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Unique Interactive Web Site Explores the Diverse Food Traditions of America

What does “American Food” really mean? It defies definition except to say that it is what people in America harvest, prepare and eat.

In conjunction with the traveling exhibition “Key Ingredients: America by Food” circulated by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES) and state humanities councils, a new Web site – www.keyingredients.org – explores the staggeringly diverse and constantly evolving food of the United States. There is no one recipe that typifies the American table. Instead, in the same vein of Americans who have borrowed and shared food for centuries, the online educational site offers the public, particularly inhabitants of rural communities, a convenient forum for sharing their recipes, traditions, and family stories.

The site’s “American Cookbook Project” invites people from across the country to share their favorite recipes and memories associated with them by posting their favorite dishes. As a sort of online message board, this section allows culinary enthusiasts, novice cooks, and nostalgic family members alike to contribute and exchange their eclectic and distinctly “American” recipes.



The homepage of the “Key Ingredients” Web site.

Not simply an online catalogue of recipes, the Web site section titled "American Cookbook Project" presents the recipes as part of a larger collection of memories and recollections of great meals from the past, unique to each person, their family, hometown, culture and ethnicity. In addition to posting family and food stories, visitors learn about other food traditions and identify favorite small town eateries. In the section titled "Eating Across America" there is space for the 150 exhibition host communities to highlight their favorite

restaurants, festivals and markets. The section "500 Years of American Food" explores the rich diversity of American food culture by time period, theme and region.

Designed to expand exponentially over the next few years, the Web site caters to the rural communities who will host the traveling exhibition "Key Ingredients." The newest exhibition from Museum on Main Street, a partnership between SITES and state humanities councils, "Key Ingredients" is currently on view in Utah and Illinois and will travel to 150 small museums and cultural organizations through 2008.

Through a selection of artifacts, photographs and illustrations, "Key Ingredients" examines how culture, ethnicity, class, landscape and tradition influence the foods and flavors we enjoy across the nation. The exhibition also looks at the evolution of the American kitchen and how food industries have responded to the technological innovations that have enabled Americans to choose an ever-wider variety of frozen, prepared and fresh foods. "Key Ingredients" also addresses the entrepreneurial spirit on which many food production companies are based, such as food pioneers Heinz, Campbell and Borden.

The exhibition is part of the Museum on Main Street, which serves museums, libraries and historical societies in rural America. The SITES-Federation of State Humanities Councils partnership, established in 1991, was formed as a creative response to the challenges faced by rural museums to enhance their own cultural legacies.

The Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES) has been sharing the wealth of Smithsonian collections and research programs with millions of people outside Washington, D.C., for more than 50 years. SITES connects Americans to their shared cultural heritage through a wide range of exhibitions about art, science, and history, which are shown wherever people live, work and play, including museums, libraries, science centers, historical societies, community centers, botanical gardens, schools and shopping malls. Exhibition descriptions and tour schedules are available at www.sites.si.edu.