

# Recipes for

# Connectors



Inspiring



social



connection



one bite



at a time



Office of the  
U.S. Surgeon General



# Letter from the U.S. Surgeon General

Just as we need food and water, we need social connection to be healthy. Research shows that connection can lead to better health and well-being—it protects us against serious issues like heart disease, stroke, dementia, and depression.\* As I've traveled the country to raise awareness about the health consequences of loneliness and the importance of social connection, there is one question that comes up at every stop: **how can I create meaningful relationships in my life?**

We made “Recipes for Connection” to spark ideas for gathering around food—because food is woven into our memories and is a powerful way of sharing who we are and what we love.

When I think about connecting over food, I see myself at the kitchen counter, laughing with my mother and kids while peeling mangoes picked from our garden. I think of small dinner gatherings with treasured friends I would host during medical school, often with a single pot of hastily cooked pasta and vegetables. And I

remember a wise mentor who told me food is so much more than calories—it's the love your mother gave you as a child.

How you gather is up to you. Just as there is more than one way to crack an egg, the ideas here are suggestions and starting points. Use them as inspiration to design get-togethers that feel right to you, whether big or small, spontaneous or planned. I hope as you do, you build confidence for more gatherings with new and old friends, family, and neighbors. Gatherings don't have to be fancy, complicated, or costly—it's the spirit of sharing that truly brings us closer together. Even something as simple as sharing a small bite with someone can strengthen our connections and remind us of the joy that comes from togetherness.

Remember, when we eat *together*, we not only feed our bodies, we nourish our spirits.

Wishing you a buffet of happy memories,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Vivek Murthy". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Vivek" and last name "Murthy" clearly legible.

**Dr. Vivek Murthy, 19th & 21st U.S. Surgeon General**

\*If you're curious to learn more about the importance of social connection for our health, visit [surgeongeneral.gov/connection](https://www.surgeongeneral.gov/connection)



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# Setting

## Ingredients for Any Gathering

It doesn't have to take much to whip up a gathering. The ingredients here can get you started—and remember, substitutions are welcome. Experiment with what works for you.

No matter what you choose, leave perfection at the door. Being together is what counts!

A hand in a blue sleeve holds a glowing green lightbulb. The lightbulb is surrounded by colorful stars and dots. The text "A dash of courage to make the invite" is written in a blue, sans-serif font, slanted upwards to the right.

A dash of  
courage to  
make the  
invite

A hand in a red sleeve holds three overlapping speech bubbles: a yellow one at the top, a pink one in the middle, and a green one at the bottom. The text "Good", "Conversation", and "Prompts" is written in blue, sans-serif font inside the bubbles respectively.

Good

Conversation

Prompts

Gathering Idea

# the Table



People you want to know better



# Making the Invite

## Some Invite Starters

Hey, it's been a minute. Any chance you're free to...

I'm thinking about getting a few people together...

Awesome meeting you the other day...

Do you want to join us for...

Hey! I think you'd love this...

## 3 W'S

A great invite has 3 W's:



## Mad Lib

When it comes to a successful hangout, inviting others is half the recipe. Start with this invitation Mad Lib—just add your idea!

**Prep time: 2–5 minutes**

Hey!

Would you like to \_\_\_\_\_  
**idea for hangout**

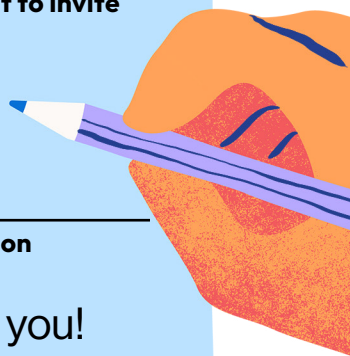
with me (and \_\_\_\_\_ )  
**anyone else you want to invite**

on \_\_\_\_\_ ?  
**date & time**

We're meeting at \_\_\_\_\_  
**location**

and it would be great to see you!

Let met know if you can make it!



# Examples of Real-Life Invitations

“Haven’t seen you in awhile! Do you want to do a coffee catch-up next week?”

**Annie, ME**

“I have an idea...what about a FishNic? We bring fish sandwiches from our favorite spots and have a picnic in the park. Who else do you want to invite?”

