

THE GOSPEL
ACCORDING TO FOOD

The Gospel According to Food

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BOOK CONTRIBUTORS

Recipes: Gary Stevenson
Writing: Gary Stevenson, Jason Weimer
Edits: Jason Weimer, Elisabeth Thoresen
Photography: Guy Gerrard, Rima Dickson, Gary Stevenson, Chingtai Wong, Chris Lateki
Design and Layout: Julie Plasse

ONLINE CONVERSATION GUIDES

Writing: Andy Allan, Hannah Gajari, Elizabeth Godden, Danielle Montgomery, Elisabeth Thoresen, Jason Weimer
Edits: Elisabeth Thoresen, Jason Weimer
Design and Layout: Julie Plasse, JD Gerard

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*Dedicated to all who hunger for more—not
just for good food, but meaningful connection,
deeper truth, and glimpses of the Divine.*

The Gospel According to Food

SETTING THE TABLE FOR
SPIRITUAL CONVERSATIONS

Gary Stevenson
with Jason Weimer





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FOREWORD: UMAMI NEIGHBORING

BY CHRIS & ELIZABETH MCKINNEY

Maybe you're like us and you've never tried mushroom soil or miracle berries before.

We were among the initial beta testers for *The Gospel According to Food* and were treated to a gourmet dinner full of guided conversations and flavorful metaphors. Not long after, we found ourselves cooking some of these recipes for a table full of our own neighbors—exploring the meal's theme, relating it to our own spiritual journeys, and drawing meaningful connections to Jesus and Scripture. When we explained the premise of the night to them in an invitation over text, our neighbors were eager to be our guinea pigs for a night of good conversation and yummy food.

For context, when we moved into our home eleven years ago, we didn't set out initially to build close relationships with our neighbors. We were in one of the most stressful seasons of our life, and it was really our neediness that prompted us to consider connecting with those in our proximity. But we needed an excuse ... ours was a fish fry.

That's when something magical happened—though we hardly recognized it at the time—we went from side-by-side strangers to acquaintances, the first step. What started as a little get-together with a few couples became a tradition for our suburban subdivision and grew over the years to include five streets and a few cul-de-sacs.

Now yearly, when the weather gets nice, we gather as singles, empty-nesters, young parents, toddlers, and teens—everyone showing up outside our home with a big appetite and food to share. Some are holding newborns, some swapping health sagas, some making TikTok videos; all feeling like we're a part of one big family that spans generations, racial demographics, and worldviews. The fish fry became the first of many excuses we've made to hang out and build relationships with those around us.

This cookbook could be the very excuse you need to draw people together, break down barriers, and create space for real connection. Just as Jesus saw meals as sacred moments to reveal truth, extend grace, and build relationships, so can we. Whether dining with tax collectors and

sinner, gathering with his closest disciples, or feeding a large gathering, food became a tangible way to display the goodness of God. In the same way, we can make an impact through salty conversations and purposeful acts of hospitality with the people in our lives. And where better to begin than at home, where we are most authentically ourselves? Whether your neighborhood consists of five streets in the suburbs like ours, five homes in the outskirts, or five stories in the city, you've been placed for a purpose. God has positioned you to bring flavor and illumination to your community, creating spaces where neighbors can experience the hope of the gospel.

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven (Mt. 5:13–16, NIV).

When our faith is tangibly expressed in our neighborhoods through good deeds, it creates a foundation for having the kinds of table-conversations that are encouraged in this cookbook. This blend of good deeds and good words allows our neighbors to truly "[t]aste and see that the LORD is good" (Ps. 34:8, NIV). Jesus' countercultural values begin to waft across rural and suburban fences and up urban apartment stairwells, making our neighbors hungry for him, too.

After all, Jesus' call to live as salt and light in our communities immediately follows his countercultural pathway and means for what that looks like: the Beatitudes. And among these eight invitations for flourishing and impacting our world, the fourth one reads: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (Mt. 5:6, NIV). Jesus is addressing our appetites. He wants us to crave and be satisfied by doing his good will, just as someone who hasn't eaten for days delights in a good meal. As our spiritual appetites shift, we become eager, ready, and willing to demonstrate God's character to our neighbors so they can see what he's like. Our desire to honor God overflows into tangible actions that invite others to taste his goodness.

If we were playing a word association game here, Jesus' 'hunger and thirst' language might remind us of the Japanese word *umami*, meaning "savory" or "delicious," often called the fifth flavor after bitter, salty, sweet, and sour. It's found in crusty, caramelized bits of meats, soy and fish sauces, aged cheeses, truffles and mushrooms, tomatoes and sweet potatoes, olives, kimchi, miso paste, and salty broths. Also, bacon. Once you discover it, it's easy to geek out over the food science behind "umami bombs," where certain food combinations unlock "umami synergy" with "eight times the flavor." Think bleu cheese over a grilled steak or a tomato soup topped with parmesan cheese or bacon and eggs—all umami bombs.

When Jesus promises satisfaction for those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, he's talking umami bomb kind of fulfillment. The eight-times-the-flavor kind. We are guaranteed to enjoy his good kingdom work for eternity ... *and* in part now.

Good works taste good to both us and our neighbors. Even in the smallest of interactions, consider each act of neighborliness as an amuse-bouche, a bite-sized appetizer that's served as a surprise. It doesn't take much to make a tasteful impression. In a world of over-scheduling and indifference toward others, a little goes a long way. Without needing to travel overseas or across town, we can help our neighbors see and savor Jesus in an umami kind of way.


