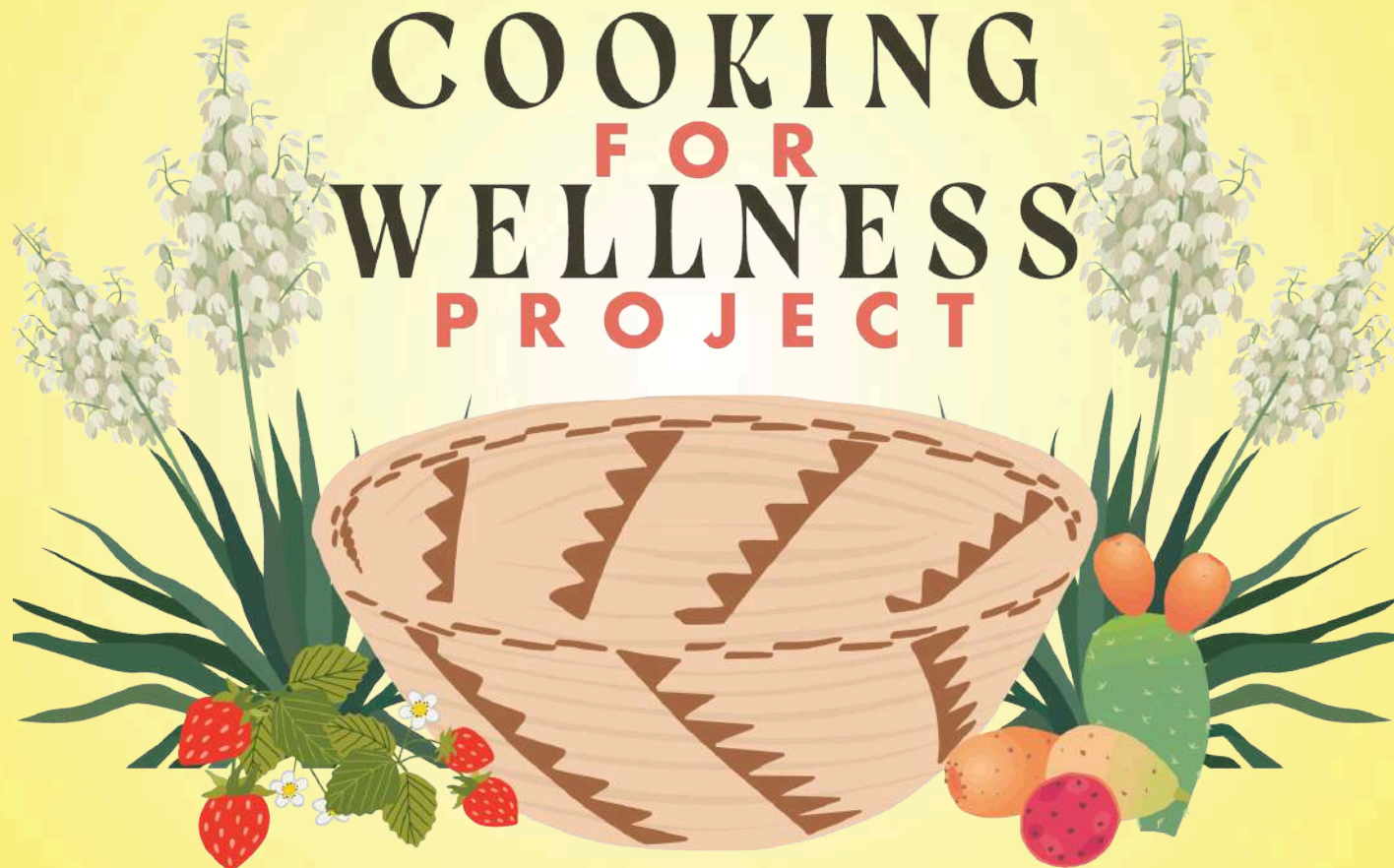


# LOS ANGELES COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH

The American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) Underserved  
Cultural Communities (UsCC) subcommittee

## COOKING FOR WELLNESS PROJECT



# 2025 SUMMARY REPORT

BY SO'OH-SHINÁLÍ SISTER PROJECT



LOS ANGELES COUNTY  
DEPARTMENT OF  
MENTAL HEALTH  
hope. recovery. wellbeing.

# Project Background

The **Cooking for Wellness Project** (CFWP) was created to support American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) community members living in Los Angeles (LA) County by promoting mental health services, reducing stigma, and strengthening the capacity of the public mental health system. A key aim of the project was to increase community engagement in the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health (LACDMH) stakeholder process, ensuring that AI/AN voices are included in shaping culturally appropriate services and policies.

To achieve these goals, the project incorporated traditional approaches to nutritional and emotional wellness — such as cooking and community talking circles — as tools for fostering connection and improving overall health and mental health outcomes across generations. These gatherings created safe, supportive spaces where participants could engage with culturally relevant practices and strengthen community bonds.

As part of this initiative, the **Cooking for Wellness Cookbook** was developed to preserve and share the recipes featured in community cooking classes. In addition to showcasing Indigenous foods and preparation techniques, the cookbook includes resources focused on nutrition, mental health, and physical wellness, further supporting participants on their healing and wellness journeys.

The project and its curriculum were grounded in the 4 R's of Indigenous core values: **Respect, Reciprocity, Relationships, and Responsibility**. These guiding principles informed every aspect of the program — from the creation of culturally rooted content to the way facilitators engaged with participants — ensuring that Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of being were honored throughout.

# Project Background

The **Cooking for Wellness** curriculum aims to cultivate healing, resilience, and a deeper sense of connection within the community. Participants explore the profound relationship between food, the land, and overall well-being — mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual.

Culturally responsive mental health presentations help to normalize discussing mental health challenges, recognize signs and symptoms, increase awareness of available resources, and provide space to strengthen family and community ties. The program also prioritizes resource sharing by connecting participants with Native community-based organizations, private therapy practices, and county and state-level mental health services.

Cooking is presented not only as a practical skill but also as a form of self-care and a powerful coping mechanism. Through intentional food preparation and reconnection with traditional foods and plants, participants learn to process emotions and manage stress in culturally meaningful ways.

Mindfulness is woven throughout the curriculum, encouraging participants to be fully present by engaging all five senses — hearing, touch, taste, smell, and sight — while cooking. These mindful cooking practices emphasize the energy and intention behind preparing food, reinforcing its role in nurturing self, family, and community.

Together, these components offer community members an opportunity to explore cooking as a pathway to mental wellness and to embrace its deeply interconnected role in supporting physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being.



# Programmatic Overview

## Balanced Minds, Nourished Bodies: Mental Wellness Cooking Class for Native College Students

**Cooking for Wellness** is a series of six in-person Indigenous cooking events throughout Los Angeles County. Event one was **Balanced Minds, Nourished Bodies: Mental Wellness Cooking Class for Native College Students**, with a total of 16 Indigenous college students taking place at El Sereno Community Garden. Participants started off with a plant identification scavenger hunt, with the first place winner taking home a copy of Sara Calvosa Olson's *Chími Nu'am: Native California Foodways for the Contemporary Kitchen* provided by our facilitator, Marcus Osorio (Salvadoran/Cherokee/Sac & Fox). During the cooking class, participants created Tetelas de Granja, a Oaxacan traditional street food.

After participants ate a catered, nutrient-dense lunch, they participated in a Native student mental health talking circle created by Monique Castro (Diné), Founder and CEO of Indigenous Circle of Wellness. The talking circle focused on discussing signs and symptoms of mental health, providing resources to reduce barriers and stigma, along with coping skills students can use to support their mental health throughout their educational career and beyond.