**Trace, HI**

“Friday, my place, sweatpants, bad TV, and dinner?”

**Amanda, WA**

“Hey, I’m making a batch of my nonna’s pasta & meatballs. Feel free to drop by tonight any time after 6pm. Highly recommend getting here early—we always run out!”

**Jacob, NC**

“I keep thinking about that awesome cake you brought to Judy’s last week... sooo good! A new dessert cafe just opened around the corner from me—want to check it out sometime this weekend?”

**Alex, KS**

Inspiration  
for

Gathering

# Make Bite-Sized Connections

Making quality connections doesn't have to take a ton of time. Even amidst the frenzy of to-dos and responsibilities, chatting with someone for just a few moments can be a delightful treat.

As you move through your day, where could you spare a few extra minutes?





## Idea Starters

### Short n' Sweet

Even during the busiest of times, finding time to check in with a friend can be a great way to unwind together. Keep it short and sweet—suggest a coffee walk in the neighborhood, taking a smoothie break in the park or a food truck visit during lunch.

### Local Drop-Ins

Imagine that cozy spot in your neighborhood people from the community gather—maybe it's the local coffee shop, diner, or market. Next time you're there, take a moment to chat. Ask your server their name or strike up a friendly convo with someone in line at the grocery store. It's these little moments that can turn everyday stops into genuine connections.



## Conversation Prompts

“What’s one thing you’re grateful for today?”

“What’s something you’ve been loving lately? It could be a book, movie, song, or even a new recipe!”

“What’s something that got you laughing this week?”

### Gathering Tip

Feeling like you don't have enough time to make meaningful connections? Just show up! Your presence is the greatest gift. For more tips, see page 37.





# Bites at the Bus Stop

A true connection story  
from Noreen in California

Muffins are my favorite breakfast food. Every morning, while waiting for the bus, my morning ritual was eating a muffin. And I savored every bite.

I noticed there was older gentleman who took the same bus at the same time every day. One day, I decided to I strike up a conversation with him and offered him a bit of my favorite bran muffin. This simple gesture sparked a conversation. Of course it turned out Otis and I both loved muffins.

For the next seven years, I would sometimes pick up an extra muffin for Otis, and in return, Otis would surprise me with a muffin from his favorite bakery. Our morning chats became a cherished routine, lasting until I changed jobs. When Otis passed away in 2019, I attended his funeral, reflecting on the unexpected friendship that grew from a small act of kindness.

You never know where bonding over a bite can lead—sometimes the most unexpected and beautiful relationships start from conversations over sharing food.

# Deepen Relationships

When we acknowledge each other and truly listen, it fuels our sense of belonging. Belonging isn't just a nice bonus—it's a human necessity. It's what can transform an ordinary conversation into a meaningful connection.

Food can serve as a powerful force for forging deeper connections with those around us. Recipes can carry our stories. Through the rituals of cooking and eating, we feed our friendships, creating lasting memories one delicious bite at a time.



## Idea Starter

### Childhood Faves Potluck

What was your favorite childhood snack? Maybe it was a crustless PB&J sandwich for lunch, fruit salad, a samosa or gimbap you ate as an after school pick-me-up. Host a childhood snack potluck and invite your friends (and their friends!). Ask each guest to bring a cherished snack or dish and a story to share.

