



For Immediate Release

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Padma Lakshmi believes everyone is a food writer

Top Chef host announces contest to foster youth creativity in food writing.

SAN FRANCISCO (Nov. 1, 2022) – Padma Lakshmi is considered one of America’s most accomplished food experts, having authored several food-focused bestsellers and judged the food of America’s greatest chefs. However, she has never had any formal culinary training. She came to the U.S. from India at the age of four, and her heritage and immigration journey have shaped her career in food media since the start. Her path to success in this field shows one’s personal experiences with food can make them an expert among the ranks of formally trained peers. She believes everyone deserves the opportunity to offer their expertise and stories. For these narratives to be told, Lakshmi is collaborating with 826 National, a nonprofit providing young students with free workshops and community spaces to strengthen creative writing skills. This partnership will host a food writing contest for youth.

From today until Dec. 2, Lakshmi invites students ages six to 18 to submit any short stories they have written, as long as they include food as a significant part of the narrative. Rather than restaurant reviews or critical pieces, these stories will focus on memories evoked when preparing a family recipe or reflections on how food has shaped their relationship to their identity. Lakshmi, along with the 826 board, will co-produce a book with the stories of eight finalists from each division of elementary school (kindergarten through fifth grade), middle school (sixth through eighth grade), and high school (ninth through twelfth grade). These 24 finalists will be awarded with an all-expenses paid, three-day trip to San Francisco, where the 826 flagship at 826 Valencia St. is located. This original address also inspired the name of the nonprofit. These students will embark on cultural food tours in

one of America's most dynamic and historic food destinations, as well as refine their submission pieces for final publication through editorial workshops. In these upcoming weeks, Lakshmi will travel to each of 826's nine chapter locations to host information sessions, encourage students to utilize 826's services before submitting their pieces, and share a few of her own food stories for inspiration.

"My daughter Krishna is now 12, and I've seen what a difference it makes when she has to write about a book she doesn't quite like versus when she writes about a topic she really loves," said Lakshmi. "Writing can be such a powerful, freeing experience, but we don't always have the opportunities to express ourselves or to write about the topics we're really passionate about. For me, having discussions and writing about food comes so effortlessly. We all have a relationship with food, and every person's story is important to share. Students are the future's most impactful storytellers, and I cannot wait to learn from their beautiful pieces."

Although only those aged six to 18 are eligible for the contest, students, educators, and community members alike can take advantage of and contribute to 826's resources. Whether people belong to one of the nine metropolitan areas the chapters serve or want to participate from virtually anywhere via 826 Digital, below are some of the ways 826 helps supplement the educational writing experiences of young students:

- At any 826 chapter location, students can complete their homework while building community. These after-school programs foster a creative, yet focused environment where students can receive academic support and prepare themselves to be excellent writers.
- Individual chapters host a variety of different opportunities to engage in creative writing. For example, 826LA collaborated with students at Susan Miller Dorsey High School in Los Angeles to produce [From the Couch to the Kitchen](#), a food writing book sold nationwide.
- Educators can engage in discussions to learn and teach innovative approaches to cultivate enthusiasm towards writing.
- Community members can volunteer to chaperone morning field trips and accompany students in their writing journeys.

- People can share ideas to expand the reach of these writing centers, as well as contribute to the materials 826 Digital make available.

826 National is a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping students, ages six to eighteen, improve their expository and creative writing skills at eight locations across the United States, as well as virtually via 826 Digital. The chapters include 826 Valencia in San Francisco, 826NYC in Brooklyn, 826LA in Los Angeles, 826CHI in Chicago, 826Michigan (serving Ann Arbor, Detroit, and Ypsilanti), 826 Boston in Boston, 826DC in Washington, DC, and 826 New Orleans. The flagship chapter of 826, 826 Valencia, opened in 2002, at 826 Valencia St. in the Mission District of San Francisco. It was co-founded by educator Nínive Clements Calegari and author Dave Eggers, who also founded the independent publishing house McSweeney's.