The psalmists agree: "I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you" (Ps. 63:5, NIV); "for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things" (Ps. 107:9, NIV).

Because something about the combination of good news and good deeds is totally umami.

As you step out in faith with spiritually curious neighbors and friends, remember that this cookbook you're holding is more than just a collection of recipes. *The Gospel According to Food* is a resource to help you live out your faith in ways that open doors for meaningful spiritual conversations. Food has the power to connect, comfort, and create space for relationships to grow, making this book a valuable tool for anyone wanting to transform their table into a place where spiritually curious neighbors can encounter the God who satisfies.

As you flip through these pages, may you be inspired to send those invitational dinner texts to neighbors, to open your home, and to foster meaningful conversations in fresh and unexpected ways. May you never lose your saltiness or hide your light, but instead, let it shine before your neighbors so they may see your good deeds and glorify our Father in heaven. And let's pray expectantly that they'll get a taste of something eternal and be drawn to Jesus, the Bread of Life.

CHRIS AND ELIZABETH MCKINNEY, Co-authors of *Placed for a Purpose* and *Neighborhoods Reimagined: How the Beatitudes Inspire Our Call to Be Good Neighbors*. Parts of this foreword are taken from *Neighborhoods Reimagined* (10Publishing, 2024).

A close-up photograph of a chef's hands. The left hand holds a small brush with a purple handle and a silver ferrule. The right hand's index finger is touching the bristles of the brush. The brush is positioned over a black plate, dusting a chocolate pyramid dessert with fine gold powder. The dessert is a triangular prism of dark chocolate, topped with a single fresh raspberry. A pool of white sauce is visible at the base of the pyramid. The background is dark and out of focus.

THE ACT OF EATING
ENGAGES ALL THE
SENSES AS WELL AS THE
MIND. PREPARING AND
SERVING FOOD COULD
THEREFORE BE THE
MOST COMPLEX AND
COMPREHENSIVE OF
THE PERFORMING ARTS.

Heston Blumenthal

THEO'S FEAST: HOW THIS BOOK CAME TO BE

Sometime during the summer of 2003, while barbecuing a salmon in my backyard, I sensed a clear internal voice say “you’re going to write a cookbook for me.”

It was quite startling, as neither my future nor any spiritual matters were on my mind. I might have dismissed it as a random passing thought, but I’d grown enough in my Christian faith to know that God will sometimes “nudge” his followers through the Holy Spirit’s presence within us, and this felt distinct and different from the many passing thoughts I do have.

Since I wasn’t a chef, or really even close to one, I didn’t do anything with this little nudge for some time. A cookbook didn’t seem remotely possible. But, time after time, often while I was praying or reading the Bible, the nudge would come back. This lent extra credence to the sense that God was behind the idea. After enough reminders, I decided to pursue it.

My prayers for clarity on how to go about such an endeavor were met by a simple recognition: food served as a powerful communication device throughout the Bible. Adam and Eve eating forbidden fruit, the Jewish Passover feast, Jesus’ identification of himself as the “Bread of Life,” his use of bread and wine to illustrate the reason for his death and its importance for his followers—in each of these examples, and many others, food serves as a metaphor to convey rich spiritual truth.

I began experimenting, learning as much as I could about flavor pairings and culinary science, and seeking to follow the Bible’s example of using food to create “edible metaphors.” Within a year or so I had a collection of dishes that I felt represented the Bible’s main message.

Some students I’d been working with at Simon Fraser University, outside of Vancouver, heard what I was up to (my job throughout this whole saga was as a university chaplain), and suggested that we host an event. They’d been looking for fun and creative ways to communicate their Christian faith with their friends. I agreed, though with no finances to speak of and no sense of how the idea would go over, I told the students that their first invitations had to go to the friends they thought were *least* likely to attend, and that we’d have to charge \$25 per guest. We were

shocked when the event sold out within a few days. We even had to establish a waiting list. The invitations were clear that this was an event hosted by a Christian ministry as a way to engage in spiritual conversation, yet students with no connection to Jesus and from all sorts of spiritual backgrounds were lining up.

That first event occurred on March 1, 2014. We decided to call it “Theo’s Feast,” an intentional play on the word *theophany*, meaning a physical manifestation of God tangible to the human senses. Our hope was, and still remains, that those joining in the meals would experience something akin to a theophany as they experience the good news of God’s love and grace through all of their senses.

Our next shock came as we sorted through the comments guests left for us:

“I was so touched . . . I never knew that food could be related to such spiritual matters.”

“It changed the way I look at things that I used to think of as ordinary, can truly be extraordinary.”

That first Theo’s Feast set the tone that all others would follow. Inspired by how Jesus often shared truths about God and his kingdom over intimate meals, our mission is to craft exceptional, immersive dining experiences that inspire curiosity and foster meaningful, gospel-centered conversations.

Each version of Theo’s Feast is as appetizing to the mind and spirit as it is to the most distinguished palate. I’ve drawn inspiration from many of the world’s most avant-garde chefs, thought provoking theologians, and culture shaping philosophers. These multi-course experiences allow us to tell a comprehensive story (as in our Original Feast, which examines the Bible’s narrative of creation, fall, and redemption), or to explore various facets of a particular topic or event (as in our Christmas and Easter feasts, which weave the overarching biblical narrative through different elements of each holiday, using both historical and cultural traditions). We introduce each individual dish with a short narrative that invites guests to connect to a particular theme or spiritual truth through the sights, smells, flavors, and even sounds the dish presents. Discussion questions at each table then invite deeper reflection and engaging conversation over the shared meal.