## Conversation Prompts

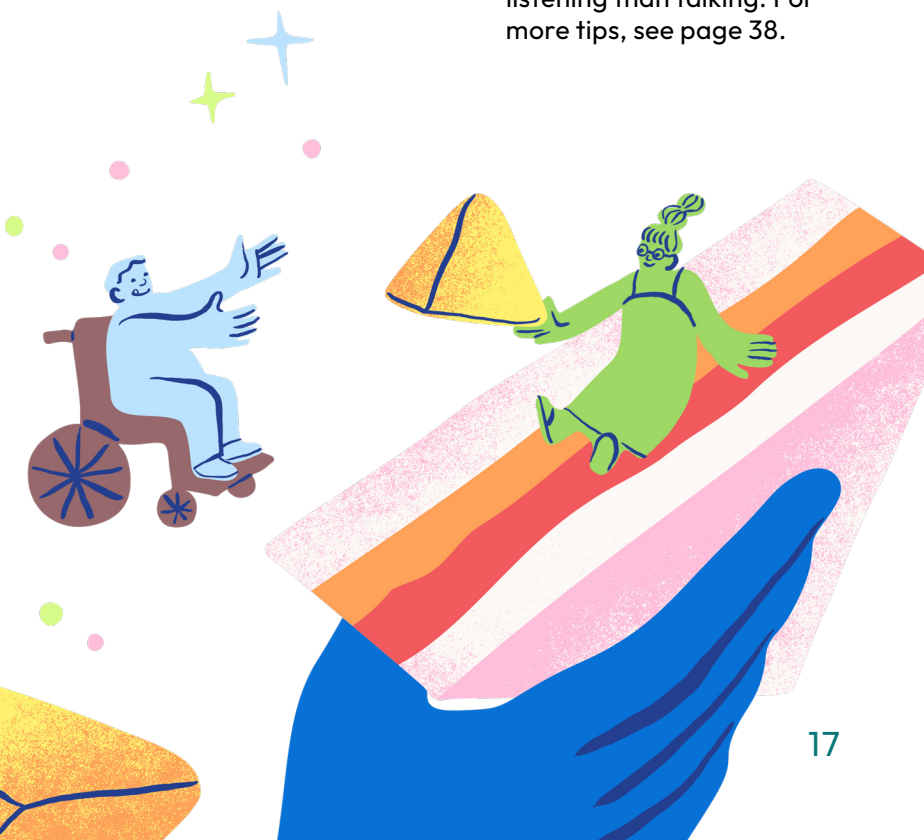
“What’s a memory that comes to mind as you eat this snack?”

“Were there any snacks you used to trade with friends during lunch?”

“Do you have any special family recipes that have been passed down through generations?”

### Gathering Tip

As a host, creating a welcoming experience for all your guests is key. How can you encourage everyone to participate? Invite them to do more listening than talking. For more tips, see page 38.



# Serving Home-Cooked Connections

A true connection story  
from Maya in Washington, D.C.

In college, I volunteered at Community Meals, a program created to help feed community members who were in need. When I first heard about the program, I thought I would be packaging to-go meals, but Community Meals was really unique: it was set up as a fun, restaurant-style experience. Community members came to the church and were warmly greeted and then seated at the communal tables. A pianist would fill the room with relaxing music. Volunteers served nutritious, home-cooked meals to guests seated at the tables, making everyone feel cared for.

And living up to its name, these were truly community meals, open to anyone in the community, whether people were having a hard time getting food on the table or not.

After serving everyone their meals, I would join a table. Eating together created an opportunity for me to connect with community members I would not have met otherwise. Sometimes families shared how they were going through one of the most challenging periods of their lives, facing situations they never anticipated. Other times, the conversation was all laughs. These meals also helped me feel less far away from my family, too.

Food is a powerful way to bring people together. Before the meal, we were all strangers. By the end, we truly felt connected, uplifted, and grateful to be in each others' company.



# Host Celebrations

“Celebration” probably has you thinking about life’s big moments—birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, cultural gatherings. But there are so many little moments in life also worth celebrating—a favorite meal to kick off the weekend, a sunny day after a rainy week. Whether it’s throwing a big party for a momentous event or simply savoring a beautiful day, each moment brings its own flavor to the table. So, let’s celebrate the significant moments and appreciate the little wonders that brighten our days. Here’s to living life to the fullest!





## Idea Starters

### Friendiversary Celebration

This can be celebrating with friends you've known since kindergarten or with new friends you recently met. Some ideas for what you can do: DIY pizza party, popcorn and movie night, potluck picnic.

### Ingredient Cook-Off!

Organize a night of fun over some friendly competition. In teams of 1 to 3 people, have a cook-off that focuses on one main ingredient.

### The Remix Dinner

For a really low-effort gathering, invite guests to bring something they already have in their fridge or pantry. It could be a can of corn, half a loaf of bread, some fruit, a chunk of cheese—anything goes! Someone else's leftovers can be someone else's delight. It's the company that counts.