# LACDMH Cooking for Wellness Project 2024-2025

## Balanced Minds, Nourished Bodies: Mental Wellness Cooking Class for Native College Students



Scan the QR code to access the Instagram  
reel for our Cooking for Wellness Gathering  
1 Recap Video

# Programmatic Overview

## Healing Through Heritage: Mental Wellness Cooking Class for Native Elders

Our second gathering was **Healing Through Heritage: Mental Wellness Cooking Class for Native Elders**. This gathering had a total number of 26 participants, over the originally anticipated amount of 20 individuals. This gathering was held at United American Indian Involvement (UAI) in Echo Park and facilitated by Analisa Rockbridge (Diné). Participants prepared Three Sisters Stew, a popular Native American dish using three ingredients: beans, squash, and corn.

Elders participated by chopping and roasting the vegetables, using directions created by the facilitator to make the process accessible. An example was learning how to grate garlic for a recipe and preventing arthritis flare-ups. Once the stew was finished, elders were served and participated in a talking circle with Indigenous Circle of Wellness therapist, Kylee Jones (LCSW).





# LACDMH Cooking for Wellness Project 2024-2025

## Healing Through Heritage: Mental Wellness Cooking Class for Native Elders





# Programmatic Overview

## Seven Generations Harvest: Mental Wellness Cooking Class for Native Families

**Seven Generations Harvest: Mental Wellness Cooking Class for Native Families** was our third gathering, held at The Grand Annex and The Feed and Be Fed Community Garden in San Pedro, CA, with 20 participants from nine Native families. Facilitator Pyet DeSpain (Potawatomi and Mexican) led a plant identification walk in the community garden, encouraging mindfulness, seasonal cooking, and connection to the land. Families engaged in open dialogue with Pyet and garden staff as they explored the space. Back at the main venue, Pyet led a hands-on cooking class featuring guacamole and salsa prepared with a molcajete, a traditional Indigenous tool. Participants of all ages collaborated in seasoning the molcajete and preparing ingredients, fostering intergenerational learning.

The event concluded with a mental health talking circle, facilitated by Stephanie Mushrush (Washoe Tribe of NV & CA; Filipina), LCSW. This created a space for reflection and community healing as she led folks through a medicine wheel exercise to support balance and provide folks with coping skills they can lean on when experiencing mental health struggles.





# LACDMH Cooking for Wellness Campaign 2024-2025

## Seven Generations Harvest: Mental Wellness Cooking Class for Native Families



*Scan the QR code to access the Instagram  
reel for our Cooking for Wellness Gathering  
3 Recap Video*

# Programmatic Overview

## Rising Spirits: Baking Up Wellness for Native Youth

***Rising Spirits: Baking Up Wellness for Native Youth*** was our fourth event hosted at Live Oak Park Community Center in Temple City with 15 participants in attendance. Native youth took part in a hands-on baking class to make blue corn cupcakes, facilitated by Annette Phoenix (Tohono O'odham). Blue corn, a cherished ingredient in many Southwest Native communities, is rich in iron, magnesium, and antioxidants, and has a lower glycemic index. Youth worked in small groups of 2-3 to bake and decorate a dozen cupcakes each. Annette shared the cultural significance of blue corn and emphasized the importance of preparing traditional foods. Annette guided participants through key baking skills, including proper measuring techniques and maintaining cleanliness throughout each step.

Once the cupcakes were ready, the youth decorated them with fresh berries and piñon nuts. Following the baking session, participants gathered in a talking circle facilitated by Stephanie Mushrush (LCSW). The circle focused on identifying signs and symptoms of mental health challenges that may be more relatable for youth, practicing mindfulness using the five senses, accessing available mental health resources, and fostering community connection through the discussion of positive coping skills.





# LACDMH Cooking for Wellness Project 2024-2025

## Rising Spirits: Baking Up Wellness for Native Youth



# Programmatic Overview

## Leaning in Love: Mental Wellness Cooking Class for Native Couples

***Leaning in Love: Mental Wellness Cooking Class for Native Couples*** was our second-to-last gathering, hosted at LA Cocina de Gloria Molina — a culinary teaching kitchen and extension of LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes, nestled in Downtown Los Angeles. This event was designed for Native couples and curated to feel like a date-night experience, especially since it took place over Valentine's weekend. After arriving, couples participated in a cooking class led by Analisa Rockbridge (Diné).

Throughout the session, Analisa emphasized how cooking for one another can be a meaningful way to express love and care. She also introduced positive communication skills to help strengthen relationships. Each couple prepared a personalized mesquite-dough pizza for their partner, applying the lessons in a hands-on, engaging way. Mesquite flour, a traditional food of Southern California Tribes, is rich in calcium and magnesium and has a low glycemic index.

Once the pizzas were baked and enjoyed for lunch, participants transitioned into the mental wellness portion of the event. The talking circle was facilitated by Kylee Jones (LCSW), who was joined by her husband as a guest. Kylee spoke about the connection between nutrition and mental health, how to recognize signs and symptoms of mental health challenges, ways couples can support one another, and how to access mental health services in Los Angeles County.



*Scan the QR code to access the Instagram reel for our Cooking for Wellness Gathering 5 Recap Video*



# LACDMH Cooking for Wellness Project 2024-2025

## Leaning in Love: Mental Wellness Cooking Class for Native Couples





# Programmatic Overview

## Sacred Sustenance: Indigiqueer Mental Wellness Cooking Class

**Sacred Sustenance: Indigiqueer Mental Wellness Cooking Class** was our final event, held at the Julia McNeill Senior Center in Baldwin Park. This gathering centered Indigiqueer and 2SLGBTQIA+ community members, many of whom attended with partners, relatives, or chosen family.

The event was facilitated by Marcus Osorio (Salvadoran, Cherokee, Sac & Fox), who identifies as queer. To open the gathering, Marcus led a farm produce game designed to foster connection and build community. Participants paired up with someone they didn't know and worked together to identify 10 different plants. The winning pair received a cookbook as a gift from Marcus, similar to gathering 1.

Following the game, participants moved into a hands-on Salvadoran pupusa cooking class. Using blue corn masa, community members created pupusas with customizable fillings, including locally sourced vegetables, meat, and Indigenous ingredients.

The event concluded with a talking circle facilitated by Stephanie Mushrush (LCSW). The circle focused on strengthening connections within the Indigiqueer community and incorporating the medicine wheel into daily life. Stephanie also spoke about recognizing signs and symptoms of mental health challenges, the connection between our nutrition and mental health, using our five senses to practice mindfulness, and shared resources to support community wellness.



# LACDMH Cooking for Wellness Project 2024-2025

## Sacred Sustenance: Indigiqueer Mental Wellness Cooking Class





# LACDMH Cooking for Wellness Project 2024-2025

## Cooking for Wellness Project Cookbook

As part of our project, we collaborated with a graphic designer to develop the Cooking for Wellness Cookbook. This cookbook features recipes from all six of our community mental health cooking classes, including Tetelas, Three Sisters Stew (**see Figure 1**), Blue Corn Cupcakes, and more. It also includes a special section highlighting the incredible Native chefs who contributed to the series. Each chef participated in a Q&A focused on the relationship between traditional foods and mental wellness. **Figure 2** provides an example of a Chef Spotlight page featured in the cookbook.

In addition to recipes and chef highlights, the cookbook also captures key elements of our in-person mental health cooking classes through photos and video. It features Native food vendors, physical wellness resources including movement videos from Well for Culture, and self-care practices supported by video content from The Native Plants and Foods Institute's *Plant Teachings for Growing Social-Emotional Skills Toolkit*.