Since 2014, I and a team of dedicated volunteers have hosted over 2,500 guests and developed 8 themed feasts, with more to come. Two of these are presented in full in this book. Many additional recipes come from our other themed feasts, while a few are what I call “one-dish wonders.”

The simple act of sitting around a table and sharing food is remarkably powerful. In cultures both historic and modern, eating a meal together indicates trust, welcome, warmth, and friend-

ship. It levels playing fields. It's a setting where vulnerability is inherent and relationships are forged. In our fast-paced, polarized, and skeptical culture, there may be no better venue than a shared meal for a conversation about the things that truly matter to us: spirituality, relationships, the difficulties and hardships of life. Authenticity, empathy, nuance, and connection find a place around the table. All of us long for these elements to characterize our relationships, and Christians who yearn to help others discover Jesus long for them to characterize our conversations about him.

It is in that spirit that we return to where this section began: a cookbook. Ever since that first Theo's Feast in 2014, I've wanted to help others create meaningful conversation spaces and communicate their faith in ways that open up deeper understanding and engagement. I've learned a lot through hosting large events, and my cooking has gone from experimental to experienced. I've been invited to participate in TV cooking shows, and I've cooked for a conference of chefs. Some people call me a chef, but I don't like to refer to myself that way for 2 reasons: I'm still mostly self-trained, and I want people to know that if I can prepare these dishes, anyone can.

I hope that *The Gospel According to Food* distills the culinary and conversational experience I've gained and passes it along to you, enabling you to create edible metaphors that look and taste fantastic, and that lead to moments of theophany in the lives of the people you care about most. The next section, *How to Use this Book*, will show you how.



HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

In most cookbooks, food is the central focus. Not so here.

In *The Gospel According to Food*, my goal is to set the table for meaningful spiritual conversations. The food plays an important role, but the primary goal is always the conversation. I want you, and whomever you share these dishes with, to have a dialogue that overflows with empathy, understanding, and good listening, and that offers a fresh, eye-opening perspective on Jesus and the Christian faith.

You might assume, then, that this book is for Christians only. However, quite the opposite.

There are people in our world, some even in our own neighborhoods, who have never heard of Jesus. Others have just the faintest idea of who he is. But for the largest segment of people, at least in the “West” (most of Europe, North America, and Australia), their relationship to Christianity might best be described as “overly familiar yet completely alien.”

What I mean by this is that Western society has been profoundly shaped by Christianity, to the point that our cultural values, stories, morals, and underlying beliefs are still rooted in a Christian understanding of the world. Because of this, many people would say they “get” Christianity. They’d say that they know what Christians believe, and what Christianity’s institutions and ethics and cultural postures are. Whether or not this understanding is accurate varies widely depending on the individual, but the point is that there is a *perception* of familiarity. This perception of familiarity leads people to a dismissive, “been there, done that” posture. Our humanist understanding has made it obsolete.

However, there is a massive gap between perception and reality. There are many reasons for this (media and politics are two big ones), but we Christians are often the biggest culprits. Sadly, the public witness of Christianity is marked by division, fear, questionable communication tactics, moral failure among leaders, compromised or watered down versions of our faith, fighting “culture wars” and seeking positions of cultural power, and more. Sometimes we can’t seem to get out of our own way. So the “familiar” picture many people have is woefully short of authentic Christianity.

As I mentioned in the previous section (*Theo's Feast: How This Book Came to Be*), my heart is to help create opportunities where the beautiful realities of Jesus and God's kingdom can break through preconceived perceptions, allowing people to see God and the gospel in a fresh new light. If our faith is going to be relevant and inviting in today's cultural setting, this reframing of perception and re-revelation of God is vital. The arts, from painting and performance to film and fiction, might be the best venue for this to happen. That includes, in this case, the culinary arts.

So, rather than using this book to find meals to enjoy by yourself or with immediate family (though you certainly can do this), I strongly encourage you to use it to host gatherings of friends, neighbors, co-workers, and more. Open your heart and your home. Embrace community and conversation.

While you're at it, give the artistic side of cooking a shot. The recipes in this book are carefully designed "edible metaphors," and presentation is a key part of creating the metaphor and engaging the heart in the way that the arts are so good at doing. Some recipes may be visually intimidating, and some may push you a bit past your culinary comfort zone, but all are very do-able. If you find a recipe that looks difficult or overwhelming, I encourage you to take a step of faith. Give it a shot. You just might find that you can cook more skillfully than you ever imagined, and the result could be a dish that helps people "taste and see" God's character or connect to our shared human experience in profound and transformational ways!

Recipe Structure

The recipes in *The Gospel According to Food* share a common template:

THE STORY BEHIND THE DISH

In our Theo's Feast events, an emcee introduces each dish with a three to five minute narrative. These examine biblical, historical, or even current events to connect guests with the themes and metaphors the dish invites them to consider. However, this storytelling approach doesn't fit well in a smaller, more informal setting like a dining room table. So we've redesigned the narratives as guided conversations (see the '*Recipe for the Conversation*' section, described below).

This section, then, is for you, the host, or for a casual reader just flipping through the book, to get more of the backstory. Reading this section will prepare you to better facilitate the conversation, so please make a point to read it through once or twice.

REFERENCE GRID

A guide to the dish's theme, prep, and timing details. I've also assigned each dish a skill level from 1 (easy to do) to 5 (requires a good bit of culinary technique).