## Conversation Prompts

"What are some of our favorite memories together? What made them special to you?"

"What's the funniest thing that happened to you recently?"

"If you could visit any place in the world right now, where would it be?"

### Gathering Tip

Our attention is precious. Tuck your phones or devices away. It will help everyone stay in the moment and enjoy each other's company fully.





# An Unexpected New Tradition

A true connection story  
from Elizabeth in Massachusetts

In my early 30's, I had a rough breakup and had to move out. I was adrift and leaning on friends for support and distraction. I started hosting Sunday night dinners in my tiny new apartment, a ritual that eased loneliness and gave structure to my weeks. These eventually culminated in a Friendsgiving celebration, where a dozen of us ate turkey and pie, toasted our friendship, and acknowledged what we were grateful for. It felt special, and we resolved to do it every year. As an LGBTQ circle, we called it "Thanksgayving."

We have now gathered for seventeen annual Thanksgayvings, with as many as thirty-six people around the table. There are Thanksgayving traditions and foods: the ceremonial extraction of a canned cranberry log, the special garlicky green beans we can't do without. Most important, before dinner, we sit in a big messy circle and give thanks. We've celebrated marriages and births, mourned losses, and supported each other through illness, divorce, and unemployment. Some friends in the group only see each other once a year, but Thanksgayving has become a cherished way to reconnect, mark time, and foster gratitude.

# Spark New Connections

Building new social connections is like adding flavor to your life's mix. But... it can be intimidating to initiate a hang out with someone new. How should I invite them? What activity do I propose? What if they aren't available?

We all experience these anxieties, but remember, spending time with a new friend doesn't have to be an elaborately-planned day. You can keep it simple and casual.



## Idea Starters

### Pups n' Pastries

Keep it low stakes and invite a new friend for a short walk in the neighborhood. Bring some shareable snacks or suggest meeting at your favorite coffee shop. You have to walk your dog, anyway, so why not invite a new friend to join?

### Taste Test Adventure

Sharing food is a great ice breaker. Make an adventure of it—invite a friend to hop around to different stores or markets to taste new samples. See story on page 27 for inspiration.

### Sunrise Coffee

Invite someone to enjoy the quiet of a sunrise with a morning coffee or tea. Connecting doesn't always have to involve chatting—sharing in each other's presence is a powerful way to connect.

## Conversation Prompts

“What’s something you’re excited for in the coming weeks?”

“What’s something you dream about doing but haven’t yet?”

“Is a hot dog a sandwich?”



# Mahjong Mondays

A true connection story  
from Jae in Arizona

I have a monthly tradition with friends: every second Monday of the month we meet for mahjong night. We all take turns hosting. And one thing we always do: consider it an open invitation to bring new friends.

On these evenings, we all gather around the mahjong table and take turns playing or watching the game. Before we start the game, we always give new guests a tutorial. Mahjong Mondays are always full of laughter and delicious snacks. We always like to try new things, like Brazilian cheese bread or black sesame dip.

The food plan is always low-pressure with very little planning. Sometimes we order in from our favorite local restaurants. Sometimes we make it potluck-style where everyone brings one contribution, with one person usually raising their hand to make the main dish.

We all look forward to every Mahjong Monday, to catch up and bond with one another amidst the hustle and bustle of our lives as working adults.



# Bonding Over Samples

A true connection story  
from Frank in New York

Every Thursday afternoon, like clockwork, I would make my way to the local farmer's market to explore the fresh produce and try out new products. This routine became a cherished part of my life after retiring and becoming an empty nester. Initially, I went to get some exercise while sampling the offerings at the market. Each week, they would have new promotions for seasonal items to taste.

A few months into my visits, I started to connect with some of the staff and business owners at the sample counters. They would greet me with a warm, "Hey Frank! Great to see you again. How's your day going?" We would chat briefly about our lives—sharing our weekend plans or stories about our families.

What began as a quest for free samples blossomed into genuine friendships at the local market.

