



SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2025.** Please include this submission form as the first page of your electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).

PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Henrico County

Program Title: Cook & Book

Program Category: Community Development, Economic Development, & Land Use

CONTACT INFORMATION

Name: Angela Bennett

Title: Assistant Library Director

Department: Library

Telephone: 804-501-1902

Website: https://henrico.gov/

Email: nacovacoawards@henrico.gov

SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Monica Smith-Callahan

Title: Deputy County Manager for Community Affairs

Signature:

Program Overview

In winter 2017, Henrico County Public Library (HCPL) held its first program mixing cooking and literacy. By 2019, Cook & Book was created as an ongoing series of monthly programs that continues to this day.

Cook & Book connects the local community through food and reading while opening the doors to local businesses to share new recipes and food. Local chefs introduce new foods and kitchen techniques, while the library provides related books, cookbooks, and other resources. Cook & Book engages library users of all ages to learn and experience a variety of cuisines. It also encourages culinary creativity through different cultural expressions, supporting increased diversity and inclusive programming.

Food has a way of bringing people together, and the Cook & Book program is no exception. The program provides residents of all ages opportunities to expand their horizons by sampling new foods, building kitchen skills, exploring creativity, and boosting confidence. With a welcoming setting and a learning environment promoting open discussion and socializing, Cook & Book has consistently resulted in high attendance and participation. More than 1,100 attendees have enjoyed a Cook & Book at Varina Library.

Problem/Challenge/Situation Faced by Locality

Henrico County's Varina District is a rural area poised for growth. Farms dot the open expanses, and the James River cuts through the landscape. The area is approximately 126 square miles, making it the largest of the Henrico magisterial districts and twice the acreage of the nearby City of Richmond.

Because of available land, recent economic investments, and proximity to major highways, Varina is poised for growth. As the population grows and diversifies, there is a great need to bring people together to strengthen the sense of community. The challenge is to provide relationship-building opportunities allowing those who currently live in Varina to meet new people, while helping newcomers of different backgrounds assimilate and thrive in the region. Another challenge is that the rural nature of Varina has contributed to socioeconomic disparities, with a lower per capita income and higher poverty level than the Henrico County average. Although growth is happening and with it, business opportunities, it is difficult for entrepreneurs to establish themselves and publicize their offerings. For instance, except for several chain restaurants, ironically, in this farming community, there are very few locally owned eateries. In anticipation of future growth, the Varina Area Library was built in 2016. Leveraging its power to bring people together, the Varina Library whipped up the Cook & Book series to strengthen the sense of community and empower economic development.

How The Program Fulfilled Award Criteria

Cook & Book offers a recipe for success by offering innovative approaches through collaboration. The program partners with other Henrico County departments, such as the Henrico County Extension, and other organizations, such as the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, as well as local businesses. The result is a stronger community and support for entrepreneurs and the local economy. The model can be easily replicated and is scalable. Other localities and libraries could easily replicate this approach and adjust it to their communities. For those without a demonstration kitchen, a cooking cart with hot plates would be low low-investment alternative.

How The Program Was Carried Out

The Varina Area Library is equipped with a demonstration kitchen and technology that lends itself to easy viewing of chefs at work. Not long after the library opened in 2016, Cook & Book was conceived in 2017 and to this day continues to be a quintessential part of Varina Area Library's programming menu. Cook & Book promotes culturally diverse programming, highlights local chefs and small businesses, and also provides a space for HCPL staff to share their culture within our communities. This is a diverse intergenerational programming effort that showcases the demonstration kitchen at the Varina Area Library and promotes community engagement through culinary exploration and an appreciation of literature. In this space, attendees can connect socially and share their enjoyment of reading and cooking.

Planning for the Cook & Book Program includes celebrating commemorative months, understanding local interest, and researching popular trends in cooking, with book and informational tie-ins. This program design reaches community members of diverse ages and backgrounds, paying special attention to ensuring the environment is welcoming for all. The Varina Area Library team works diligently to bring desired Cook & Book programming themes to encourage community participation and learning. An example would be during Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month (AAPI), HCPL partnered with the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts' statewide programming department to host a Chinese Cuisine dumpling-making program tied into the year's All Henrico Reads book, *The Many Daughters of Afong Moy* by Jamie Ford.

