

Department of Family Development  
Research Brief  
October, 2008

### Hmong Cookbook Project

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#### Abstract:

To improve understanding about Hmong dietary practices, strengthen intercultural communication, and assist local food producers, Eau Claire County UW-Extension Family Living partnered with non-profits, universities, and community members in Western Wisconsin to create a Hmong cookbook. It is one of the few Hmong cookbooks ever produced and it includes cultural information and nutritional analysis. Using participatory research methods, the editors worked with local Hmong women and men to record the recipes and share culinary techniques, beliefs and practices. Knowledge gained from this project may inform educators about Hmong American dietary practices and food customs. All proceeds from the sale of cookbooks will be pooled to support future duplication of the cookbook, as well as providing entrepreneurship grants to members of the Hmong community.

Cookbook Information: <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cty/eauclaire/index.html>

## **Hmong Cookbook Project**

### **Situation Statement**

Assimilation into the mainstream American lifestyle is associated with overweight, obesity, and increased risk of chronic diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease. These lifestyle-related diseases are soaring in Hmong immigrant communities across the United States, but it is challenging to find current educational materials that might easily be adapted by educators or health practitioners working with Hmong families on health-related topics.<sup>1</sup> Intervention and education programs are more effective and relevant if they are based on a current understanding of the continuum of food patterns, cultural practices and beliefs of the target community. The only on-line Extension fact sheet about Hmong food culture is from The Ohio State University and it appears outdated. It was likely developed as a provisional cross-cultural teaching tool when Hmong refugees first immigrated to communities in the mid-west.<sup>2</sup>

Preservation of culinary culture becomes important as well. Food traditions such as consumption of vegetables and fruits may be lost to younger generations because most culinary knowledge and heritage is passed along orally in Hmong American communities. Formal education and the written word are the primary means for cultural transmission and preservation in Western societies. Several Hmong cookbooks have been developed but they are out of print and they contain little or no culinary history or nutritional analysis (New Citizen's Garden Project 1985, Cookbook: Phau Ntawv Qhia Ua Joj, 1996).

### **Project Objectives**

The Hmong Cookbook Project is a collaboration of partners from the non-profit community and University of Wisconsin System who share common interests in Hmong American nutritional health, family strengthening and agriculture. Partners identified three collective goals: 1) increase awareness and maintenance of Hmong American culture and heritage; 2) increase knowledge of Hmong American dietary practices; and 3) increase the sale of vegetables, including Asian vegetables, marketed by Hmong vendors at the local farmers' market. The target audience for the cookbook includes both Hmong and non-Hmong culinary enthusiasts, as well as educators who work with Hmong families.

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<sup>1</sup> Joanne Ikeda, Cooperative Extension, University of California Berkeley has studied the food habits of Hmong living in Central California. Her recommendations focus on the nutrition management of diabetes and its implications for meal plans for Hmong Americans. Her findings were published in book and article form in 1991 and a second edition of the book was released in 1999.

<sup>2</sup> See Ohio State University Fact Sheet HYG-5254-95, written by Deidre Betancourt: Cultural Diversity: Eating in America—Hmong. Original date of publication unspecified.

## **Methodology**

Project researchers sought to use participatory research methods to gain knowledge and develop a meaningful product that was constructive and collaborative. A cookbook with cultural information and nutritional analysis met all three project goals. Project staff agreed that the profits from the sale of the cookbook would help support grants and scholarships in the Hmong community.

The project team included a bilingual Hmong professional who was working to assist local Hmong farmers. Kong Vang was the Agricultural Coordinator for a local Community Action Program, Western Dairyland, and he arranged interview/cooking sessions with each cook and he designed the graphics for the cookbook. Team members from UW-Extension Eau Claire County included Nancy Coffey, Wisconsin Nutrition Education Program Coordinator, and Julie Keown-Bomar, a Family Living Educator and an anthropologist with a background in Hmong studies. Contributing cooks included Hmong men and women from the Chippewa Valley of varying ages and backgrounds recruited because of their interest in cooking and one non-Hmong author who had published several Hmong recipes in Wisconsin magazines.

Using ethnographic methods, project researchers collected data for the cookbook. They sought secondary and first hand information about Hmong American food practices and were participant observers in each recipe session conducted in the Extension office kitchen or in the homes of the contributing chefs. Each person prepared a dish of their choice. Amounts of each recipe item were measured and preparation steps were recorded. While participating in the cooking, researchers asked specific questions about cultural food habits, preparation techniques, family food beliefs and changing food practices.

The project benefited from community and university expertise. Tanya Becker, a graduate student in the dietary program at UW-Stout conducted nutrient analysis (using Food Processor 6.0). Students in the food technology program at UW-Stout took professional photographs of the foods. Traditional Hmong textile art designs (*Paj ntau* or *Paj ntaub*) were incorporated by Kong Vang to complete the graphic design of the cookbook. A Hmong elder helped translate the name of each dish into both social dialects of Hmong (green and white Hmong). A UW-Extension Western District Innovative grant financed the first printing of the cookbook.

## **Results**

Featured recipes contain fewer vegetables and higher fat and carbohydrate content than Extension researchers predicted. Generalizations about Hmong dietary practices should not be made on the basis of this cookbook because many of the dishes are community favorites. Everyday food choices are still not well understood by Extension researchers. Nutrition educators working with Hmong audiences are advised to ask questions about everyday patterns and be

prepared for important variations within the group and particularly between generations.

Participants discussed changes in dietary practices as a result of immigration, work patterns, and increasing financial wealth. Growing Hmong American prosperity and adaptation to American society has influenced food and physical activity patterns. Participating cooks noticed increasing consumption of meat and rich foods and less physical activity in the Hmong community. Celebratory foods that may be eaten only occasionally in the past were being consumed more often. If main dishes like those featured in the cookbook are frequently consumed by individuals with diabetes or heart disease, educators may want to help clients understand which kinds of foods, including Hmong food options, would be better nutritional choices given their individual health concerns.

Participants shared current information about cultural perceptions of obesity, celebratory foods, food taboos and rituals. Much of this information has been documented in the introductory portion of the cookbook.

### **Recommendations and Implications**

The first goal of the project has been met—food heritage has been recorded and is in the process of being widely distributed through Hmong and mainstream marketing and media outlets, Extension offices, and web-based marketing channels. The cookbook project has contributed to the body of knowledge about Hmong American food practices, nutritional analysis of well-known dishes, and food preparation techniques. Extension researchers do not believe they have an adequate understanding of everyday food practices from this research project and they would urge others working with Hmong Americans to incorporate food recall exercises and inquire about each individual's dietary choices. Educators' assumptions may be very incorrect and therefore their nutritional or health recommendations misguided. More studies of Hmong-American daily food habits and intergenerational dietary and lifestyle differences are warranted.

It is too soon to tell if the cookbook will help promote the sale of vegetables in regional farmers' markets. In the next growing season, Extension staff will vigorously promote the sale of the cookbook at local markets. Some of the recipes call for vegetables, herbs and Asian cooking ingredients that are unfamiliar to many non-Hmong palates. Researchers hope that as a result of the cookbook, Hmong farmers will be able to sell more Asian eggplant, bitter melon, lemongrass, and yard long beans.

### **References:**

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### **Acknowledgements**

The cookbook could not have been created without the talent and hard work of many devoted individuals. The editors would like to extend special thanks to the following talented individuals and organizations:

Leah Rekau  
Mai Pang Lee  
Tanya Becker

Nicole Jackson  
Martin Springer  
Johnson Lithographics