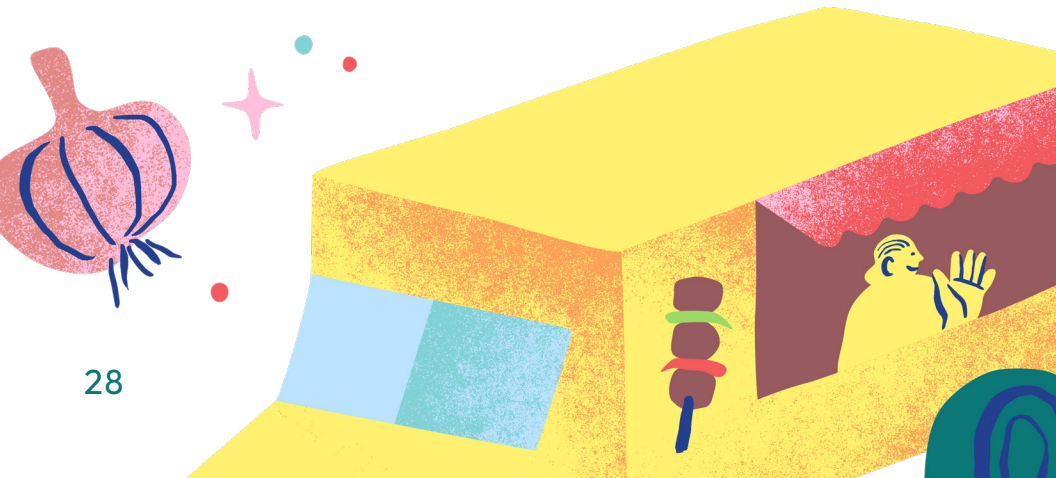




# Expand Your Circle

Expanding your social circle opens you up to new perspectives, experiences and support systems. Having a range of different types of friends and acquaintances is key ingredient for healthy social connection.

While making new friends and acquaintances can feel daunting at first, there are plenty of ways to make it less intimidating. Meeting new friends through friends is a great first step. You can also join clubs, attend events, or strike up conversations in everyday situations. Each small effort you make helps broaden your community.





## Idea Starters

### Meet n' Eat

Don't feel like cooking? Don't let that keep you from gathering! Instead, pick a casual place (like a food hall or a park for a picnic) and a time and invite a bunch of folks. No RSVPs or food prep necessary!

### Bring-A-Friend Game Night

Organize a game night with your friends. Pick a game, prep some of your favorite snacks, and ask your friends who are coming to bring a new friend. Easy!

## Conversation Prompts

"What's your go-to comfort food when you need a pick-me-up?"

"Are you a sweet or savory person when it comes to snacks?"

"If you could only eat one food for the rest of your life, what would you choose?"

### Gathering Tip

Worried about a low turnout? With everyone's busy schedules, gathering people can be a challenge. If you're dealing with fewer guests than expected, check out page 38 for tips on what you can do.



# Together at the Table

A true connection story  
from Sarah in Texas

When I moved to Dallas 14 years ago, I didn't know anyone. I felt daunted: how would I make new friends?

Then, an old friend reminded me that I was a "people gatherer." As a student in Arkansas, I had started a cafe...in my house. It was under the radar but it became a thing, with everyone from the hardware store guy to our university president asking me to host gatherings! Thinking back on those memories, I felt a tug to recreate that magic in my new home.

I took a chance. I looked up my neighbors' names and addresses and mailed them paper invites. I wrote: "If you've never stepped outside of your house to meet your neighbors, would you come? Bring a beverage, a dish, or whatever you like, and we'll have a potluck." Even if a few people joined, it was still worth the effort to me.

In preparation, my dad, a talented carpenter, built a beautiful wooden table. My yard was tiny and a little downtrodden, with a small patch of grass, a chain link fence, and cracks in the driveway. But that didn't matter because I knew the table would be the place where everyone gathered. When the evening came, 91 people



showed up! I was stunned. That day, I learned people just want to be invited.

Over the years, my table has become a cherished space where people find comfort and connection. I've hosted everything from casual dinners to gatherings for funerals. (At last count, I've hosted over 4,500 guests.) Hoping to inspire more gatherings, my dad and I started a custom table business. We've made over 500 tables for customers as far away as Oregon and Vermont. I deliver every table myself, meeting people gatherers all over the country.

