as well as teaching this technique is the backbone of our programming. Our kitchen has three designated handwashing stations, and when we offer programs in our neighborhood libraries, we make sure people wash their hands or use gloves, so that we minimize the potential for cross-contamination as much as possible. There are [four important steps to avoiding food poisoning](#): cooking to the right temperature, washing hands and surfaces often, refrigerating food properly, and avoiding cross-contamination by separating raw meats from other foods. Public libraries must also know [how to report a foodborne disease outbreak](#). Visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's [BusinessPulse Food Safety](#), as well as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Safety's [Foodsafety.gov](#), as starting points for food safety standards.

Knife Skills

We promote knife safety by teaching knife skills. We believe in giving people, children included, the best tools for the job, and we instruct them in the [proper way to use them](#). We regularly offer knife-skills classes at the Culinary Literacy Center, and [books about using and caring for knives](#) are available to check out. At the Culinary Literacy Center we give chefs' knives to children ages 10 and up. We use butter knives and lettuce knives for younger children and often have children use their hands to tear and break produce into smaller pieces. We have found that box graters, vegetable peelers, and the blades on plastic wrap dispensers are "hidden sharps"; we have had more injuries with those items than with the knives. We use a special perforated red bin to store dirty knives, to keep our dishwasher safe. We have three first-aid kits in the kitchen, and our staff knows the proper procedures for handling an injury, including whom to contact in the building. We encourage you to work with your library's security or safety department to develop safety procedures for your culinary literacy program.

Food Allergies

In our programs we avoid many of the [major food allergens](#) designated by the Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act of 2004, like nuts and shellfish, whenever we can—especially in our children's programs. We ask participants about food allergies before classes and encourage people with life-threatening food allergies to bring along an Epinephrine Auto-Injector. Additional training on how to address food allergies is available via [Servsafe](#).

Food Procurement

When you think about ingredients for your programs, you will need to consider factors like cost, feasibility, and the values your library's mission upholds. At the Culinary Literacy Center we get our ingredients in two ways: We either ask our food educators and instructors to purchase food supplies, and then we reimburse them; or we purchase the ingredients ourselves.

When we purchase our own ingredients, we usually use a food-delivery service like [Instacart](#), [Fresh Direct](#), or [AmazonFresh](#). For programs that need a large quantity of ingredients, we have found that ordering cases of food at wholesale prices saves money. We have used the [Common Market](#), a "mission-driven distributor of regional farm products" that "strives to strengthen small and family-owned farms while simultaneously improving food access and public health."

Community Partners

The staff members of the Culinary Literacy Center are librarians and library assistants, not chefs. We are not usually the instructors for our programs. Instead, we partner with organizations around Philadelphia with similar missions to find our food educators, and we often find our audiences for programs for special populations in the same way. We suggest conducting an [environmental scan](#) of the food- and culinary-education programming in your area. Look for culturally competent organizations whose mission aligns with your institution's and that have registered dietitians and other food educators on staff. An added cost savings with such partnerships is that often the partnering organization will pay their staff members to do outreach, so the library does not always need to provide an honorarium or fee.

Inside the U.S., we recommend connecting with your local [Cooperative Extension](#) office, part of more than 100 land-grant colleges and universities that have a mission to "bring vital, practical information to agricultural producers, small business owners, consumers, families, and young people." Reach out to local hospitals, healthcare providers, and nonprofits that are doing work in food access, food justice, community gardens, nutrition, and health. Outside of the U.S., find out if your local culinary school, college, or university has an office of community outreach or a continuing education department you can partner with. The Culinary Literacy Center has worked with a number of community partners to provide programming, including the following:

- [Oldways](#) – Their A Taste of African Heritage program is one of our most popular series. The success of this free class at the Culinary Literacy Center led to Philadelphia being a hub for this Oldways program, which highlights "a way of eating based on the healthy food traditions of people with African roots."
- [C-CAP](#) – The Careers Through Culinary Arts Program is "a national nonprofit that transforms the lives of disadvantaged youth through the culinary arts and prepares them for college and careers in the restaurant and hospitality industry." Our current kitchen manager is a C-CAP student and graduating high school senior.
- [Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger](#) – This organization "strives to build a community where all people have the food they need to lead healthy lives." The Coalition Against Hunger "connects people with food assistance programs and nutrition education; provides resources to a network of food pantries; and educates the public and policymakers about responsible solutions that prevent people from going hungry." Each year we partner with them to present the [Good Food for All](#) conference.

Programming

We have vibrant and diverse programming at the Culinary Literacy Center, which often focuses on community engagement and civic dialogue, as well as health and nutrition literacy. Our programs fall into two categories: public programs and programs for special populations.

Public Programs

Public programs at the Culinary Literacy Center are open to everyone. They cover a wide range of topics and take on a variety of formats, including cookbook-author events, food photography, cheese tasting, preserving and pickling, butchering demonstration, knife skills, ancient Roman/French/Filipino cuisine, and a culinary seed swap. For a list of current and past Culinary Literacy Center events, [please visit our Eventbrite page](#).

While some classes are free, we charge a fee for a majority of our public programs, ranging from \$5 to \$35. Funds raised through our public programs go directly toward the costs associated with our programs for special populations. In addition to keeping our fees low, we further promote accessibility by reserving a portion of free tickets for low-income Philadelphians who are eligible for the [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program](#) (SNAP). We also offer our colleagues at the Free Library a 50% staff discount for our programs.