RECIPE DETAILS

Though many recipes are on the gourmet side, they are designed to be prepared using equipment common to most kitchens and ingredients you can find at a local grocery store. When an uncommon ingredient is called-for, a note on where you can find it is included. The recipe instructions are, in most cases, broken down according to their component parts and able to be followed step by step. Ingredient lists are found in sidebars, along with a few other features that vary by recipe:

Special Equipment Needed: A list of any specialty or uncommon kitchen tools needed for the recipe, and in some cases a shortcut that uses more typical equipment and produces a similar result.

Pro Tip: shortcuts, special instructions or tips, or information on particular techniques or tools used in the recipe.

CHEF IT UP

Some recipes include a ‘Chef It Up’ option, which is an invitation to take a step further into an advanced culinary technique or plating style, or to add a particularly hard-to-find ingredient. All the dishes can be cooked and served without these optional add-ons, but “chef-fing” things up can give you and your guests an extra wow factor.

GET A RECIPE FOR THE CONVERSATION

As I said above, the primary goal for these recipes is the conversations they inspire. To that end, every recipe features a QR code that links to a Conversation Guide housed at www.theosfeast.com (these are grouped according to the book's 5 sections). These are always found on the first page of the recipe, in a sidebar where the recipe's theme is stated. The conversation guides provide interactive questions and short segments for a host to read. They invite people to share personal experiences, explore the themes and stories the dishes allude to, and open the door to rich, meaningful spiritual dialogue.

I strongly recommend simply following each conversation guide as it is written. You can tailor them as needed, but they are born out of real-life experience and should create a warm, wel-

A NOTE ON SOUS VIDE

Sous vide refers to the process of vacuum-sealing food in a bag, then cooking it to a precise temperature in a water bath. This is the cooking method we use for most protein-based dishes in our Theo's Feast events. It's a great technique for beginners and pros alike, as the precise temperature control makes it nearly impossible to overcook food. *Sous vide* cooking results in incredibly tender, evenly cooked, restaurant-quality meats that are subsequently finished with a quick sear.

When you encounter recipes that call for *sous vide* cooking, you can choose to prepare the protein in your preferred way (grill, broiler, pan, etc.). However, *sous vide* immersion circulators have become affordable, and I can't recommend them enough.

coming, and winsome discussion for just about any group. A few other conversation tips can be found below, but you can have great conversations by just following the guide.

The online PDFs are easily printable, whether for the whole group or just the host or facilitator. Keeping the guides online gives us the opportunity to make tweaks and edits based on your feedback; scan the QR code at the end of this section to share feedback with us.

The Book's Sections

The recipes in *The Gospel According to Food* are grouped into 5 sections:

ONE COURSE OR MULTI-COURSE?

Theo's Feasts are designed as multi-course gourmet experiences. As a result, most of the recipes in *The Gospel According to Food* are parts of a larger culinary experience.

Executing a multi-course feast at home, even if it isn't elaborate, can be a daunting task. We've tweaked the stories and conversations tied to each recipe so that each can stand on its own. You can make one dish, pair a couple of recipes together, or get adventurous and prepare a full feast—the book is flexible, and you can have fantastic conversations no matter how many dishes are involved.

If you would like to re-create a full feast, it's best done with several partners. The more people you're hosting, the more help you'll want to have in cooking. I usually look for one additional kitchen helper for every six guests. This could make for a great community outreach event for a church or ministry group to attempt together!

SECTION ONE: THEO'S FEAST

This section is a dish-for-dish re-creation of my original Theo's Feast. I've modified these recipes slightly over the years, but this is still the series of dishes I've cooked and presented most. It's designed, as a whole, to guide guests through the biblical storyline that is echoed within our own experience as human beings: creation, fall, brokenness and longing, redemption, restoration.

SECTION TWO: EATING ALPHA

Alpha is an 11-week course where those curious about faith can explore life's big questions in an open, informal environment. Alpha Courses are often hosted within local churches and are particularly prevalent in the United Kingdom (where it was founded) and "Commonwealth" nations like Canada and Australia.

Alpha Courses often include connection over a shared meal, so during the COVID-19 pandemic, when in-person gatherings were on hold for much of the world, I partnered with Alpha Canada to create "Eating Alpha." I paired each lesson in the Alpha Course with a recipe that invited deeper exploration of that lesson's theme and message, and posted the recipes online so that participants in online versions of Alpha could add a culinary element to their experience.

The recipes in this section are intentionally simple and easy to make, so it could make a great exploratory small group series.

SECTION THREE: U2 FEAST

U2 has been one of the most famous rock bands in the world for nearly four decades. Ardent fans, and even casual ones, know of the band's Christian faith, but not many know just how much it infuses their lyrics and their offstage lives. As a longtime U2 fan, I knew that their story and songs would form the framework for an enlightening culinary journey. Each of the recipes in this section touch on different elements of the band's faith story.

SECTION FOUR: HOLIDAYS

Holidays naturally create gatherings, and the Christian traditions that are, even in our secular age, still prominent within them often create curiosity and spiritual openness that aren't present at other times of the year. The recipes in this section provide easy pathways to cultivate warm, natural holiday conversations.

SECTION FIVE: ONE-DISH WONDERS

Like the title indicates, the recipes found here are meant as standalone conversation starters that explore a variety of themes.