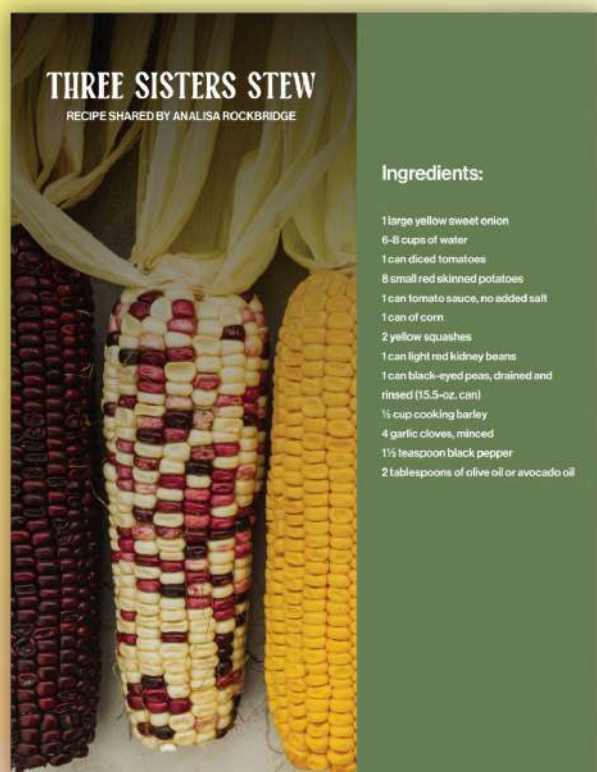


Figure 1



Figure 2



# Outreach and Engagement

## Promotional Materials

In designing our project logo and promotional materials, we collaborated with an AI/AN graphic designer to create artwork that is both culturally resonant and reflective of our core values around cultural and nutritional wellness.

The centerpiece of the design is a Southern California Indian-style coil basket, symbolizing tradition, community, and resilience as seen below in **Figure 3**.

Surrounding the basket are Native plants and traditional foods such as Yucca, California Strawberry, Prickly Pear, and Nopal — each chosen for its cultural significance and connection to wellness. A traditional Tongva-style chia seed beater is also featured, layered with a vibrant purple chia plant to honor local Indigenous knowledge and the role of ancestral foods in community health. Together, these elements create a powerful visual that grounds our project in culture, place, and nourishment.

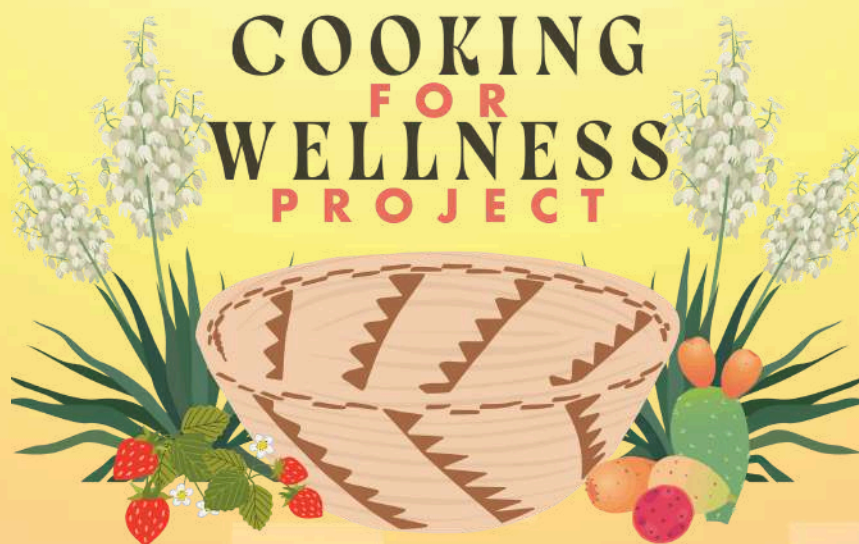


Figure 3

# LACDMH Cooking for Wellness Project 2024-2025

## Promotional Materials

To promote our Cooking for Wellness events, our team developed a postcard flyer that provided an overview of all upcoming gatherings seen in **Figure 4** and **Figure 4.1**. These were mailed out to key Indigenous community organizations, including United American Indian Involvement, American Indian Counseling Center, The Chapter House, Wombat Mental Health Services, and others. This low-cost outreach strategy proved effective in distributing our save-the-date to a broad network of trusted community partners.



Figure 4



Figure 4.1



# LACDMH Cooking for Wellness Project 2024-2025

## Promotional Materials

In addition to mailing flyers, we actively participated in several tabling opportunities, where we handed out flyers directly to community members and offered on-site registration assistance. We leveraged our growing social media presence and newsletter subscriber list to share program details with our Los Angeles community.

Additionally, we also utilized collaborator posts with our facilitators like Indigenous Circle of Wellness who have 16.1K followers on Instagram which helped us expand our reach. **Figure 5** below is an example of a collaboration Instagram post for our Leaning in Love: Mental Wellness Cooking Class for Native Couples, wherein the RSVP list filled up in less than two days.

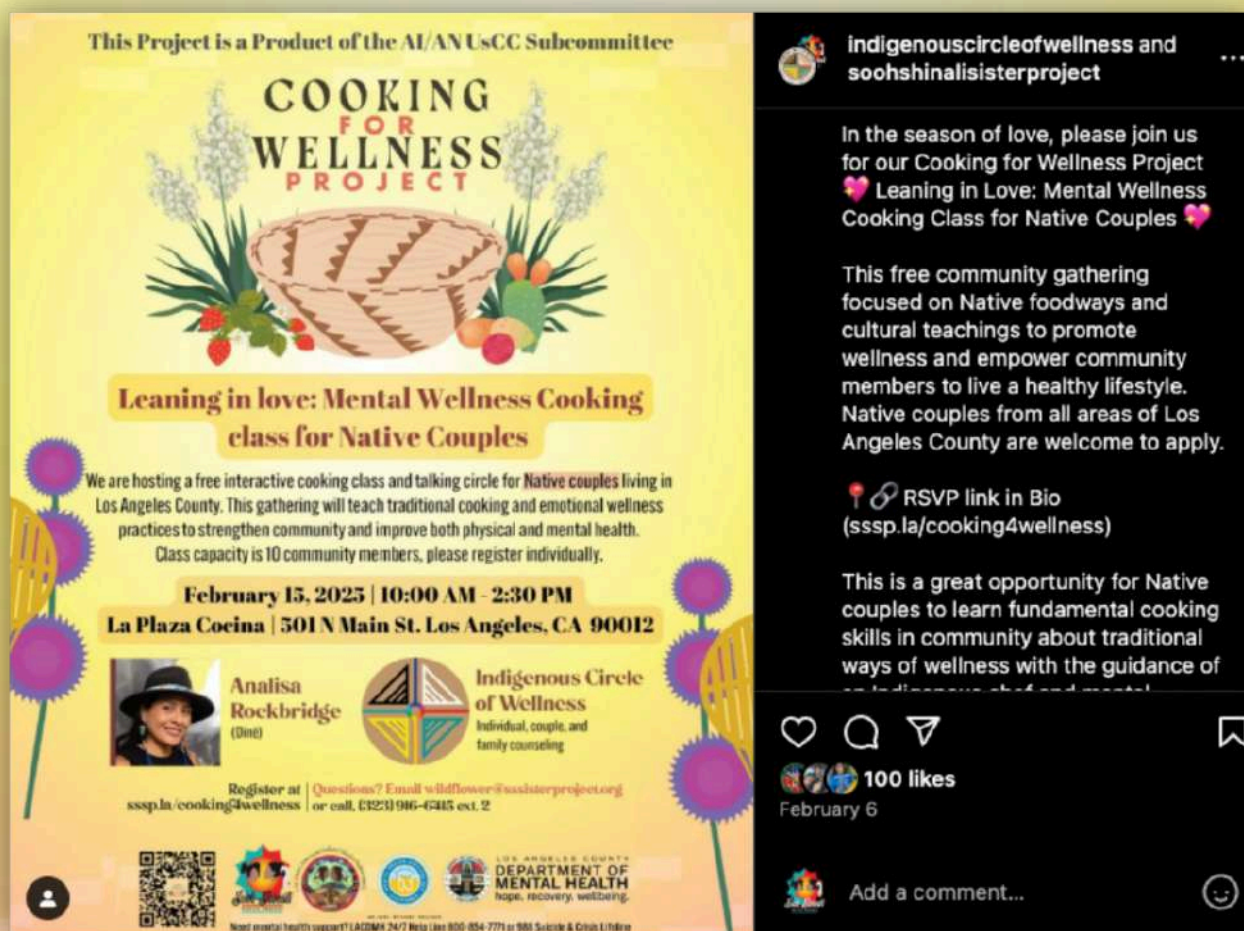


Figure 5

# LACDMH Cooking for Wellness Project 2024-2025

## Promotional Materials

Our multifaceted outreach approach led to overwhelming interest — each event reached capacity within two days of registration opening, with some filling up within just 24 hours. Across the series, we welcomed a total of 122 participants, with 86 unique individuals joining us, surpassing our original goal of 60 by 26 attendees. Many participants returned for multiple events, reflecting the meaningful impact of the series and consistently highlighted the healing nature of the space and expressed strong interest in continuing the *Cooking for Wellness* series in the future.

