Creative Cooking

Skill Builders

1. Become familiar with the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Food Pyramid or Vegetarian Food Pyramid. You can write to the USDA in Washington, D.C., or find this information in a nutrition textbook. See also pages 60-61 in the Cadette Girl Scout Handbook. Compare your own daily diet to the dietary recommendations of the USDA models. Is your diet lacking in some nutrients? If so, what changes would you make?

2. Learn how to make the freshest and most healthful foods at the store—fruits, vegetables, meats, dairy, eggs, prepared foods, etc. Check the labels to find foods that are low in salt, low in fat, and low in chemical additives. Look for color and firmness in fruits and vegetables.

3. Find a food, canned or fresh, that is native to your area. Find out what region of the U.S. or other country it is from, and where and how it is produced. Use this food as an ingredient in the preparation of two different recipes.

4. Go to the cookware section of a store and familiarize yourself with the tools of the trade. When would you use such items as a mortar and pestle, peelers and choppers, masliners and ricer, spatula, and other flippers, knives, food processors, juicers, bread makers, pressure cookers, and various pots and pans? What is the difference in cost of items designed to do the same thing (knives, choppers, and food processors, for example)? Is the extra cost worth it?

5. Choose a recipe that can be prepared while camping or hiking. Include the ingredients and equipment needed to prepare the dish while camping or hiking.

6. Pick a cuisine (Mexican, Caribbean, Indian, vegetarian, etc.) and prepare two meals using recipes that include appetizers, entrees, and desserts. Familiarize yourself with the basic ingredients and seasonings of the cuisine you choose.

7. Adapt a standard recipe for someone with special dietary needs. Include low fat, low salt, low sugar, lactose intolerant, vegetarian, etc.

Technology

1. Look at the technology used in cooking. Examine the advantages and disadvantages of different heat sources: electric, gas stoves, microwave ovens, pressure cookers, grills, crock pots. Name two foods that cook best in each of these.

2. There is a lot of chemistry behind many cooking tips and recipe directions. Questions to consider: What items serve as thickeners in a recipe? Are leavening? What would happen if balking a cake if you left out or changed one ingredient? For instance, lemon juice will curdle milk. Take a recipe and substitute similar ingredients such as curd or instead of raisins, or walnuts instead of almonds. Does the substitution improve the recipe, or not? How about the texture?

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Service Projects

1. Volunteer at a soup kitchen for at least two weeks for several hours a week. Find out how food is prepared and served for a large number of people.

2. Organize a basic cooking class for a community center or homeless shelter with some friends.

3. Organize a food drive for a local shelter. Consult the proper nutritional guidelines or a professional dietitian for a list of recommended foods.

4. Work with a local service that helps provide nutritious meals to people who cannot leave home. Help prepare at least three different meals. Make sure your meals meet the dietary needs of these homebound people.

5. Using the Food Pyramid or other guidelines, evaluate the food service in a local facility you visit (school, camp, or activity center). Discuss your evaluation with the personnel in charge. Offer alternative food suggestions and your reasons for them.

6. Plan a menu for a full, festive meal. Cook and serve it to a group as a celebration of a cultural heritage, a holiday, or other event.

Career Exploration

1. Interview a food critic at your local newspaper. Ask about her experience, education, and work history. Or read several newspaper restaurant reviews. Then, write two reviews of popular restaurants in your area.

2. Find out how institutional cooking differs from restaurant cuisine or home-cooked food. Take a poll in your school cafeteria and ask people what they like/don't like about school lunches. See if you can come up with one or two suggestions based on the poll to improve the choices or quality of the school lunches. Share them with school personnel.

3. Visit a local cooking class or culinary school. Talk to an administrator or instructor about the types of jobs their students are prepared for.

4. Arrange to job-shadow a chef, baker, caterer, pizza maker, etc. Write down the skills and techniques that you've observed, as well as lifestyle pros and cons, for example, flexible hours, late night hours, etc.

5. Get a part-time job in a restaurant or working for a caterer.