Important Advice for Inviting and Hosting Well

Good hospitality and robust conversation are something of a lost art. These are things we must have margin for, and modern life tyrannizes margin with its constant demands: deadlines, social commitments, kids' activities, mobile devices constantly chirping at us with news and messages and app updates and a slew of other notifications. It is increasingly rare to have free and undistracted moments by ourselves, let alone with others.

Relationship-building and authentic, meaningful spiritual conversations most often require time and space, however. Think slow-cooker, not microwave.

As you consider these dishes and the conversations they can prompt, you'll want to take this slow-cooker approach. Everything surrounding the meal matters as much as the meal itself. Intentionality and thoughtfulness, from how you invite to how you set the table to how you introduce the conversation, make a huge impact on your guests' comfort level and their willingness to open up and share vulnerably.

Though these dishes and discussions have evangelistic intent, by no means should we make our friends and neighbors feel as though they're "projects" or "targets" for our message. Especially now, evangelism must be a relational endeavor, not a task to accomplish.

A TASTE OF GRACE

THE THEO'S FEAST CAPSTONE

When I was experimenting and developing the dishes that would become the original Theo's Feast, I read about a fascinating little berry native to West Africa. This fruit, appropriately called a *Miracle Berry*, temporarily neutralizes the sour receptors in a person's taste buds. As a result, many foods that are naturally sour are tasted as sweet—the natural sugars present in things like citrus fruit, nearly undetectable behind the acidic sour notes, suddenly come alive.

I immediately saw this sour-to-sweet transformation as a powerful metaphor for God's grace. Our bondage to sin, the hardships and brokenness in our world, our quests to find meaning that lead down empty paths, even our common perception of God as harsh and demanding and religion as joyless and restrictive—it all leaves a sour taste. We want to spit it out. But, when we encounter God's astonishing grace through Jesus, we taste the sweetness of hope, forgiveness, and freedom. Even the religion that we may once have perceived as sour becomes a sweet pursuit of a good, gracious, relational God.

This metaphor, and the experience of sour foods showing up as deliciously sweet, is so powerful that I include some version of *A Taste of Grace* at the end of every Theo's Feast event. Three of the dishes in this book are "taste of grace" variations: one in the Original Feast, one in Eating Alpha, and the recipe titled "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" in the U2 Feast section.

Raw miracle berries are hard to find and can be quite expensive. They're also incredibly fickle. If they aren't eaten within a day of being picked, they rot and lose their transformative properties. Thankfully, several companies sell packs of freeze-dried berries, or freeze-

dried tablet versions that offer a bit more potency than a single berry. I recommend *mberry Miracle Fruit Tablets*, which you can find online. While I've tried to stay away from hard-to-find ingredients for the recipes in this book, this one is essential to a true "Theo's Feast" experience. It powerfully exemplifies God's grace and his ability to produce transformation in us through Jesus.

There are a couple of important notes regarding the miracle berry tablets. Some people see the little red tablet on their plate and wonder if I'm serving them some sort of drug. I've learned to intentionally call it a tablet or lozenge, not a pill. I also explain exactly what it is—100% freeze dried miracle berry held together with a bit of cornstarch—and offer to let guests have a look at the package. This is more than enough for most people to give the tablets a go. It's also important that people don't chew the tablet; it needs to sit on the tongue and slowly dissolve (this usually takes 3–5 minutes) in order for the full effect to be experienced.



Here are a few hosting tips, then, to help you make the most of *The Gospel According to Food*:

1. **INVITE PERSONALLY** Whether you mail a paper invitation, send an email or e-vite, or make a face-to-face invitation, make it personal! Don't text out anonymous invitations to a random list of neighbors or co-workers.
2. **INVITE CLEARLY (DON'T BAIT-AND-SWITCH!)** *This is vital.* Don't conceal the spiritual or conversational elements. Nothing leaves a poor taste in someone's mouth like the feeling that they were duped. Don't say "hey, we'd love to have you over for dinner," and spring the spiritual conversation on them unannounced.

Instead, however you extend the invitation, communicate that the dish (or dishes) are intentionally crafted "edible metaphors" designed to explore spirituality and elements of the Christian faith in a fun, refreshing way. Let potential guests know that you'll be engaging in a spiritual discussion grounded in a Christian perspective, but that your value is for everyone to share their perspectives openly and authentically. Communicate an environment of safety, listening, and discovery. If needed, feel free to download and customize one of several invitation examples online. Scan the QR code at the end of this section to find those. You can print and send, or simply use them as a guide for making a personal invitation.

3. **GIVE YOURSELF TIME TO PREPARE** Many of the dishes in this book can be prepared quickly, but several require making elements a day or more beforehand. Be sure to check the prep and cook times given and give the recipe a thorough read well in advance. There are few things more frustrating for a cook than starting to make a dish and discovering that you're missing an important ingredient or didn't give yourself enough time.

Do some preparation for the conversation as well. Read the *Story Behind the Dish* section and perhaps do a bit of curious digging for more information on your own. Read the conversation guide and consider what responses or questions your particular guests might have. Internalize the sections for the host to read so that you're able to deliver them more naturally. This is where nerves might come into play and you realize that you're taking a step of faith. You can't control what people might say or be prepared for every scenario, but some intentional prep goes a long way. Then step out in faith and trust the time to God!

4. **CREATE A FRIENDLY, CONVERSATIONAL ENVIRONMENT** Consider your guests: how many, who they are, etc. What kind of environment will be the most comfortable and conversational? Background music or no? In a more formal dining room, on the back patio, or maybe even in a living room around a coffee table? What will help remove distractions and encourage presence and engagement? It's probably a must to keep the TV off, and you might even invite guests to voluntarily set their phones aside where they won't be distracted by notifications.