## Project Results and Outcome

### Registration and Attendance

*The Cooking for Wellness Project* had a total of 144 registrations across gatherings 1-6. Due to the limited capacity of each cooking class, we had to waitlist some folks for each session, and engaged a total of 122 attendees, with 86 unique participants.

Of the six workshops, the participant breakdown is as follows:

- 20 attended Gathering 1: “Balanced Minds, Nourished Bodies” in September.
- 27 attended Gathering 2: “Healing Through Heritage” in October.
- 20 attended Gathering 3: “Seven Generations Harvest” in November.
- 15 attended Gathering 4: “Rising Spirits” in January.
- 21 attended Gathering 5: “Leaning in Love” in February.
- 19 attended Gathering 6: “Sacred Sustenance” in March.



# Project Results and Outcome

## Tribal Representation

Shown in **Figure 6**, participants in the **Cooking for Wellness Project** represented 37 different Tribes, showcasing the rich tribal diversity within our community. This broad representation highlights the importance of creating inclusive spaces that honor and uplift the unique cultural backgrounds of Native peoples living in urban settings. In cities, where Indigenous identities can often feel fragmented or overlooked, programs like this provide vital opportunities for participants to connect across tribal lines, share traditions, and learn from one another. By fostering a sense of community rooted in respect and cultural exchange, Cooking for Wellness supports collective healing, growth, and the strengthening of intertribal relationships in an urban environment.

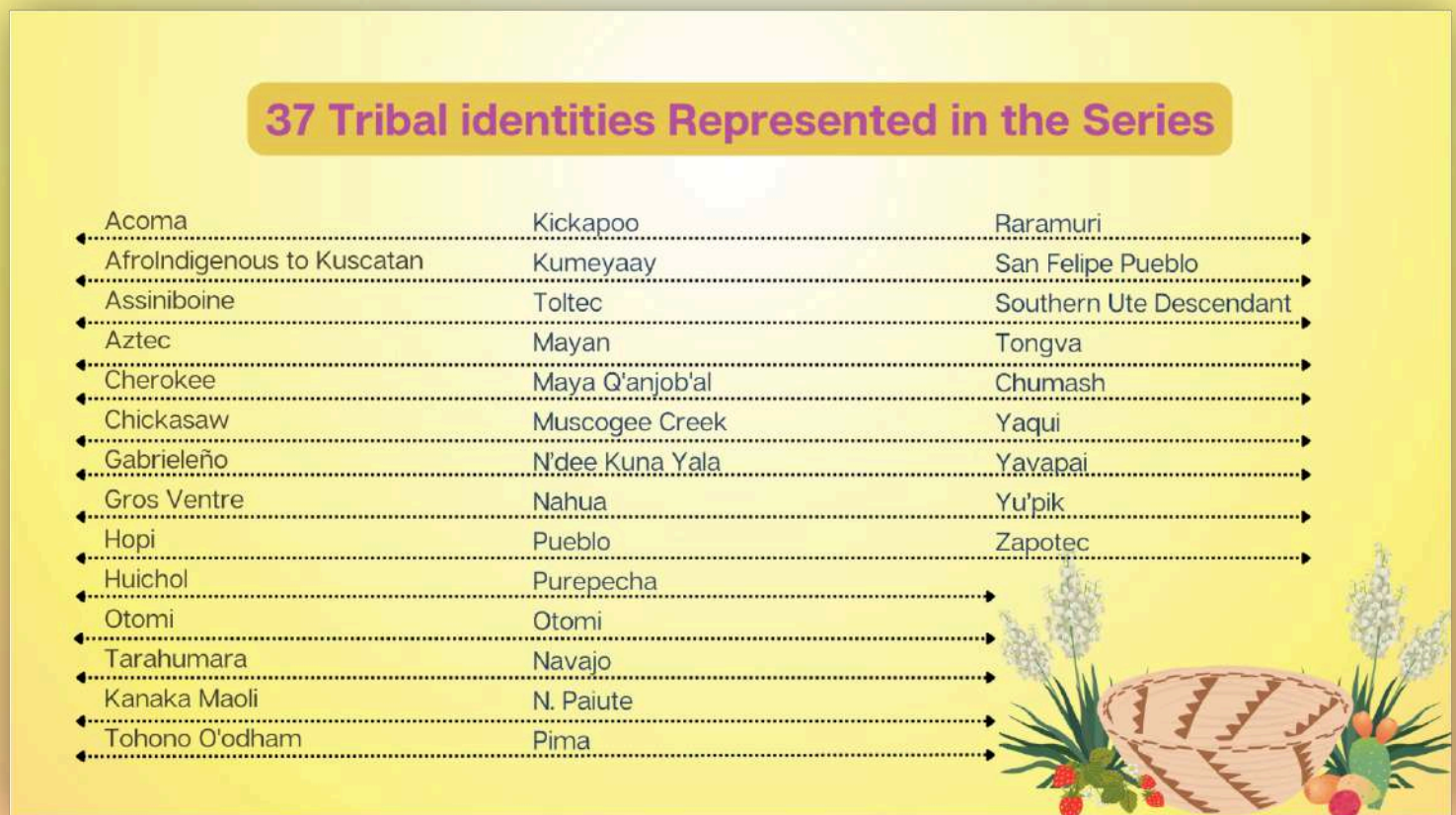


Figure 6

# Project Results and Outcome

## Intergenerational Representation

**Figure 7** shows the age breakdown of participants for the **Cooking for Wellness Project**. This chart reveals a diverse range of ages, with the majority falling within the 26 to 54 age group. This group accounted for 69 individuals, highlighting a strong level of interest and engagement among adults in their prime working and caregiving years. Younger participants, aged 25 and under, made up 26 of the registrants, indicating growing involvement from youth and young adults. Elders, defined as those aged 55 and older, comprised 24 participants, reflecting the program's reach across generations. Additionally, 3 participants did not report their age. This broad age representation demonstrates the program's wide appeal and its potential to foster intergenerational connections through shared cultural and wellness experiences.