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What is 826's mission?

In 2002, author Dave Eggers and educator Nínive Calegari wanted to support educators with students in need of extra help. They did so by opening a writing and tutoring center, where they connected community members with these students.

This center was located at 826 Valencia Street in the Mission District of San Francisco, and it is now the founding and flagship chapter of 826 National.

826 National is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization providing free writing support services and resources to students ages six to 18. 826 chapters work with students over periods of two hours or many years.

The organization oversees and supports 826 Digital and its nine chapters in Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, New Orleans, New York City, San Francisco, and Washington.

Student Literacy in the U.S.

- * As of 2022, 67% of fourth-graders are below NAEP Proficient in reading.
- * As of 2022, 69% of eighth-graders are below NAEP Proficient in reading.
- * As of 2019, 63% of twelfth-graders are below NAEP Proficient in reading.

* Students performing at or above the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Proficient level on NAEP assessments demonstrate solid academic performance and competency over challenging subject matter.

- According to the 2019 data from the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), 43.0 million U.S. adults possess low literacy skills.

- PIAAC defines literacy as "the ability to understand, evaluate, use and engage with written texts to participate in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential".

826 National Core Programs

AFTER SCHOOL

Four to five days a week, students come to our writing centers after school to build community, complete their homework and write.

FIELD TRIPS

Entire public school classes journey to our writing centers for two hours of interactive writing.

IN-SCHOOL PROGRAMS

We dispatch 826 chapter staff and teams of trained volunteers to local, high-needs public schools to support teachers and students in various writing projects.

WORKSHOPS

Our free workshops encourage students to be creative while strengthening their writing skills. Topics range from academic essentials like SAT-prep and college-entrance essays, to more imaginative forms of writing like fiction, cartooning, and bookmaking.

YOUNG AUTHORS' BOOK PROJECT

The Young Authors' Book Project (YABP) partners local schools with professional writers and editors. Students spend three to four months writing about a particular theme and collaborate with volunteers throughout the editing and publishing process. Once the project is complete, students, volunteers, and families celebrate with a book release party.

2020–21 by the numbers

350K
students

88%
students
of color

75%
from
low-income
families

2K
active
volunteers

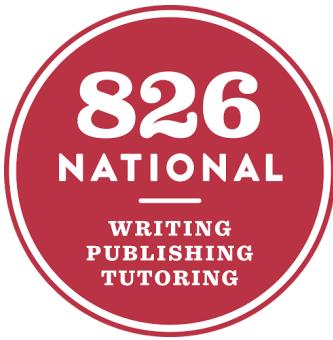
350
educator
collaborators

2K
teaching
artists

20K
total
instructional
hours

11K
educators served
via 826 DIGITAL

412
student
publications



826 National x Padma Lakshmi Food Writing Contest Q&A

Padma Lakshmi and 826 communications manager, Zaneta Jung, answer questions regarding the food writing contest. Lakshmi's responses will be represented by "P," and Jung's responses will be represented by "826."

Q: What is a food story? Can people submit recipes in place of a short story?

826: A food story is any story that has food at the center of it. To be clear, we are not looking for the next restaurant critic. While students can certainly write about their favorite restaurant or their favorite dish from a restaurant, we are looking to hear what memories come with eating that dish. We want to hear about a daughter who makes enchiladas with their father every Sunday brunch or the high schooler who flips burgers at the local diner. Students as young as six can submit. Even if they may not have the most sophisticated palate yet, they can certainly express what they love about food. We will allow submissions up to 1000 words, and we would love to see different mediums of writing: poetry, personal essays, etc. As long as it uses words, we are happy to read it. There is no minimum word count to account for the different writing mediums people may use.

P: Food writing might sound intimidating, but that is the complete opposite of what it should be. You don't have to go to culinary school or have worked in a professional kitchen to be an expert about food. I didn't go down either one of those paths. Anyone can be a food writer, because everyone has a relationship with food. We all have to eat, which means we all can write about food. We definitely welcome recipes, but we would appreciate if the recipe came with a short story.