As you consider the environment though, don't pressure yourself into perfection. Tidy up a bit, set a nice table, consider who will sit where and remove things in their field of view that might take their attention away from your conversation, but don't worry if it doesn't look worthy of HGTV or *Magnolia Journal*. It's more important to be yourself and be authentic, and your real lived-in environment is likely more comfortable for others to enter into than one that looks like a model home.

5. **SET CLEAR EXPECTATIONS** Don't be surprised if guests are a little nervous or unsure what to expect. "Edible spiritual metaphors" and a multisensory culinary experience related to the Christian faith might sound intimidating at first. You can defuse that by simply forecasting what the evening will look like: you'll serve the meal and walk through a guided discussion that connects the sights, smells, and tastes to questions about life and spirituality human beings have asked for centuries. Let people know that genuineness and authenticity is expected, and that you value everyone being able to share their perspective if they'd like. Encourage good listening and tactful disagreement (if there is any). Make sure that people know that it is a safe space, that they won't be forced to talk if they don't want to, and that you'd like everyone to commit to confidentiality. Let people know that you, as facilitator, might intervene (gently) if one person cuts another off, or redirect if the conversation gets way off track. It's also a good idea to let everyone know approximately how many questions you have, and a target end time.
6. **FACILITATE ATTENTIVELY** As facilitator, you have the biggest influence on the tone of the conversation. If you're distracted or agitated, or relaxed and warm, that's very likely how the environment will feel for others. In addition to that overall posture, be attentive to body language, responses to what others share, and other nonverbal cues. If someone is silent or appears that they can't find the space to comment, make a personal invitation for them to share. Make good use of statements like "Tell me more about that...", and "I'm curious to see if anyone has a different opinion...".

The conversation guides have Host prompts for what to read and/or ask. Look for natural lulls in the conversation to move to the next prompt, and be cognizant of any indicators that people are getting bored or disengaged. A direct question to a particular person, a transition to the next idea, or a move to wrap things up might be appropriate.

7. **LISTEN ACTIVELY AND EMPATHETICALLY** Related to the last point, your posture in listening has a powerful effect on others' comfort and vulnerability. Attentive listening includes leaning in, eye contact, nodding, and other nonverbal cues that affirm that you're following along. Active listeners ask for clarification when needed, and often repeat back what they hear with a statement like "Let me make sure I've heard you correctly. You mean that...". Resist the temptation to interject, correct, or hijack the conversation with a comparative or "one up" story.

If guests share heartaches or difficult experiences, offer empathy by affirming what they feel and offering care and support. These situations are open doors to develop trust and relational intimacy. Dismissing someone's emotion, offering platitudes, or changing the subject undercuts empathy; as facilitator you can gently redirect anyone who responds in these ways by saying something like "It seems like this was especially painful for _____. Before we change the subject, let's create space for _____ to share more and receive our support."

Empathetic listening also includes affirmation of a person's experience or opinion, even if you disagree. You don't need to rebut each perspective that doesn't align with a Christian viewpoint; doing so would create an environment that lacks safety and makes people feel as though their perspectives aren't welcome. The goal for these conversations is thoughtful, open dialogue, not to try to convince everyone of the Christian perspective. God will work in that environment to draw people to himself.

8. **SHARE AUTHENTICALLY** Just as you invite everyone to share their authentic perspectives, you can do the same with your own. This creates an opportunity for you to share the gospel or connect the particular theme to the Christian faith. As you do, connect it to your own story and personal experience; don't simply offer a theological answer. Be honest about how you've wrestled with the topic in discussion. Share how knowing Jesus has offered transformation, clarity, joy, or even just peace and perseverance in the midst of hardship. Make it personal, not like a lecture.
9. **CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION** God willing, your conversation will be enlightening and engaging for all. There may be natural momentum for it to continue, whether through another dinner party environment or in your casual everyday interactions. As it seems appropriate, be intentional to follow-up with your guests by asking more curious questions about their lives, offering helpful resources, asking about particular things they mentioned in your conversation, or any other relational steps that seem relevant. My hope is that *The Gospel According to Food* will enable life-changing conversations to become part of your everyday life and relationships.

stand in QR codes



**GIVE FEEDBACK ON
THE CONVERSATION
GUIDES**

.....



**DOWNLOAD OR
CUSTOMIZE
INVITATIONS**

.....

Section One

Theo's Feast





Section One

Theo's Feast

In the spring of 2014, a group of students at Simon Fraser University were looking for a fun way to share the gospel with their friends.

When they learned that I had been working on an idea to use gourmet meals as a way of communicating spiritual truth, they fell in love with it. Together we brainstormed a unique event: a multi-course gourmet dining adventure that explored the Bible's overarching narrative and connected it to our human experience. We had no idea whether people would show up, how they might respond, or even if we could pull the whole thing off. But we were willing to step out in faith and give it a shot. We called it "Theo's Feast," intentionally playing on the word *theophany*, which describes a physical manifestation of God tangible to human senses.

To our surprise, Theo's Feast was a hit! We served 40 guests, and the feedback they gave was tremendous. They found the food delicious and said that the event helped them connect to spiritual and philosophical matters in ways they never had before.

I and a team of volunteers have hosted this very same feast, with a few slight recipe alterations, a number of times since, and the response is consistently the same. People are often stunned at the level of depth and understanding of the Christian story it creates for them. It's also quite disarming—the simple act of eating together lends itself to warmth and empathetic conversation.