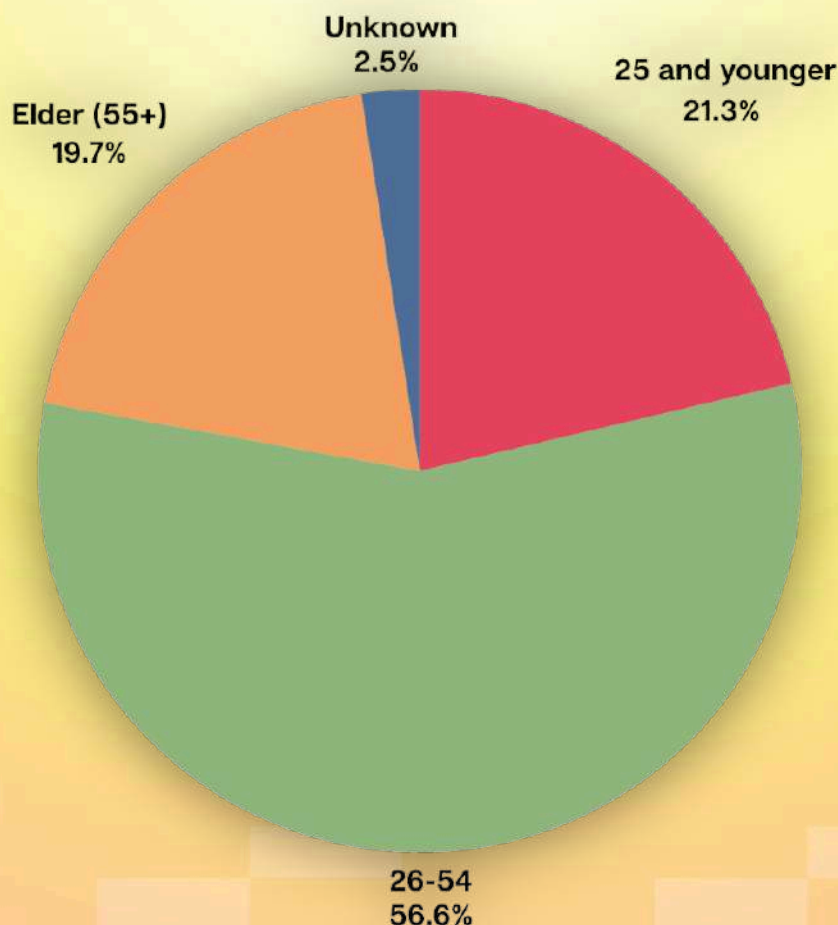


Figure 7



# Project Results and Outcome

## Geographic Reach

**Figure 8** illustrates the geographic distribution of Cooking for Wellness attendees across Los Angeles County's Service Planning Areas (SPAs). The majority of participants resided in SPA 3: San Gabriel Valley and SPA 7: East Los Angeles, reflecting strong engagement from communities in these regions. SPA 6: South Los Angeles and SPA 8: South Bay were equally represented, indicating consistent interest from these areas as well. Participation was lower in SPA 4: Metro LA and SPA 5: West, while SPA 2: San Fernando Valley saw minimal engagement. Notably, there were no attendees from SPA 1: Antelope Valley. These insights emphasize the need to explore targeted outreach strategies to ensure broader and more equitable access to the program across all regions of the county.

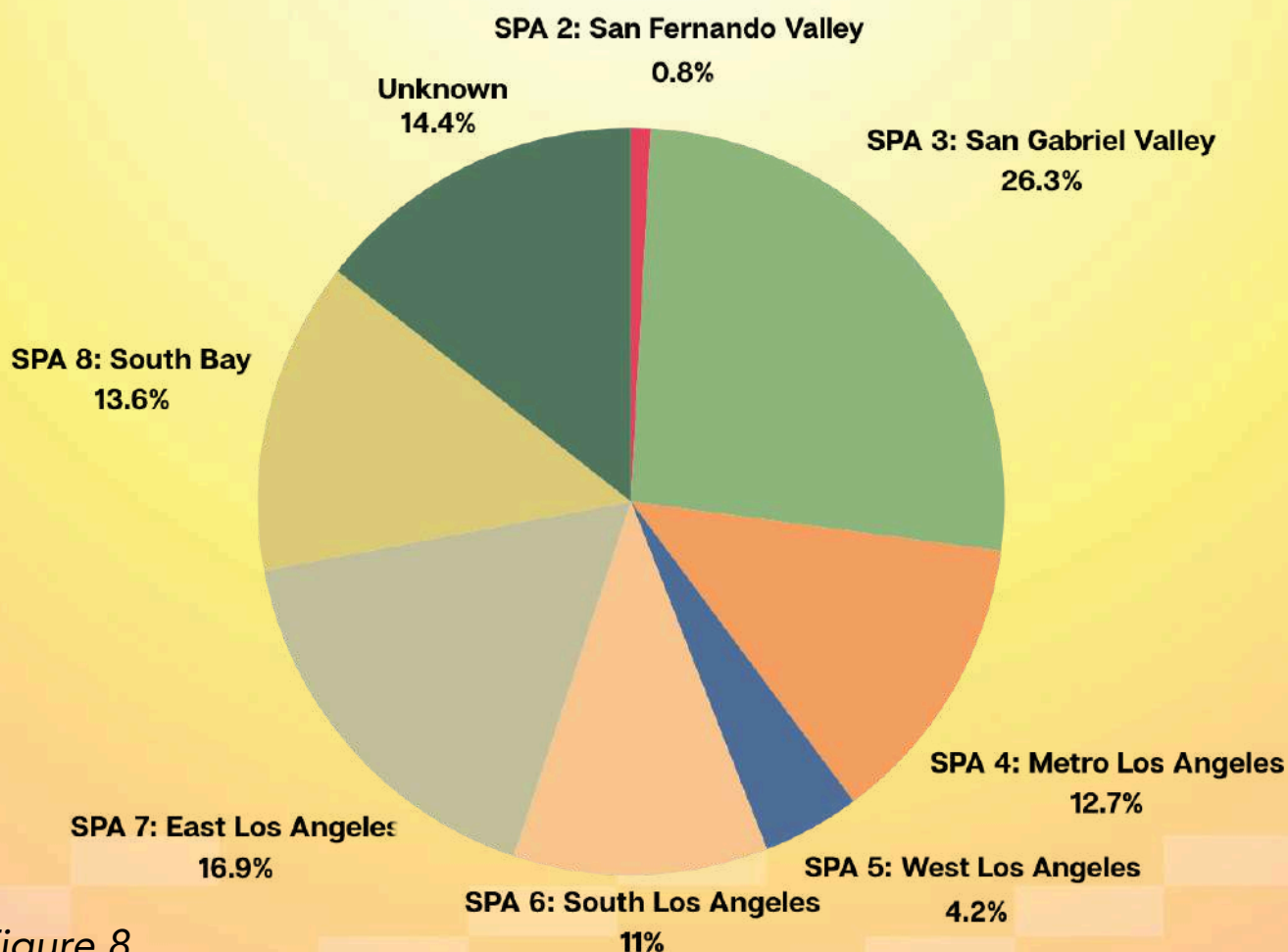


Figure 8

# Project Results and Outcome

## Retrospective Survey Findings

We had a total of 69 retrospective questionnaires completed anonymously by community participants across the series as a whole.

**Question: *I feel comfortable discussing my mental health openly with friends, family, and other members of my community.***