Q: Writing about what you love makes the writing process so much easier. Why did 826 want to do a contest specifically about food writing, as opposed to another focus?

826: We know it's important for students to write about things beyond what they are required to in school. They want to write about things they love. And just like Padma said, we know food is in

everyone's life. A bite of a childhood favorite dish can transport you back to that memory. We are naturally lovers of food and flavors, so there's so much out there for students to write about. We wanted to focus on a category that wasn't too limiting, but just universal enough for anyone to contribute their voice to.

Q: What kind of young writers are you hoping will enter the contest? What are your goals for this food writing contest?

P: We are hoping to hear from absolutely anyone who feels they have a story to share, because everyone absolutely does. As a first-generation immigrant myself, I am always looking to uplift people from immigrant and/or marginalized backgrounds. This food writing contest is just one way I am looking to do so. There are so many stories about food that have yet to be documented, and I am hoping that we get to give a platform to those whose stories are less frequently told.

826: Our goal is to serve as many students as possible. If this food writing contest is what gets them through our doors, virtually or physically, we are more than happy. We just want to make clear that people's submissions do not have to be perfect. We are hoping to provide support along the way by encouraging people to participate in the contest-specific workshops that are hosted by Padma. However, we recognize not everyone will be able to come in person. This is why our winners will have the chance to revise and edit their submissions during their all-expenses paid trip.

Q: Padma, could you give more details about what you'll be doing during your visits to the 826 chapter locations?

P: During my visits to each of the eight writing centers, I'll be sharing one of my own food stories, as well as pieces written by my 12-year-old daughter, Krishna, and my 8-year-old nephew. I hope these stories will inspire those who are still in their earlier stages of writing. I'll also be reading over the stories of the first 25 students who come by my workshop and will provide some specific feedback.

Community members will be present at each workshop to review the stories of anyone who brings a draft.

Q: What can students expect when they go to an 826 National center? Do students have to sign up to have a session, or is it an open space during operating hours?

826: 826 chapter centers provide free writing and publishing programs designed to engage and prepare students for success. Each chapter invites anyone who believes in our mission to provide students with the necessary tools and resources to excel in school; this means parents, families, teachers, and any community members are welcome. While some programs, such as field trips and some after-school tutoring sessions, do require filling out request forms, our chapters are always ready to support any

student who comes through our doors. Even if the chapter is unable to provide a session at that exact time, students will never walk out empty-handed; we always have tips and writing techniques to offer.

Q: Who will judge the submissions?

826: Because of the diverse word count range, we know we'll receive a wide variety of submissions. We have assembled a team of community members from each chapter location, who will then nominate their favorite submissions to be judged by Padma and a small team of her favorite food writers. Students participating in the contest do not have to live near a chapter location, because the team of community members will collectively review submissions from all over the U.S.

Q: We'd love to hear more about what the writers of winning submissions will receive.

Why is it important for you to invite the winners to San Francisco?

P: San Francisco is not only home to the first 826 chapter, but it is home to some of the greatest food in the world. It is historically a major hub for immigration, meaning it has had a long history of people coming from all over the world and sharing their food in the city. It only seems fitting to take the contest winners on a tour to explore the wonderful culinary landscape of San Francisco. This trip is also time for them to meet fellow food lovers and writers, participate in discussions about their relationships to food, and receive feedback on their winning pieces that will be heading for publication in the following weeks.

Q: Padma, what's next for you?

P: We are preparing for our biggest Top Chef season yet, with season 20 to film in London. This will be the first time the competition will primarily take place overseas. It will feature all-stars from all around the world. I am beyond excited to see what these amazing chefs will cook and the stories they'll share with each dish. I also just wrapped up filming for the next season of "Taste the Nation," which will feature the people and communities behind ten new and different cuisines in America. There's been no greater privilege than hearing the stories of people who are dedicated to sharing their family histories and love through food. I am confident that whatever else is next, it will all tie back to this core love for food and its stories.