After an amuse bouche icebreaker (Apple Fennel Soup), the dishes lead guests through an exploration of the biblical storyline. Adamah Salad examines humanity's origins and mortality, and God's cultivation of flourishing life. Paradise Lost speaks about the Fall of Man and the pain and brokenness staining our world. Salt of the Earth points to God's desire to bring *shalom*, how Jesus ultimately offers this, and how he uses us to create it as well. The Bread of Life explores Jesus' Incarnation and claim to be the source of life and sustenance all people need. And finally, A Taste of Grace offers a vivid illustration of the transformative power of God's grace and love.

Any of these dishes can create a stimulating conversation on their own. You can serve them as standalone dishes, go through them as a multi-week series, or combine several or all into a full dining adventure. I'd recommend gathering a few others to help if you try to do the full feast in one event. However you do it, I pray that God would reveal himself in tasty and tangible ways!





Amuse Bouche APPLE FENNEL SOUP

| | | |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------|
| SERVES 12 | DISH TYPE Hors d'oeuvre | SKILL LEVEL ●●○○○ |
| PREP 20 minutes | COOK 20 minutes | REST Overnight |

THE STORY BEHIND THE DISH

Amuse Bouche, translated from French, literally means ‘mouth amuser’ or ‘mouth teaser.’ It’s often served as a single bite—something to activate the palate and build anticipation for the meal to come.

During Theo’s Feast events, we use this *amuse bouche* course as an icebreaker. In many cases, guests are seated with people they’ve not yet met, so this small but tasty dish provides a ‘conversation teaser’ as well—some small talk and getting-to-know-you questions that loosens everyone up for the conversations to follow. The same can be true if you’re hosting a group of friends; in this case the questions in the online conversation guide can serve as fun ways to learn something new or just get everyone laughing and comfortable.

Finally, since this is truly a taster course, be sure to pair it with another dish, even if you aren’t planning to re-create a full Theo’s Feast.

ICEBREAKER

Get a Recipe for Conversation



Soup

This soup tastes best when prepared a day in advance.

Peel, core, and chop 2 of the apples.

Core and chop the fennel bulb.

Melt the butter in a medium sauté pan over medium heat.

Add the 2 chopped apples, 8 oz (200 grams) of chopped fennel (save about 1oz or 20g for the salad), and fennel seed. Cook for 7 minutes. Do not allow the apples or fennel to brown.

Add the milk and cream and bring to a simmer. Cook for another 7 minutes.

Transfer to a blender and blend on high speed until fully smooth, usually about 2 minutes.

Strain through a fine-mesh sieve and add 1 tsp of lemon juice and a pinch of salt. Refrigerate.

Salad

In a medium bowl, whisk together olive oil, 1 tsp lemon juice, tarragon, and salt. Add the apple, pineapple, and strawberry batons, and the remaining shaved/sliced fennel bulb. Toss together gently to coat. Set aside.

Plating

Pour the soup into small bowls. Place a mound of apple-fennel salad in the center of the bowl. Place 1 fennel frond over the top of each.

CHEF IT UP!

Garnish your soup with edible flowers. These are specific species of flowers that you can buy online (you might find them in certain stores too). They must come from a reliable source and are grown for culinary uses. Do not eat flowers from your garden, because many are poisonous!

Order a few flowers that will add a pop of color to your finished dish alongside the fennel fronds.

2 oz (50g) butter

3 Granny Smith Apples; peel and cut one into thin batons (about 36 total)

9 oz (220 g) fennel bulb, cored and thinly sliced

1 pinch fennel seed

1½ cup (400 ml) whole milk

½ cup (150 ml) heavy cream

2 tsp freshly squeezed lemon juice

2 pinches salt

1 pinch sugar (optional if the lemon juice is too acidic)

1 pinch ground white pepper

12 freshly picked fennel fronds off of the bulb

5 strawberries, cored and cut into match sticks/batons (approximately 36)

2 pineapple rings, cut into match sticks/batons (approximately 36)

½ tsp tarragon (dried, or fresh if you can get it)

PRO TIP

Fennel or Anise with fronds intact can be difficult to find, as many stores trim the fronds to make more room for the bulbs on their shelves. Try a few stores if you can't find fennel bulbs with the fronds intact.



Adamah Salad

PUMPERNICKEL-MUSHROOM “SOIL,” TOMATO-RICOTTA SALAD

| | | |
|------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| SERVES 12 | DISH TYPE Salad | SKILL LEVEL ●●●○○ |
| PREP 20 minutes | COOK 60 minutes | REST None |

THE STORY BEHIND THE DISH

This dish, a layered salad that we often serve in a clay pot or planter, typically receives more comments than any others in the original Theo’s Feast. It represents the Garden of Eden and the soil from which humans were made.

The very first story in Genesis, the first book of the Bible, describes a newly created world filled with plenty of soil. God forms the first human being, who he named Adam, out of this dirt, which is called *adamah* in Hebrew. Whether you take this account of our origins literally, or believe in an evolutionary account, our source material is still the organic matter of the earth. The Hebrew connection between the words *adam* and *adamah* speaks to this intrinsic link.