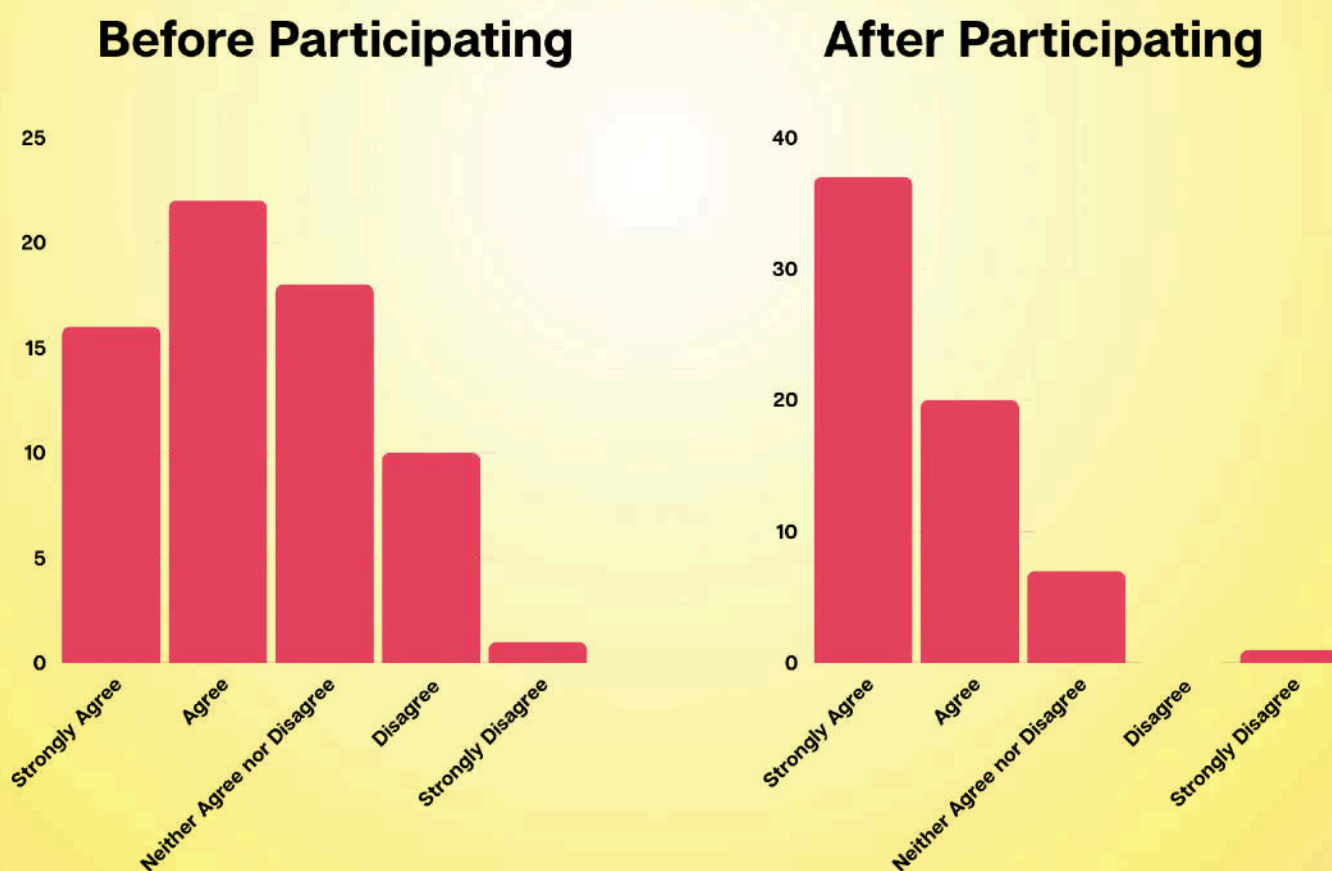


Figure 9

The two charts in **Figure 9** reveal a clear and encouraging shift in participants' comfort levels when discussing their mental health following their participation in the **Cooking for Wellness Project**. Most notably, the number of individuals who Strongly Agree with feeling comfortable discussing their mental health increased dramatically from 16 to 37 — a gain of 21 participants, indicating a significant positive change in attitudes.



# LACDMH Cooking for Wellness Project 2024-2025

While there was a slight decrease in those who Agree (from 22 to 20), this minor drop is likely due to individuals moving from moderate agreement to a stronger affirmation, as evidenced by the substantial increase in the **Strongly Agree** category.

There was also a considerable reduction in neutral responses, with the number of participants who **Neither Agree** nor **Disagree** dropping from 18 to 7. This shift suggests that participants became more decisive in their views, moving away from neutrality and toward a clearer stance.

Importantly, those who selected **Disagree** with the statement decreased from 10 to 0, reflecting a complete elimination of mild discomfort in discussing mental health. Meanwhile, the number of participants who **Strongly Disagree** remained steady at 1, indicating no increase in strong discomfort.

Overall, these changes suggest that the project had a meaningful and positive impact, fostering greater openness, comfort, and willingness among participants to engage in conversations around mental health.

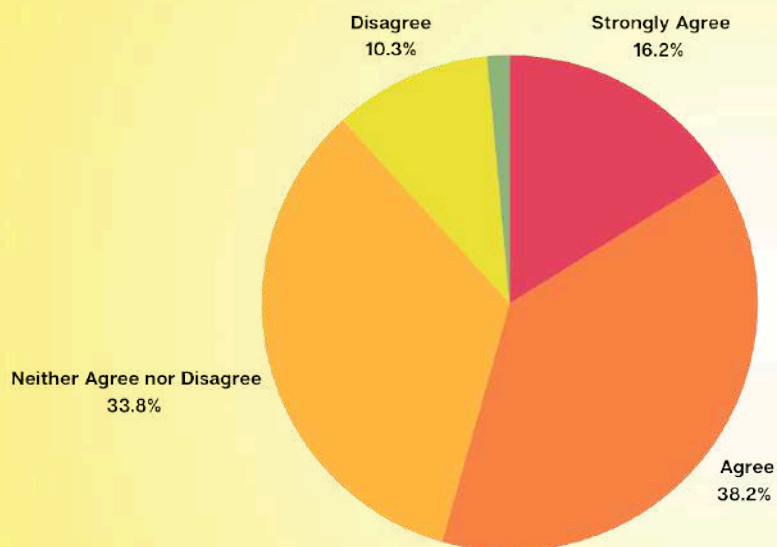


# LACDMH Cooking for Wellness Project 2024-2025

## Retrospective Survey Findings

**Question: *I know how cooking and traditional foods can be used to support mental health and wellness.***

### Before Participating



### After Participating

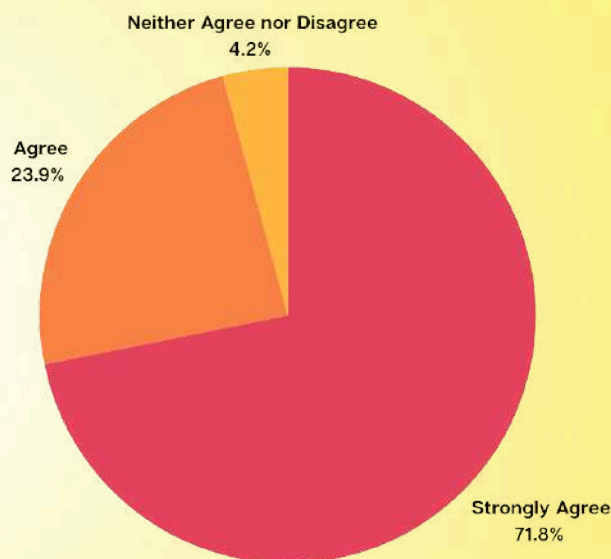


Figure 10

The data in **Figure 10** reflects a significant and overwhelmingly positive shift in participants' understanding of how cooking and traditional foods can support mental health and wellness. Before the **Cooking for Wellness Project**, only 11 participants **Strongly Agree** with this statement.

After the program, that number surged to 51, indicating that a substantial majority of participants now deeply recognize the importance of traditional methods of nutritional and emotional wellness such as cooking to build connections and improve overall health and mental health outcomes.

Additionally, while 26 participants had initially selected **Agree**, that number decreased to 17 post-intervention. This drop is likely explained by a movement toward stronger affirmation, as many participants who once moderately agreed now express greater conviction by selecting **Strongly Agree**.



# LACDMH Cooking for Wellness Project 2024-2025

## Retrospective Survey Findings

The number of respondents who **Neither Agree nor Disagree** declined dramatically from 23 to just 3, suggesting that the program helped clarify this connection for those who were previously unsure or lacked awareness. Importantly, all **Disagree** and **Strongly Disagree** responses were eliminated entirely — dropping from a combined total of 8 to 0. This complete removal of disagreement indicates the project was successful.

Taken together, these changes underscore the program's strong educational impact rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems and its effectiveness in deepening cultural knowledge, promoting wellness, and reinforcing the healing power of traditional foods.

