

Serving tea at the community kitchen at Bardon, October 1942. State Library of Queensland.
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/statelibraryqueensland/3960299073/>

It's always amazing to me how family memories can be so different. While you may have specific food memories about your grandmother, your cousin's memories offer a different perspective and could add to what you already know. I remember every summer as a child my family would visit my maternal grandmother and stay with her for a few weeks. Inevitably one of the foods we enjoyed while there was watermelon. A cousin later told me that my grandmother had warned him as a small child that if he swallowed any watermelon seeds, the fruit would grow in his stomach. (I believe this was probably an effort on her part to make him behave.) He feared eating watermelon because of the potential fruit that would take over his stomach. Now something as everyday as eating watermelon reminds me of my cousin who grew up believing that he was destined to have a watermelon grow inside of him.

One way to learn more about your family's food history is by asking questions of family members, either informally through an email or more formally as a structured interview. You can contact family members through email correspondence or through social networking sites such as Facebook where you can conduct a private chat or send a private message to a group of family members. Sending a message to a group of people allows family members to read each other's responses, which may help trigger more memories. This is a great way to solicit memories from the younger generations in your family. So what kinds of questions should you ask about food? Well that all depends on what information you want to learn. Do you want to learn about holiday celebrations? Do you want to learn about immigrant foods? Do you want to learn more about what a great-grandmother cooked?

To help you get started with questions to ask, I've included the following interview questions, but don't limit yourself to just these. As the person you are interviewing tells their story, you'll likely think of additional follow-up questions. Don't be afraid to ask these. It's important to see where the interview leads you and not be too rigid. Some questions you can include in your interview are:

Family History and Food

What did you eat as a child?

What did you eat at your grandparent's house?

What did the older people eat in the family (sometimes this can be different than what the children are willing to eat)?

Did you eat anything as a child that your family would not be willing to eat now?

What was your favorite meal growing up?
How did you learn to cook? Who taught you?
What was your first meal that you prepared?
How was food different when you married?
What did your in-laws serve that was different? What were their food traditions?
Was any of the food you ate handed down from immigrant ancestors? If you were the immigrant, then what foods did you continue to prepare once in the United States? What ingredients were difficult to find? Did you change the recipe at all?
Who was the best cook in the family? Why? What did they prepare?
What kinds of desserts did you eat? Did you have a favorite?

Holidays/Special Occasions

What holidays, if any, did your family celebrate?
What was served for holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas?
Did you have any traditional dishes that were served each year?
Did you eat any foods that were not traditional for that holiday?
Who cooked at family gatherings?
Did your family ever host a large gathering like a 25th or 50th wedding anniversary or a wedding?
How was food served differently at a holiday or special occasion than a normal dinner?
What was served at birthday parties?
What occasions did the extended family come together for? Who attended those occasions?
What, if any, were the foods or beverages your family abstained from because of religious beliefs?