We suggest reaching out to your local culinary community to find program ideas and instructors. Ask a local chef to come and lead a class. Email a cookbook author or publisher to schedule an author event. You can also lead programs yourself. Start small. Lead a program on something you know how to do really well in the kitchen, or find a [model of a program online](#) and adapt it for your community.

In addition to one-time programs, the Culinary Literacy Center hosts special events, like our annual conference on food insecurity, [Good Food for All](#). In partnership with the Coalition Against Hunger, we have welcomed truly extraordinary keynote speakers for this conference, including [Linda Tirado](#), [Karen Washington](#), and [Saru Jayaraman](#). As a part of [Archives Month Philly](#), [Food from the Archives](#) gave more than 15 local cultural institutions the opportunity to showcase their food-related objects and materials, which brought more than 200 visitors to learn about food through primary sources.

Programs for Special Populations

Programs for special populations are targeted for specific groups that receive inadequate resources and services in our community. We work with partner organizations that serve these special populations and that are committed to cultural competency, in order to offer programs that effectively deliver services designed to meet the social, cultural, physical, and linguistic needs of all participants. The Culinary Literacy Center's programs for special populations are part of the Free Library's broader [commitment to diversity, equality, and inclusion](#), which builds on a longstanding foundation of libraries as welcoming community spaces. Our current programs for special populations include:

[Nourishing Literacy](#) is our school-visit program, offering students and teachers food-based lessons both in the Culinary Literacy Center and at their school that support classroom curriculum. Nourishing Literacy helps students make deeper connections between cooking, literacy, food, and nutrition. Nourishing Literacy was created by the Culinary Literacy Center and [HoneyPie Cooking](#).

[Edible Alphabet](#) is an English-as-a-second-language course for new Americans that also connects students with the Free Library. Edible Alphabet allows students to improve their English-language and interpersonal skills in a non-traditional classroom space that brings people from all over the globe to the table. The curriculum for Edible Alphabet was created for the Free Library of Philadelphia by [Language ConnectED](#).

[Cookability](#) is a program for people who are visually impaired to learn and share about food and cooking. The Culinary Literacy Center works with a chef instructor, who is himself legally blind, to offer hands-on cooking classes that incorporate adaptive and accessible approaches to buying and growing food and meal preparation for home cooks with limited vision.

[Chow Down on Wellness](#) is a monthly plant-based cooking class for military veterans designed to promote healthy eating habits and teambuilding in a relaxed social atmosphere. Health professionals have found that cooking in a social atmosphere can be therapeutic. This class explores all the health benefits of cooking together.

[Cooking with Confidence](#) is a beginner cooking class designed for adults with disabilities. Participants cook and eat together in a joyful, inclusive kitchen classroom and share in lively conversation around a communal table.

Resources

Books

Brown, Leanne. 2015. [*Good and Cheap: Eat Well on \\$4/Day*](#). * *Good and Cheap* is freely available online as a full-text PDF at leannebrown.com. Additionally, organizations that support people in need are eligible for a [*special bulk discount of \\$5.19 per copy with free shipping*](#).

Cheng, Eugenia. 2016. [*How to Bake \$\pi\$: An Edible Exploration of the Mathematics of Mathematics*](#).

Chevat, Richie, and Michael Pollan. 2015. [*The Omnivore's Dilemma: The Secrets Behind What You Eat*](#).

Elton, Sarah, and Jeff Kulak. 2014. [*Starting from Scratch: What You Should Know About Food and Cooking*](#).

Jayaraman, Sarumathi. 2013. [*Behind the Kitchen Door*](#).

Katzen, Mollie. 1999. [*Pretend Soup*](#).

McCallum, Ann, and Leeza Hernandez. 2011. [*Eat Your Math Homework: Recipes for Hungry Minds*](#).

Menzel, Peter, and Faith D'Aluisio. 2008. [*What the World Eats*](#).

Ruhlman, Michael. 2010. [*Ratio: The Simple Codes Behind the Craft of Everyday Cooking*](#).

Sampson, Sally, and Carl Tremblay. 2013. [*Chopchop: The Kids' Guide to Cooking Real Food with Your Family*](#).

Websites

[ChopChop Kids](#) – an innovative nonprofit organization whose mission is to inspire and teach children and families to cook real food together

[Foodsafety.gov](#) – the gateway to food safety information provided by US government agencies

[Food Safety for the Restaurant Industry](#) – information for businesses from the CDC Foundation

[Foodspan](#) – a free, downloadable high school curriculum that highlights critical issues in the food system and empowers students to be food citizens, developed by the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future

[Four Steps to Food Safety](#) – information for the general public from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

[Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation](#) – an independent population health research center at the University of Washington that provides rigorous and comparable measurement of the world's most important health problems and evaluates the strategies used to address them

[Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity: Data, Trends, and Maps](#) – an interactive database from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that provides information about the health status and behaviors of Americans, state-by-state, via clickable maps, charts, and tables

[ServSafe](#) – food and alcohol safety training and certification exams created by the National Restaurant Foundation

[Science & Cooking](#) – an edX course from Harvard University in which top chefs and Harvard researchers explore how cooking can illuminate basic principles in physics and engineering