



Local elementary students learn about the nutritional value found in traditional African foods

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A Taste of African Heritage is a six-week course, with each lesson focused on a different part of the African Heritage diet pyramid. In each class, students learn about food, history, heritage and cooking. (File Image)

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CINCINNATI - Students at [Frederick Douglass Elementary School](#) are learning about African heritage and healthy eating through a new after-school cooking class.

The class, which began in January, is crafted around a diet and pyramid created by representatives for the nonprofit food and nutrition education organization Oldways.

"The idea is that we're looking at heritage as a motivator," said Sara Baer-Sinnott, Oldways president. "We have found that when we talk about diets families ate, people get excited."

Ife Bell, community resource coordinator for Frederick Douglass, said A Taste of African Heritage is especially pertinent for students at the school, most of whom are black. She learned of the cooking classes while searching for activities for students in Frederick Douglass Elementary's after-school program.

"I was looking for different opportunities for after-school programming that was healthy, interactive and something the kids would enjoy," said Bell, who teaches cooking. Students in fifth and sixth grade are taking part. (Photo courtesy of Ife Bell).

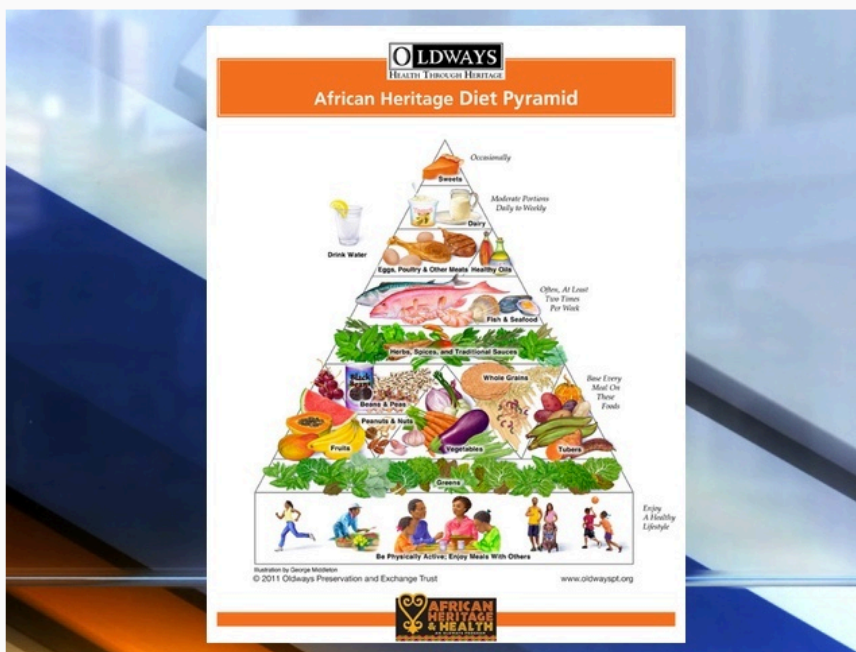


Over the past 23 years, Oldways representatives have created five heritage diets and food pyramids. Introduced in 1993, the Mediterranean pyramid was the first, followed by Asian, Latino and vegetarian and African Heritage pyramids.

"They are all basically the same pattern with different foods," Baer-Sinnott said.

Diet includes "superfoods"

The African Heritage diet and pyramid is the newest Oldways food pyramid. Although it focuses on traditional foods, the pyramid incorporates various cultures that are part of the African Diaspora.



These are people groups with African roots, stemming from the dispersion of Africans during the slave trade. Diaspora cultures include populations in the Caribbean, American South and parts of South America.

The foundation of the African Heritage pyramid is greens, which are inexpensive "superfoods," packed with vitamins A and K, said licensed dietician Cindy Cassell.

The pyramid also includes a strong emphasis on fruits, vegetables, tubers and beans. Because beans are insoluble, they help people fill up without gaining weight. A one-cup serving of beans also offers about 10 grams of protein, Cassell said.

Tackling obesity with familiar foods

In 2012, Oldways representatives launched the organization's first cooking class program, A Taste of African Heritage. After a successful pilot program in 15 locations, it was expanded to include 50 cities in 2013. This year, it is expected to be available in 100 locations.

The program, which is centered around the African Heritage pyramid, is geared toward African-American communities, which tend to be affected by obesity, heart disease and diabetes more than other population groups.

- **MORE: Obesity and African-Americans** (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services)

"These chronic diseases are diseases that can be controlled largely by lifestyle choices," Baer-Sinnott said. "That's a big part of what Oldways is all about: making diet and lifestyle changes."

While African-Americans tend to have a higher rate of obesity than other populations, children are of particular concern.

- **About 35.6 percent, or 500,000, Ohio children between ages 10 and 17 are considered overweight or obese, according to the 2008 Ohio Family Health Survey.**

Reinforcing poor eating habits is one possible factor contributing to high childhood obesity rates. While the foods featured in the African Heritage diet and pyramid are lean sources of vitamins and nutrients, they often are prepared in unhealthy methods.

People may resort to adding sodium or frying green vegetables to mask their bitterness. Other foods, like sweet potatoes, are often prepared using sweetening products, such as syrup, marshmallows and sugar. Incorporating green vegetables into soups, salads or steamed rice and beans can help decrease bitterness without adding salt or oil, Cassell said.

Baking sweet potatoes and adding a small amount of butter are good alternatives to adding sweeteners.

"You have to introduce a food product multiple times (for children)," Cassell said. In fact, some foods need to be introduced as much as 25 to 30 times before children become accustomed to them.

Cook, taste and discuss

A Taste of African Heritage is a six-week course, with each lesson focused on a different part of the African Heritage diet pyramid. In each class, students learn about food, history, heritage and cooking.

"We talk about the foods, their benefits and different ways to cook them," Bell said.

Students also build their reading skills and learn about measurements, patterns and following directions.

During each interactive lesson, students help prepare two to three recipes. In addition to cooking an item centered around a specific food group, Bell's students make a different type of smoothie and hummus each week. After preparing the food, the students sample it.

"No matter how healthy something is, unless people taste it and see how fabulous it is, it's just a theory," Baer-Sinnott said.

At the end of each session, students engage in dialog, sharing thoughts and recommendations.

"The kids are enjoying it," Bell said.

To make the lessons more fun and interactive, Bell added an element: Students end each session by coming up with raps that incorporate their names and information learned during the class.

Going forward

In an effort to continually improve the Taste of African Heritage program, Oldways representatives are monitoring results to track the program's effectiveness. During the first class, instructors do a health assessment by measuring students' weights, blood pressures and waist circumferences. A follow-up assessment comes during the final class, and again 12 weeks after.

After the Frederick Douglass fifth and sixth graders complete the course, the third and fourth grade students will begin.

"It's definitely something we will continue into next year, too," Bell said.

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