Some hosting tips: At the table, I introduce everyone by name and mention one thing I love about them. It's a simple acknowledgment that also boosts people's confidence to connect. Also, help people feel like they have a part in the gathering—if you see low water glasses, fill them. Serve food. Load the dishwasher. To pull everyone into one conversation, have a few reflective questions ready to ask the group. Do whatever helps people feel welcome.

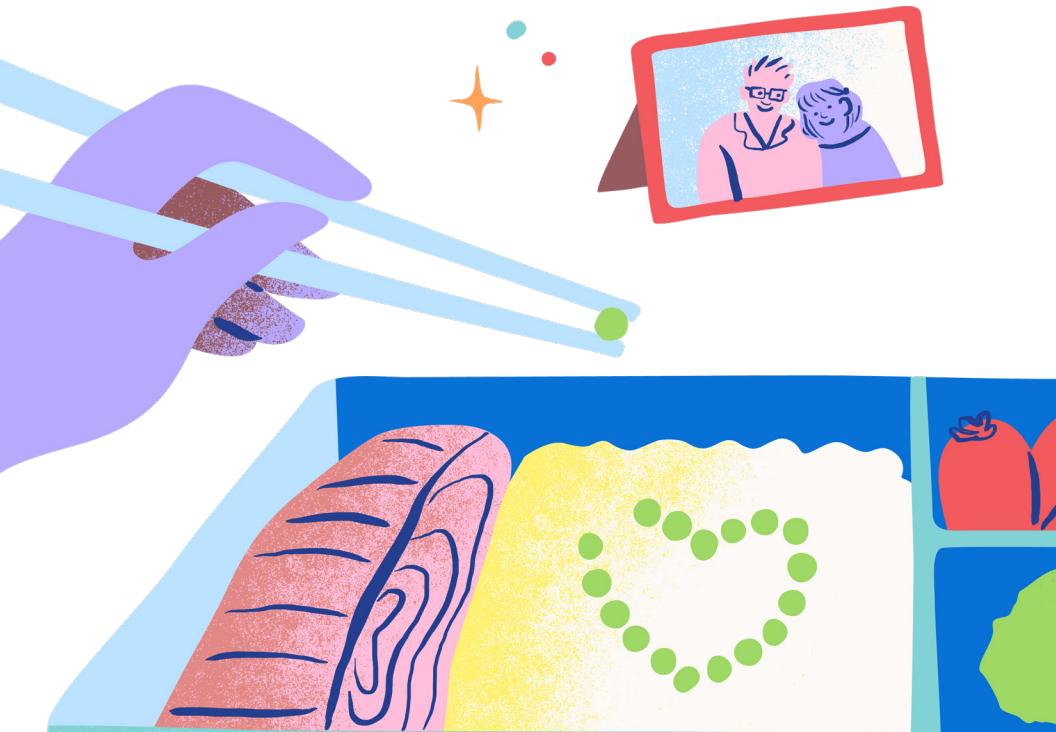
Something comes alive in each of us when we're at the table together. That's what I've learned about life—things are so much better when we're sharing. We all have to eat anyway, so we may as well do it together!

When I'm 80 years old, I still hope to be gathering people.



# Give Thanks

Did you know that showing gratitude can strengthen our social connections? Gratitude acts as a powerful glue, a reminder of love and kindness that brings us closer to our friends, family, and community. It feels good to show appreciation, for you and the person receiving your thanks. Who's someone you would like to thank?



## Idea Starter

### Gratitude Box

Think of someone you are grateful for and would like to thank them for being a positive force in your life. It can be anyone—a friend, a neighbor, your child’s teacher, the local traffic guard, the mail person, etc. Select a box (like a bento or any food-friendly container) and fill it with goodies. Think of 3-5 small treats you think this person might enjoy eating. Write a heartfelt message about the things you’re grateful for about them—maybe it’s their kindness, their humor, or a special shared memory. Get creative! Personalize it by adding stickers or drawings! Deliver it with a smile!

## Reflection Prompts

“What do I appreciate most about this person?”

“How has this person positively impacted my life?”



