What does “a culturally appropriate food” mean?

With elevated participation in backpack programs, there is an increased desire to incorporate more culturally appropriate foods for the participants. However, “culturally appropriate” food items, or those that are most commonly found within a particular culture, are difficult to integrate into programs, such as Three Squares, as many cultures use fresh, whole foods as a basis for their diet. This presents some difficulty when trying to add relevant food choices to the bags provided by Northwest Harvest. In response to this, there needs to be an awareness of individual culture when procuring and distributing donated food items to better compensate for the lack of fresh foods offered. Culture defines social structure, decision-making practices, and communication styles and offers a sense of identity, order, and security. As a powerful symbol of cultural identity, food is more than an object or product to be purchased for routine insertion into daily life. Ethnic groups maintain their cultural identities with their food practices, values, and beliefs and it is hard for people to change this when forced to eat foods outside their cultures as a result of difficult circumstances. The following information is meant as a guideline when purchasing or choosing foods to create meals and menus for backpack programs.

**Culturally specific foods: The following are culturally relevant foods for some of the most predominant cultures encountered at Northwest Harvest.**

**Muslim:** Many of the Muslim faith follow strict dietary practices that guide their daily lives. Islamic, similarly to Judaic, dietary practices are fundamentally about obeying God, not just following a diet. Many strict practicing Muslims believe they obey God by eating allowed foods, also called halal, and avoiding the forbidden foods, called haram. Because of this, it is better to think of foods that are NOT allowed rather than those that are. When possible, while preparing packages or backpacks for Muslim clientele, only foods that are labeled Kosher or Halal should be included. The following are symbols commonly used to denote Kosher and Halal:

![Kosher and Halal symbols](image)

Most commonly seen are the crescent moon M and the circle K or U. The following is a list of foods that are not acceptable according to Muslim tradition:

- Pork, lard or porcine foods
- Non-halal gelatin and other animal derived additives
- Non-halal meats, shellfish, blood or blood products
- Carnivorous animals or birds or prey
- Alcohol
- Non-halal additives such as E numbers like E120, E441, E542 and genetically modified foods are questionable (mashbooh).

Foods that are halal are considered “healthy foods” are chicken, fish, milk, olive oil and honey are highly recommended in Islam. Fish must have scales and cannot be bottom dwellers, such as catfish. Muslims consider their health a religious matter and they believe that good nutrition is one of the essential steps toward maintaining good health.

**Hispanic/Mexican:** The traditional Mexican-American diet is rich in a variety of foods and dishes that represent a blend of pre-Columbian, indigenous, Spanish, French, and more recently, American culture. Traditional diets also reflect the geographic regions of Mexico and the availability of local fruits, vegetables, grains, dairy products, and protein sources. The five staples of most Latin American diets are beans, corn (tortillas), peppers, tomatoes, rice and chilies. Typically, these diets are rich in complex carbohydrates, which are provided mainly by corn and corn products (usually tortillas, present at almost every meal), beans, rice, and breads. This diet also contains an adequate amount of protein in the form of beans, eggs, fish and shellfish, and a variety of meats mostly including pork and poultry (Also beef, ie., fajitas and carne asada). Popular fruits and vegetables are tomatoes, squash, sweet potato, avocado, mango, pineapple and papaya, cilantro, onions, and lime/lemons.

**Eastern European- Ukrainian:** Ukrainian cuisine is based on the plentiful grains and staple vegetables grown in the country. The traditional Ukrainian diet includes chicken, pork, beef, fish and mushrooms. Ukrainians also tend to eat a lot of potatoes, grains, fresh and pickled vegetables. Kasha (steamed buckwheat), barley or millet that is usually eaten as a warm cereal. Popular traditional dishes include varenyky (boiled dumplings with mushrooms, potatoes, sauerkraut, cottage cheese or cherries), borscht (soup made of beets, cabbage and mushrooms or meat) and holubtsy (stuffed cabbage rolls filled with rice, carrots and meat). Many of the staple foods include beets, potatoes, cabbage, mushrooms, millet, barley, buckwheat, wheat, lamb, pork and beef.

**Asian:**

**East Asian (Chinese, Japanese, Korean):** Dietary preferences and choices vary widely given the large geographic range spanning China, Japan, and Korea. Foods consumed on a daily basis are rice (jasmine and short-grained varieties, rice products, noodles (wheat and rice), millet, and other grains. Fresh vegetables such as napa cabbage, daikon radishes, bok choy and other dark leafy greens, bean sprouts, mushrooms, and potatoes are frequently used in East Asian cookery. Garlic, ginger, scallions, sesame, soy sauce all feature prominently in East Asian cuisines. Citrus fruits, lychees, watermelon, peaches, mangos, and other fruit are enjoyed as traditional ends to a meal instead of sugary desserts. Soybeans in the form of tofu and soymilk are popular protein sources in East Asian cuisines. Beef, chicken, fish, and pork are utilized in the diet, often as a flavor addition to a dish rather than the main component of a meal. Dairy items are not commonly used in most traditional Asian diets. Lactose intolerance in adulthood is most prevalent in people of East Asian descent, affecting more than 90 percent of adults in some of these communities. Soymilk or nut milk products are alternative offerings for East Asian clients.