HCPL has a six-month planning window that allows for coordination with community partners and alignment with the theme of the season and literary tie-ins. Within the six-month planning

timeframe, promotions include online calendar entries, flyers, program guide distribution, and social media and blog posts. The timing of promotional efforts allows the presenters to cross-promote the program to their networks, increasing the reach of all promotional materials. The final part of the promotional process is HCPL's staff sharing about upcoming program offerings with the public in their day-to-day services.

In part due to promotional efforts, community interest, and the versatility of the Cook & Book Programs, there has been a consistently high turnout of community members seeking the next best recipe, a new culinary skill, and a good book. The momentum continued even through the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, when Cook & Book transitioned to an online format that kept the same vibrancy using WebEx to share recipes, cooking demonstrations, and supportive reading materials. This program speaks to the "every day" family and lifelong learners who want to learn everything from quick meal hacks for weekly meal planning to prepping school lunches for kids. Topics run the gamut from summer salads to lobster and cake pops to favorite donuts. The program speaks to the needs and wants of the community by integrating books with food and sharing kitchen tips and tricks in a welcoming setting. With the support of the Friends of the Library, Varina Area Library staff have built relationships by creating an open dialogue about cultural expression through food.

Financing and Staffing

Cook & Book is a relatively low-cost endeavor. Cook & Book is easy to scale up or down to replicate elsewhere according to the size of the library system and promotional goals.

Varina Area Library has a built-in kitchen as part of its meeting room. Costs for hosting have ranged from \$14 to \$250, based on the presenter and materials needed. Cook & Book has proven

so successful that the idea has been modified for implementation at another Henrico library, the Fairfield Library. Although this location does not have a built-in kitchen, the plan is to use a cooking cart with hot plates, a low-cost alternative that almost anyone could use. The program can also be hosted virtually from a local kitchen or mobile kitchen. Promotional materials have been created and printed in-house, so there is no extra cost for the promotion of the program.

Program Results

Cook & Book has grown to become one of Varina Area Library's signature programs, averaging 15-20 attendees per event, and up to 40 on some occasions. Registration is not required. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, community members faithfully attended these programs virtually. Since its inception in 2017, more than 1,100 people have participated in the Varina Area Library's Cook & Book. The program has built community as people have started recognizing each other and building relationships.

Cook & Book has also provided a platform to shine a light on local entrepreneurs, chefs, and restaurants. One of the first participants was Ronnie's BBQ. The restaurant is near the library, and Ronnie has returned to do programs on several occasions, helping to get the word out about his establishment. Ronnie recently won a national BBQ award, and at one of his library programs, Ronnie gave out samples of his rub.

Chef Charles of BlackFolkFood has presented on Black Southern cuisine and how to prepare in a heart healthy way. This program not only tied in with Black History Month and celebrated the history of the region, it also promoted healthy lifestyles for residents. In some cases, Cook & Book goes full-circle: for instance, one time a young entrepreneur used the digital media lab to

take photos of her product—cupcakes. The library staff noticed and asked her to come back and do a Cook & Book program.

Executive Summary

Cook & Book is a successful Henrico Library program that began in 2017 and continues to this day. The program offers an innovative way to strengthen the community and support local businesses as a locality becomes less rural. Cook & Book fosters relationship-building by promoting intergovernmental cooperation with other County departments, community organizations, and local businesses and entrepreneurs. By connecting books and reading with demonstrations around food and cooking techniques, Cook & Book has resulted in more than 1,117 residents meeting their neighbors, learning about nearby businesses, and connecting with the library. The result has been a strengthened sense of community and empowered economic development. Best of all, Cook & Book is easily replicable and scalable. It can be adapted to a locality's specific needs as a recipe for success.

Cook & Book Series



ADULT

Cook & Book: Southern Chinese:

A Conversation and
Demonstration

March 6
Monday 7:00PM

Chef Will Leung-Richardson's cuisine ([Kudzu](#), [RVA](#) and [Choy Sun BBQ](#)) combines his Chinese heritage and Virginia roots. He'll talk about his immigrant experience, and cook a dish or two in our demonstration kitchen.



ADULT

Cook & Book: Soul Food with Chef Charles

February 27
Monday 7:00PM

Finish Black History Month with a flourish as we welcome back Chef Charles of [Blackfolkfood](#). He brings his classical training to the preparation of the cuisine of Black Southerners.



ADULT

Cook & Book Kibbeh & Kanafa

April 25
Mon 7-8 PM

Close out Arab American Heritage Month with a sampling of savory and sweet dishes from the Levant



Images from Cook & Book
series programs