After forming Adam from the soil, God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (Genesis 2:7, NIV). All living creatures—plant and animal—depend on these two elements of soil and God’s life-giving breath. It’s no wonder, then, that after God places this new “earthling” in the garden called Eden, he anoints Adam, and all subsequent generations, as its caretaker. Eden means “delight.” God invites human beings to participate in the divine activity of creating, cultivating, nurturing, and protecting a delightful creation and the life within it. Life’s beauty—the taste and aroma of every good thing that springs from the earth—is ours to enjoy.

The next chapter offers another reminder of our connection to the soil with words that are familiar even to those who aren’t well-versed in the Bible: “for dust you are and to dust you will return” (Genesis 3:19 NIV). This statement is part of the curse God prescribed as a result of Adam and Eve eating the “forbidden fruit.” Death is clearly in view, but when taking the whole story of the Bible into account, it isn’t a grim end. When living things die, their decay imparts vital nutrients into the soil—fertilizer that helps new life grow. This is a reminder of the cycle of life and points to the resurrection.

So we might be surprised that God, though himself immaterial, has a fondness for dirt! He does not stay distant from his creation. He isn’t uncaring, but is constantly offering hints of new life even in his pronouncement that we will one day face death.

He’s been gardening from the beginning of time, looking after all creatures and cultivating the conditions in which life can flourish. God continues to look after the life he creates. That is what gardeners do. ►

HUMANITY'S CONNECTION TO
THE EARTH/MORTALITY

Get a Recipe for Conversation

1 loaf of dark rye pumpernickel bread, sliced
 3 cups chopped fresh tomatoes.
 A variety of yellow, orange, and red tomatoes is best for visual appeal, but use what is available
 1 can fire-roasted tomatoes
 1/3 cup fresh basil, chopped
 1/4 cup fresh oregano
 1 Tbsp smoked paprika
 1 Tbsp chili powder
 1 pinch cayenne pepper
 1 cup fresh parsley, very finely chopped
 1/8 cup fresh tarragon
 1 sweet onion
 1 yellow pepper
 3 cups fresh mushrooms
 1 cup Canola oil
 1 cup olive oil
 1 1/2 cups ricotta cheese
 1/2 cup prepared fresh basil pesto
 1–2 tsp Liquid Smoke
 Salt & Pepper to taste
 (fresh ground is best)
 Balsamic vinegar
 12 carrots with greens

Tomato Salad

Finely chop the basil, oregano, and tarragon, and very finely chop the sweet onion. Set about half of each aside for use in the “soil.”

Chop and mix the tomatoes and yellow pepper in a large bowl. Mix in the fire-roasted tomatoes and 1/2 cup of chopped sweet onion. Once those are mixed, add one half of your chopped basil, oregano, and tarragon.

Add salt and pepper to taste.

Mix in 2 Tbsp olive oil and a light sprinkle of balsamic vinegar.

Cover and refrigerate.

In a separate medium bowl, mix the ricotta cheese with 1/2 cup basil pesto. Cover and refrigerate.

Pumpernickel Mushroom “Soil”

Toast the sliced pumpernickel bread in an oven at 250°F (121°C) for 40 minutes (or until dry and crispy). Turn the slices halfway through.

Break up the pumpernickel and blend it into a powder in a blender.

Clean the mushrooms and dice very finely. Set half (1 1/2 cups) aside.

Drizzle olive oil into a pan and cook 1 1/2 cups of mushrooms with the remaining portion of chopped sweet onion until caramelized. Add spices (paprika, cayenne pepper, chili powder), herbs (tarragon, oregano, basil, parsley), and the pumpernickel bread crumbs. Slowly add 3/4 cup of canola oil. Cook, stirring regularly, for 10 to 15 minutes.

Slowly add more canola oil as needed to make the pumpernickel soil dark and moist but not wet. Add sprinkles of liquid smoke to taste as you stir; 1–2 Tbsp in total.

Once the pumpernickel soil is well seasoned, mix in any remaining chopped tarragon, basil, parsley, oregano, and uncooked mushrooms. Set aside to cool.

Taste the soil—it should be earthy, smoky, and well seasoned with salt and fresh cracked pepper.

Wash and trim carrots to the right length by cutting the bottom of the carrot at a sharp angle approximately 3/4 of an inch shorter than the depth of your serving dish. You want to be able to insert your carrot into the salad so that just the top half inch (12mm) remains above the soil line.

Plating

In the terra cotta or ceramic pot, spoon in an even layer of the chilled basil ricotta mixture, followed by the chilled tomato salad. Top this with a thin layer of pumpernickel soil, covering the tomatoes no more than $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick. Insert the carrots evenly spaced in a way that suits the serving dish.

You may need to trim the greens of the carrots if they are too heavy and cause the carrots to droop or fall over.

CHEF IT UP!

We had a lot of fun with Adamah Salad when we incorporated Theo's Feast into a wedding reception. We placed the pots on the tables before guests arrived. They all thought the colorful pink pots were a part of the decor. Everyone was shocked when they discovered that the first course of their wedding feast was already on the table!

You can recreate this by using a larger planter instead of clay pots or other serving vessels. Again, be sure it is food safe (glazed is better than non-glazed). Layer the ingredients as in the plating instructions, then insert the carrots, evenly spaced so they fill the planter. Serve in the center of the table and give each guest a plate or bowl and a spoon. Dig in together!

SPECIAL EQUIPMENT NEEDED

Use 12 terra cotta or ceramic pots, or anything that looks at home in a garden. Alternatives include a cake or roasting pan, or even a mug if your options are limited. You can get glazed terra cotta pots at arts and crafts stores or hardware stores. Make sure they are food safe, and glazed is better than non-glazed. Clean them well before use!