**South Asian/Indian:** As with East Asian cultures, the variety of cuisine differs across the numerous regions in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. Meats such as lamb, goat, fish and chicken are enjoyed by many South Asians across the continent. Many common spices are chili, black pepper, cloves, ginger, turmeric, cardamom, cinnamon, mustard seeds, and cumin.
Dairy in the forms of yogurt, ghee (clarified butter), and milk are highly utilized in South Asian meals and desserts. While those with Hindu beliefs eschew beef products and instead opt for other types of meats, South Asian Muslims embrace Halal beef and do not consume pork products. For religious and/or socio-economic reasons, many South Asians follow a vegetarian diet which focuses on balanced staples such as mung beans (dal), lentils, potatoes, rice (long-grained basmati), millet, and pulses (chickpeas, beans, peas). Cuisine in Southern regions of India focus heavily on vegetables, seafood, chilies, and at times, coconut products.

Southeast Asian (Vietnamese, Cambodian, Burmese, Filipino, Laotian, Indonesian, Thai, Malaysian, Hmong): Foods consumed in Southeast Asian countries differ greatly from those in China, Japan, or Korea. The use of coconut milk and products, fish sauce, chili peppers, lemon grass, galangal, tamarind, and lime separates these cuisines from their northern neighbors. Southeast Asian cuisines often employ fish sauce and galangal instead of the soy sauce and ginger found in East Asian cuisines. Vietnamese meals focus on proteins such as seafood, beef, chicken, tofu, and pork, as well as fresh vegetables such as bean sprouts, herbs, and leafy greens. Curry is often used in Thai, Burmese, Cambodian, and Malaysian cooking. Rice is a main starch, and is used for noodles, cakes, and breads, however, wheat plays a role in Vietnamese cookery (influenced by French colonialism) and is seen in the abundance of wheat breads and noodles. Tempeh, a highly nutritious, protein-packed fermented soybean product, was invented in Indonesia and is eaten by Indonesians in stir-fries and noodle dishes.

African:

The African continent is home to 47 countries and each of these countries has a different food associated with it. However, there are some common foods of African heritage that many share. Traditionally, the various cuisines of Africa use locally available fruits, cereal grains and vegetables as well as milk and meat products.

Central Africa: Some of these countries are DR Congo, Zambia, South Sudan, and Chad. Rice, millet, sorghum, sesame, yam, cassava plants and plantains, are a staple starches of this region. They are often served with grilled meats (chicken/beef) and other dishes made of spinach, tomato, peppers, chilies, rice, onions, okra, onion, garlic, banana and peanuts.

East Africa: The cuisine of East Africa varies from area to area and is distinctive in that meat products are generally absent. Common staples are maize, rice, beef, fish, chilies, tomatoes, coconut, pomegranate, curries, lentils, banana, pineapple, peppers, cabbage, kale and oranges. Common herbs used are saffron, cloves and cinnamon.

Horn of Africa: this is home to countries like Somalia, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. One of the main traditional dishes are stews called ts ebhs (wot) made from chicken, beef, lamb, a variety of vegetables and clarified butter. These are traditionally served with injera or a flatbread made from teff, wheat or sorghum. Staple foods are legumes, lentils, barley and basmati rice. One important thing to be aware of is many people from this part of Africa are Jewish, Muslim or Ethiopian Orthodox and follow dietary restrictions accordingly. This means that most regional food is served halal.
Northern Africa: Countries that lie along the Mediterranean include Morocco, Algeria, Libya and Egypt. The diets here are varied and diverse and include foods such as been, wheat, semolina, couscous, olives, spices, pastries, potatoes, chickpeas tomatoes and zucchini. There is a large use of herbs and spices in this area including saffron, nutmeg, ginger, cloves and cinnamon.

Southern Africa: This part of Africa has a blend of foods that are blended from other cultures such as the many African tribes, European and Asian flavors. Many staples include maize and other whole grains, meat, soured milk products, vegetables and fruit such as apples, grapes, mangoes, bananas, avocados, oranges, peaches and apricots. They also eat seafood such as crayfish, prawns, tuna, mussels, oysters and mackerel.

West Africa: This area includes countries such as Ghana, Togo, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea. The diets are heavy with starchy items such as cassava, sweet potatoes, yams, cocoyams and other root vegetables. Traditional foods include rice, millet, sorghum, groundnuts, peanut butter, black-eyed beans, beef, chicken, mutton, guinea fowl, and eggs.

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