# Garden of Gratitude

A true connection story  
from Myetraie in Florida

I love our garden. My husband and I have cared for it for 40 years. When we moved into our home, our yard was just grass. Year by year, my husband and I would plant fruit trees. When I look out at our yard now, it fills me with a sense of comfort and peace. The lush trees of citrus, lychee, sitaphal, jackfruit, and mango also remind me of my childhood. Once, we had a 65-pound jackfruit! I love mangoes so much that we grow 9 different varieties.

Our garden's abundance is a divine gift, and it makes me so happy to share that abundance with friends and family as well as with the squirrels and birds. When the time is right, we invite everyone to come by and pluck the ripe fruits. For loved ones who are far away, I mail boxes of carefully wrapped jackfruit and mangoes. When my grandchildren visit, we experiment with all kinds of mango recipes, like mango cake, mango ice cream, and mango lassis.

The fruit from our garden has become a symbol of gratitude for family, friends, neighbors, and the animals who make our garden their home. It is so simple to give in this way, bringing delight and joy to both the giver and receiver. Everything tastes better when it's shared.





# Food is My Love Language

A true connection story  
from Avantika in Minnesota

Food is my grandmother's love language. Whenever we're together, I help my Nani (that's what I call her) in the kitchen, chopping, stirring, baking, rolling, whatever she needs. When we gather for holidays, Nani makes every single family member (that's 12 people!) their favorite home-made dish.

Just like Nani, I always listen for what people love. I once heard my friend Alex say chocolate chip cookies are his favorite, so for his 13th birthday I surprised him with a giant chocolate chip cookie cake! For my friend Mario, I made apple crisp cookies that he said were the best cookies he has ever had in his entire life! My brother's favorite is banana bread. My mom is my #1 taste tester, even though she has to regularly remind me to clean up my kitchen mess. For her, I always love to make anything with chocolate and coconut, two of her favorite ingredients.

Cooking is super fun. It's also the perfect way for me to show my love and appreciation for the people who mean a lot to me.



# Bites to Go



# Strategies for Easing Gathering Anxieties

## **What if I'm too busy to host?**

We get it. It's not always easy to find the time for a gathering, let alone plan one. If time is short, consider:

- Co-hosting with a friend
- Having a potluck where everyone contributes
- Making a time bounded plan—it's okay to say you only have 30 minutes to get together

## **What if I don't have time to make anything?**

Just show up! You being part of a gathering is more important than what you can bring. If you don't have time to bring something to a gathering, don't worry about it. (You can always give the host a heads up.) Your presence is the best present.

## **What if my grocery budget is already tight and I can't buy extra food for a gathering?**

You don't have to go all out to host a gathering. Forget a meal; snacks and small bites can be just as effective in bringing people together. Think about simple things you can make with ingredients you already have. Or you can make it a potluck-style gathering and ask everyone to bring a food or drink to share.

## **How do I make space for everyone to talk?**

As the host, you can set the tone for the gathering. Sarah from Texas (see page 30) asks her guests to focus on listening and giving everyone a chance to speak. If one person is dominating the discussion, you can bring more voices in by trying something like, “That’s an interesting point. Anybody else have thoughts on this?”

## **What if I mess up my dish and it’s inedible?**

Not everyone’s a master in the kitchen, and that’s okay—but hangry guests are no fun. If you’re in a bind, you could:

- Serve breakfast for dinner
- Have everyone chip in to get some pre-made meals
- Turn it into a fun, last-minute cook-off by getting your guests to create dishes with whatever’s in the pantry!

## **What if I invite people and only a few (or no one) can make it?**

You come up with a great idea, send out invites, and... nothing but crickets. Trust us, it’s not you. Life’s busy and it can be hard to get people together. If you’re facing low or no turnout, you could:

- Offer alternative dates or try planning in advance to give people more time to save the date
- Switch up the event to something more casual, like a picnic or grabbing dinner at a local spot
- Reach out to friends individually to see if they’re free for a smaller, more intimate hangout
- Keep the event flexible—consider turning it into a “come whenever you can” gathering

**Let's build  
connection  
one bite at  
a time!**

# What's your recipe for connection?



[surgeongeneral.gov/recipes](https://surgeongeneral.gov/recipes)

Recipes are meant for sharing. Share your ideas at **#recipesforconnection**

Share your experiences with us



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