**Question: *I know how to recognize signs and symptoms of poor mental health.***

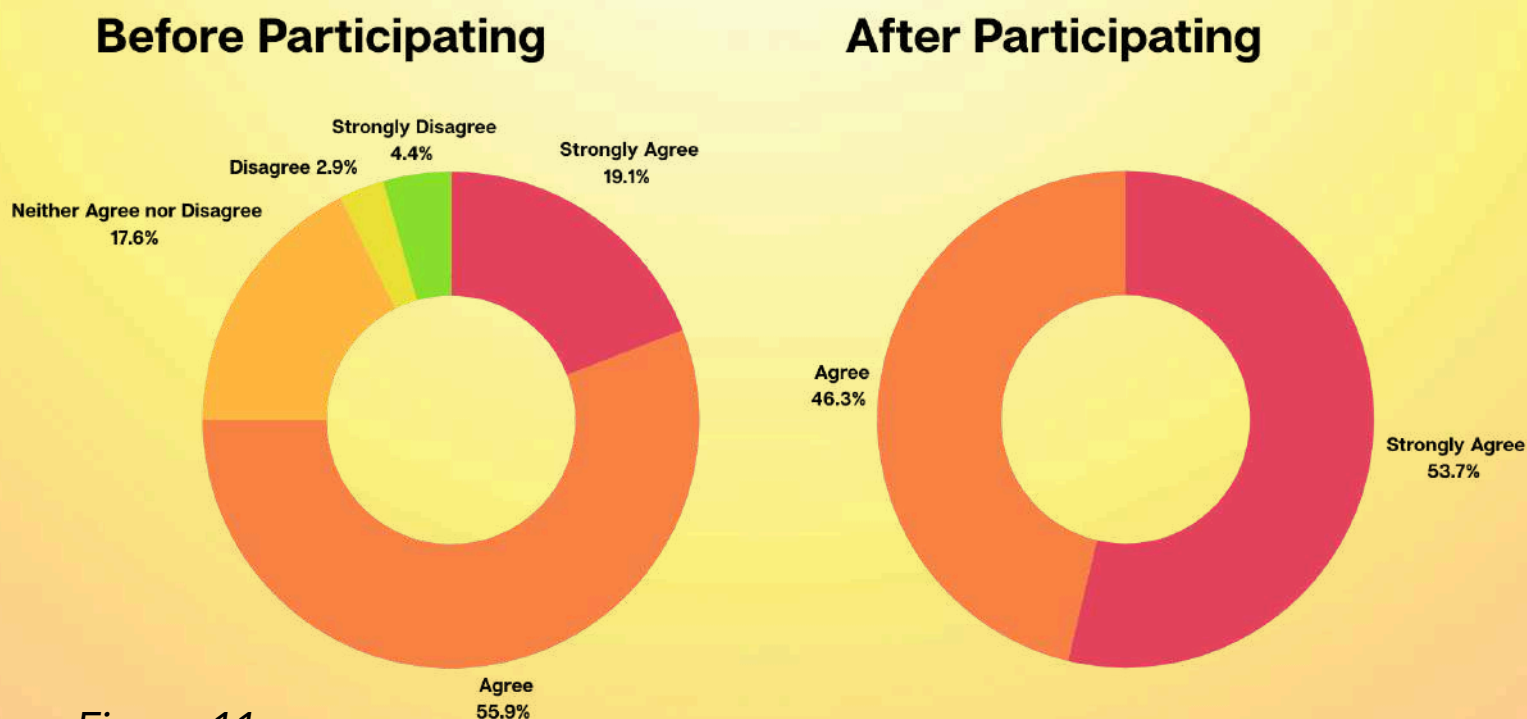


Figure 11

# LACDMH Cooking for Wellness Project 2024-2025

## Retrospective Survey Findings

The data in **Figure 11** shows a significant improvement in participants' ability to recognize the signs and symptoms of poor mental health following their involvement in the **Cooking for Wellness Project**. The number of individuals who **Strongly Agree** with the statement increased significantly from 13 to 36, highlighting a strengthened confidence in their mental health literacy. This shift indicates that a large portion of participants now feel more empowered and informed when it comes to identifying mental health challenges, whether in themselves or others.

While the number of **Agree** responses decreased slightly from 38 to 32, this change is likely reflective of a positive shift, with many participants moving from moderate agreement to a stronger affirmation of their understanding, as evidenced by the increase in **Strongly Agree** responses.

Notably, there was a complete elimination of neutral and negative responses. The **Neither Agree nor Disagree** category dropped to zero, which previously included 12 participants, suggesting increased clarity in participants' ability to recognize signs and symptoms of mental health challenges. Similarly, those who previously selected **Disagree** (2 respondents) and **Strongly Disagree** (3 respondents) also dropped to zero, signaling a full transition away from uncertainty or lack of understanding.

Overall, this data demonstrates the effectiveness of the program in building critical mental health awareness among community participants. It reflects not only an increase in knowledge but also a greater sense of confidence and readiness to recognize when mental health support may be needed — for themselves, within their communities, and for future generations



# Project Results and Outcome

## Open Feedback from Community Members

I love these events and **feel so blessed to find a space [where] I feel welcome!**

Lovely wellness cooking + mental wellness workshop. The cherry on top is definitely the group session - being in a circle & **speaking with fellow community felt safe, open, and felt like connection.** Thank you!

I loved this event & would love to be a part of more. I'm **grateful.** I've always wanted to attend events, but don't meet the requirements, so I'm happy I got to be a part of this today. **I feel connected, aligned, and joyful.** Thank you. 🍷

You all did great. **Grounding in nature was very therapeutic.**

**Beautiful!**  
Thank you for everything!



# Project Results and Outcome

## Open Feedback from Community Members

**I had a very good experience.** The stew was simple to make and it was delicious. I enjoyed the group activity. The staff is very dedicated to the program. The participants seemed to enjoy the work we did together.

Thank you so much for these workshops, **they mean too much to community.**

Thank you for providing a safe place for my partner and me to be free to be ourselves among amazing people.

Love the organization in terms of logistics + **having everything I need for the activities.** I appreciate that it's close to home.

Every aspect of this event was thought out, and **I am extremely grateful.**

Thank you for today!  
**It was much needed, more than I knew.**





# Project Results and Outcome

## Open Feedback from Community Members

Wonderful program that inspires me to be more involved in the community. **A safe space where I can feel like I am accepted w/o judgement.** Helps to dispel the idea of imposter syndrome + not being enough of one thing. As a child, I never felt like I belonged anywhere, + as an adult, it has been an exercise in seeing where I feel I am supposed to be. **Programs such as these are helping set me on a great path.**

Today's cooking with Marcus has been **my favorite cooking class** so far.

This was a beautiful gathering and **reminder [of] how powerful it is to be in community.** We need more culturally affirming spaces to meet and find connection to a broader community.

You all do a wonderful job with your events. **Thank you for creating this!**

It was a great day, and the staff and Annette were wonderful. **Looking forward to another workshop with the organization. (:**



# Project Learnings, Strengths, and Recommendations

## Lessons Learned

### **Food Accessibility**

Throughout this project, we had the opportunity to highlight beautiful and culturally significant recipes featuring traditional Native ingredients such as blue corn, mesquite, huitlacoche, the Three Sisters (corn, beans, and squash), and other fresh produce. However, we recognize that not all of our community members have regular access to these foods. Living in LA, many urban Native individuals are far from their homelands and experience a disconnection from traditional foodways due to systemic barriers, including food deserts, economic inequities, and lack of access to culturally relevant markets.

While we remain committed to supporting the broader movement for Native food sovereignty, we also recognize the importance of meeting community members where they are. One key lesson learned is that we can strengthen our impact by incorporating more recipes that center accessible and affordable ingredients. This includes foods obtained through WIC programs, food pantries, canned and dried goods, and community gardens. Doing so ensures our nutrition education is not only culturally grounded but also practical and supportive of participants' day-to-day realities.

### **Outreach and Engagement**

In terms of outreach and engagement, we noted limited participation (only 0.8%) from Service Planning Area (SPA) 2 – the San Fernando Valley. Despite efforts to expand into this region, engagement remains low.



# LACDMH Cooking for Wellness Project 2024-2025

## Lessons Learned

We believe that partnering more directly with a Native DMH Mental Health Promoter in SPA 2 would help deepen our reach and strengthen trust and participation in that community.

### **Affordable Cooking Spaces**

Lastly, venue accessibility remains a challenge. While we deeply value the partnerships we've built with community organizations, gardens, and CBOs, the lack of access to teaching kitchens increased the logistical burden on our team. Hosting classes in non-traditional spaces often required additional setup time and placed limitations on what recipes and cooking methods we could safely use. Securing consistent access to well-equipped, affordable teaching kitchen spaces will be critical to the sustainability and growth of this program moving forward.