Nov. 1, 2022

TO: John Zuchelli, Assignment Editor at NBC Bay Area, KNTV

FROM: Carissa Liu

SUBJECT: Padma Lakshmi Hosts Food Writing Contest

John,

“Top Chef” host and food writer Padma Lakshmi is empowering the next generation of writers through her partnership with San Francisco-founded 826 National, a nonprofit overseeing nine writing and tutoring centers nationwide that provide free services to students ages six to 18. Together, Padma and 826 National are co-hosting a food writing contest, which invites students ages six to 18 to submit any story that has food at the heart of the narrative. Winning submissions will be published in a book to be sold nationwide. Starting Nov. 10, Padma will embark on a national tour to each 826 chapter, where she will host information sessions and provide guidance to young writers. She will begin her tour in San Francisco at 826 National’s flagship location, 826 Valencia. Her event will take place at 3:30 p.m. on Nov. 10.

Submitted stories may be about fond memories cooking with family members or how a dish at one’s favorite restaurant reminds them of a vacation they took. The contest will have three divisions: elementary school (kindergarten through fifth grade), middle school (sixth to eighth grade), and high school (ninth through twelfth grade). Finalists will be awarded with an all-expenses paid, three-day trip to San Francisco, where they will embark on culinary adventures and participate in workshops to revise their submissions before publishing.

Padma will be in San Francisco from 2 p.m. on Monday, Nov. 7 until the evening of her workshop on Nov. 10. We invite KNTV Channel 11 to visit Padma and the 826 Valencia team at their center to learn more about the contest’s purpose and intended impact, as well as the work 826 National does. Padma is happy to speak about her own experiences with food writing and the need for strengthened writing and literacy skills in youth populations. We would love to have Channel 11 cover this story on a morning news segment, so students from all over the Bay Area are aware of this opportunity, as well as the free learning services the center offers. Would a Channel 11 team member be available to come to 826 Valencia on Nov. 7, Nov. 8, or Nov. 9? Once in San Francisco, Padma’s availability is flexible, so we are happy to schedule a visit at Channel 11’s convenience.

The flagship chapter is located at 826 Valencia St, San Francisco, CA 94110. 826 Valencia, like all 826 National chapters, has an unusually-themed retail storefront. This chapter presents itself as Pirate Supply Store & King Carl's Emporium.

Please contact me with any questions and comments. If this is of interest to you, we look forward to hearing from you and the KNTV Channel 11 team.

Regards,
Carissa Liu, Publicist
On behalf of 826 National

Biography on Padma Lakshmi



How fashion modeling helped Padma Lakshmi become a food expert

From humble beginnings in Chennai, India to modeling abroad in Europe, Padma Lakshmi's love for food has always been shaped by the people and places she's been around.

Now on her 19th season of hosting "Top Chef," Lakshmi has established herself as an connoisseur in international cuisines and communicating about the importance of food in people's lives. Off screen, Lakshmi is an active food writer, having contributed to columns about food and fashion on The New York Times, Vogue, and Harper's Bazaar. Lakshmi has published three best-selling cookbooks, "Easy Exotic," "Tangy, Tart, Hot & Sweet" and "The Encyclopedia of Spices and Herbs." She is also the author of The New York Times best-selling books: memoir "Love, Loss, and What We Ate" and children's book "Tomatoes for Neela."

Although nationally recognized as a food expert, Lakshmi does not come from a formal culinary background. She credits her college study abroad with bringing her into a career in food. While studying abroad in Madrid for her theater and literature programs, Lakshmi began modeling. This led her to opportunities to model and travel all across the world, which allowed Lakshmi to develop the sophisticated, global palate she has today.

Lakshmi remains committed to serving communities around the world through her activism and philanthropy. She proudly supports causes such as food justice, the independent restaurant industry, immigrant rights, and women's advocacy.

Lakshmi resides in New York City with her daughter Krishna, 12.