

# Ode to El Molcajete

A lively and evocative poem about family and food

## About the Poem

**Learning Objective:** Students will analyze a poem, then use it as a model to write their own.

**Featured Skill:** analyzing and writing poetry

### Essential Questions:

- What role does food play in culture and identity?
- What is the role of family in our lives?
- Why are memories important?

### Standards:

The article and its suite of support materials support these Common Core anchor standards: R.1, R.2, R.4, W.4, W.5

For more standards information—including TEKS—go to Scope Online.



## Your Teaching Support Package

Find your full suite of support materials at [scope.scholastic.com](https://scope.scholastic.com).

### Audio:

- Poem Read-Aloud
- Text-to-speech

### Activities to print, project, or share digitally:

- Poetry Analysis
- Featured Skill: Poetry Planner

### Video:

- Poet Read-Aloud
- Using a Molcajete (clip)

## Step-by-Step Lesson Plan

### 1. Prepare to Read (10 minutes)

#### Do Now: Introduce the Molcajete (10 minutes)

- If your students are likely to be unfamiliar with molcajetes, kick off your lesson with a quick primer. Explain that a molcajete is a traditional Mexican tool for grinding spices, chiles, seeds, and nuts, and is used to prepare salsas, guacamole, and mole (a type of sauce). A molcajete consists of a bowl—usually with three short legs—and a grinding tool, both carved from volcanic rock. Show students the **Using a Molcajete video clip** (available in your Resources tab), or, if you happen to own a molcajete, you might bring it in for a quick demonstration! (Alternatively, you could arrange in advance for a student to do a short demonstration of how to use a molcajete.)

### 2. Read and Discuss (30 minutes)

- As a class, watch the **Poet Read-Aloud video** in which Gary Soto reads his poem to your students. Find it in your Resources tab.
- For a second read, invite students to read the poem silently to themselves. Then discuss the following questions as a class.

#### Poetry Analysis (25 minutes)

*The following questions can be shared in printable or interactive form.*

1. **What part of his life is Gary Soto writing about in this poem?** *He is writing about his childhood.*
2. **Explain how this poem about a molcajete is also about the poet's family.** *The memories Soto describes in this poem involve not only the molcajete but also members of his family. He begins by describing his grandmother using her molcajete, her eyes watering from the onion she is smashing. When Soto describes a time he licked a spoon that was resting in the molcajete, he doesn't mention his grandmother, but in a way, she is part of this memory too, as she is likely the*

one who made the spicy food that he licked off the spoon. Soto then describes a time he took the molcajete outside and filled it with dirt—and how his mother reacted when she caught him. And finally, Soto writes about his grandfather eating spicy chiles from the molcajete.

3. **Besides the fact that she used the molcajete, what do we learn about Soto's grandmother in the first stanza?** *We learn that she had a son who went away (we don't learn the reason) and that she watched TV novelas.*
4. **The second stanza is packed with similes and metaphors. Identify them and explain what they help you understand.** *Soto writes that his tongue was "like a red flag." This simile helps you picture him with his tongue hanging out of his mouth in reaction to the spicy food he just licked off the spoon. Soto then uses a second simile to help us picture the way his tongue was hanging out of his mouth, writing that it was "Like the tongue/Of a dog on a hot day." Next, Soto describes drinking from a hose as "a gas station/Of water" that filled up his "one-gallon stomach." This metaphor helps the reader understand that Soto gulped an enormous amount of water—that the water was flowing from the hose into his stomach the way gas flows from a gas pump into a car's gas tank.*
5. **In the third stanza, Soto writes, "But it wasn't the onion/That made me cry,/But my mother/Looking out from the window." Which lines from another stanza do these lines echo? Why might the poet have included this "echo"? These lines echo lines from the first stanza of the poem: "The half moon of onion/Cries sad tears/Into the stone,/And my abuela/Leaves two or three tears,/Not from the sadness/Of a son going away,/Not for the starstruck/Young couples/In TV novelas./It's the onion/That makes her cry." Answers to the second question will vary. Perhaps the poet included this echo to draw a connection between his grandmother and himself (using the molcajete led both of them to cry) while also emphasizing the difference between the two of them (she's an adult who makes spicy food for her family; he's a kid who messes around in the backyard). Or perhaps the poet included this echo simply because there is something enjoyable about it for the reader—there's something fun or satisfying in recognizing the similarity between the two groups of lines. Some students may also find humor in the echo and how it expresses the idea that it was onions that made Soto's grandmother cry and an angry look from his mom that made Soto cry.**
6. **In the first stanza, Soto writes that the molcajete "runs with/The blood of tomatoes." Explain the metaphor Soto is using in this description and how it continues in the third stanza.** *When Soto describes the molcajete as running with the blood of tomatoes, he is comparing the tomatoes being crushed in the molcajete to an animal being killed. In the third stanza, Soto continues this metaphor when he describes the molcajete as a "slaughterhouse" for chiles, tomatoes, and onions.*

7. An ode is a type of poem that expresses the writer's thoughts and feelings about a particular person, place, or thing. Often, an ode is written to praise or celebrate that person, place, or thing. In what way is this poem an ode? *"Ode to El Molcajete" is an ode because it expresses the writer's thoughts and feelings about an object: his grandmother's molcajete. The writer describes his memories of the molcajete and how it was connected to members of his family. He seems to be recounting these memories fondly, celebrating the molcajete and the role it played in his childhood.*

### 3. Write Your Own (30 minutes)

- Have students complete the **Featured Skill Activity: Poetry Planner**. This activity will help them brainstorm ideas and provide tips for writing their own poem in response to the prompt:

***Write an ode to something connected to cooking or eating, using "Ode to El Molcajete" as a model.***