## Project Strengths

### **Community Collaborators**

One of the most significant strengths of this program was the dedication and expertise of the SSSP staff, contractors, and consultants. Together, they provided culturally rooted education on nutrition, food sovereignty, traditional ingredients and their health benefits, as well as mental health awareness. Their efforts helped reduce stigma, increase understanding of mental health symptoms, and empower participants to navigate available resources.



# *LACDMH Cooking for Wellness Project 2024-2025*

## **Project Strengths**

We were intentional about working with Native graphic designers, photographers, consultants, chefs, and mental health providers. Each of these collaborators contributed to cultivating a program deeply grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems, Native joy, and holistic community health. Their presence not only enhanced the cultural relevance of our programming but also affirmed community identity, pride, and connection.

### **Network of Volunteers**

Our strong network of Native and diverse volunteers played a critical role in the success of our in-person events. These volunteers showed up consistently to support and uplift community members, making it possible to deliver high-quality, impactful gatherings. Their contributions were invaluable and deeply appreciated.

### **Strengthening New and Existing Relations**

Another major strength was our ability to build and strengthen relationships with community-based organizations (CBOs) across Los Angeles County. We collaborated with trusted partners and venues including El Sereno Community Garden, United American Indian Involvement (UAI), Feed and Be Fed Community Garden, The Grand Annex, Live Oak Community Center, Baldwin Park Senior Center, and LA Cocina de Gloria Molina – LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes. Strengthening existing partnerships and forming new ones was transformative, both for our organization and for the community members we serve.

Participants frequently shared excitement about the expansion of programming into cities like San Pedro and Baldwin Park, and many expressed a strong desire for us to return.



# LACDMH Cooking for Wellness Project 2024-2025

## Project Strengths

We also heard appreciation for our continued collaboration with trusted organizations like UAll, where participants have long-standing relationships and a deep sense of safety and belonging.

### **Creating Opportunity for Community Connection and Healing**

Finally, the intentional design of our program to uplift different subpopulations within the urban Native community — such as elders, students, youth, families, Indigiqueer folks, and others — resulted in strengthened community bonds. By curating sessions for specific groups, we created a space where participants could connect through shared identity and experience. This added layer of connection fostered greater comfort, openness, and engagement, especially during group discussions around wellness and mental health.

## Reflections and Recommendations for DMH

One key takeaway from this capacity-building project is the importance of balancing participant reach with program quality. While we exceeded the SOW goal for 60 unique participants, a high unique participant requirement came with tradeoffs. Interactive cooking classes are most effective and supportive when limited to 10–13 participants. Beyond that, it becomes difficult to provide the individualized attention and emotional safety needed for mental health-centered engagement. We recommend that DMH consider adjusting the requirement for unique participant counts to 50% of overall program attendance, allowing for deeper and more consistent participation across sessions.

To meet the unique participant requirement of 60, we designed each session to uplift a specific subpopulation of the urban Native community.

# LACDMH Cooking for Wellness Project 2024-2025

## Reflections and Recommendations for DMH

While this allowed for tailored support and specific community connection, it also meant some individuals waited months for a session relevant to them. One participant shared in a survey, “I really enjoy these events and wish they were held monthly, and not just for specific age groups. Maybe offer both age-specific and open events? Going several months without attending really impacted me.”

This feedback highlights the need for more consistent access to wellness programming to support long-term engagement and mental health outcomes.

Many attendees come to our workshops with limited awareness of mental health concepts or with cultural barriers to openly discussing these topics. We’ve seen that regular exposure to supportive, culturally grounded wellness spaces is essential to slowly shift attitudes, reduce stigma, and build mental health support for our community. For many, these programs are one of the few places where they can safely and consistently access mental health-related support.

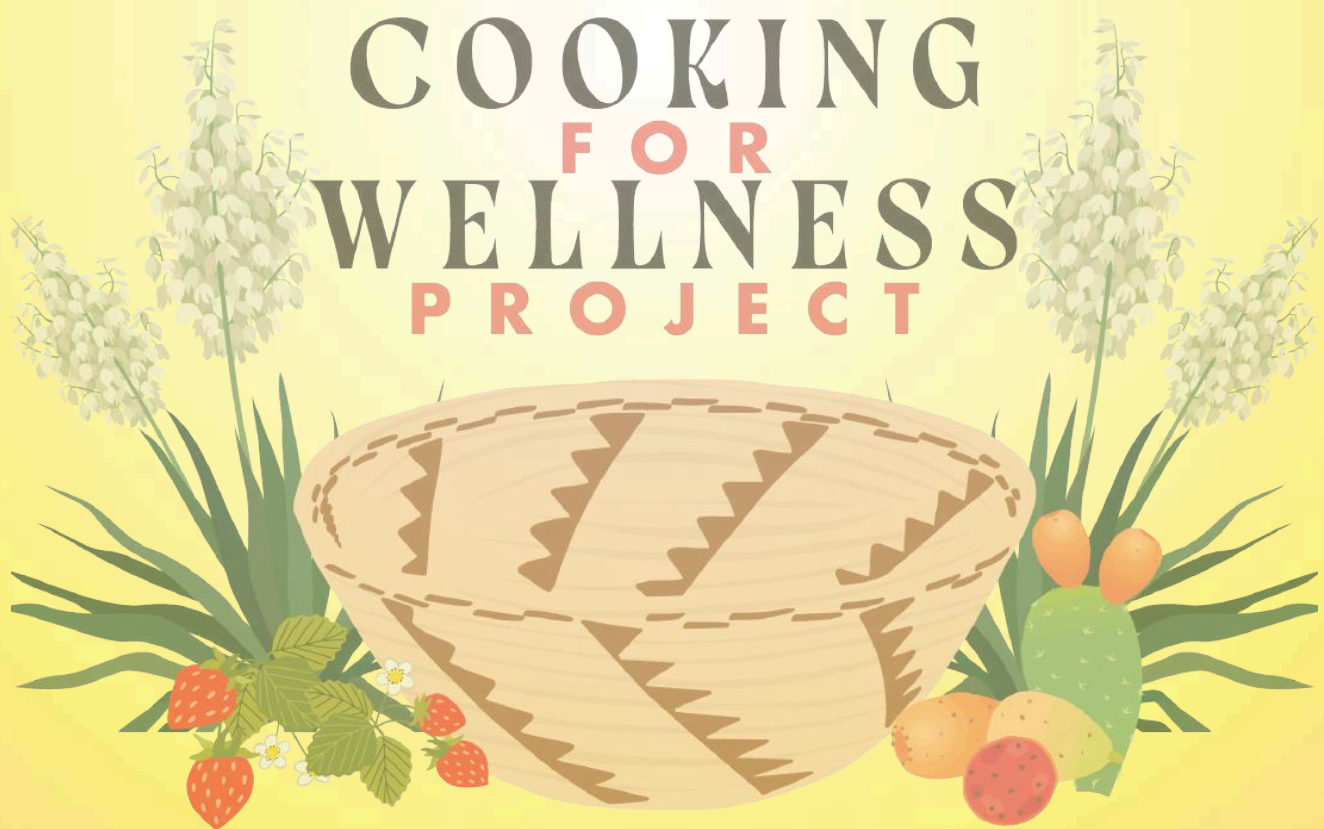
In closing, this project reaffirmed the need for culturally grounded mental health programming that incorporates traditional cooking practices to support mental, physical, and emotional well-being. The **Cooking for Wellness Project** fostered healing, connection, and wellness, and our community members have expressed a strong desire for more nutrition-based mental wellness spaces. By embracing traditional methods of nutritional and emotional care, such as cooking, we were able to strengthen community bonds and improve overall health and mental health outcomes for participants. These small yet meaningful improvements contribute to the ongoing healing and resilience of our



# LACDMH Cooking for Wellness Project 2024-2025

## Reflections and Recommendations for DMH

communities for generations to come. As we move forward, we remain committed to refining our model to better serve both current and future generations, while continuing to advocate for structural changes within DMH to promote equity and expand access to mental health resources for our urban Native community in LA.



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