



**UNITED  
AMERICA**  
**WAYNE BAKER**

**Taste of Home  
Guide**

By David Crumm

Read The Spirit Books



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# ***A United America*** **discussion guide**

## **Why talk about food?**

This is one in a series of discussion guides that readers may want to use while talking about Dr. Wayne Baker's book. This guide describes a group exercise that the team at our publishing house has used repeatedly to foster discussion about this book. This activity can be used as an ice-breaker, and it also works well mid-way through a series of discussions about United America after group participants get to know each other and are eager to interact. As a one-time experience, a leader can simply ask participants to talk about their family food traditions. Or, if you have sufficient time in your discussion series, you can invite participants to bring samples of favorite foods to a subsequent gathering.

Why does food break through social barriers and get people talking? It's a beloved, basic part of daily life; food activates all five senses; food memories tap deep into our family and community heritage.

"Tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are." For 200 years, authors in the natural sciences have been making this claim. In the 1960s, the French historian Fernand Braudel surprised his scholarly colleagues by devoting a major portion of his massive series, "Civilization and Capitalism," to the foods and culinary customs of ordinary Europeans since the 15th century. In his volume, "The Structures of Everyday Life," Braudel explained that food preparation was key to the development of successful communities. Today,

the exploration of food traditions is a common discipline in sociology, anthropology and ethnography.

Talking about our favorite food traditions and, even better, tasting those beloved foods, is not only revealing—it's fun! Chef and best-selling author Anthony Bourdain has made a career of producing documentary films about culinary traditions in communities around the world. Bourdain writes, "Meals make the society, hold the fabric together in lots of ways that were charming and interesting and intoxicating." Bourdain's hour-long films are regularly re-run on the CNN network and also are available on DVD. Several of his films explore grassroots food traditions in regions of the United States. Depending on the length and nature of your discussion series, you might enjoy finding a Bourdain film clip to supplement your discussion.

# Preparation

Divide your larger group into small groups. We do this by “numbering off” around the room, which usually has the effect of separating spouses and friends into different small groups and ensures a diversity of stories in each group. Small groups of three to four people work best in this exercise.

**THE QUESTION:** We got people to start talking in their small groups by asking, “In your small group, please invite each person to tell about a food that makes them think about home and family traditions. The food you describe might connect generations in your family and may reflect your ethnic heritage. Or, the food might be a fond memory of home because of the way it was prepared, the season in which it was eaten, or the circle of people who enjoyed it with you.”

If you have a large number of people, you might add: “In each small group, choose one person who will tell a food story, when we reassemble the whole group.”

If you have enough time in a discussion series, you might invite participants to bring in a copy of their original recipe to share—or, even better, you can invite some participants to collaborate on a session in which you actually taste their beloved foods.

# Responses

We have experienced a very wide range of responses to this activity—from fond memories of the participant’s own home and family to much more involved stories about immigration, family relationships and changing communities. Most stories evoke warm memories—but some stories recall times of challenge, struggles with poverty or loved ones who have passed away. We always have found some of the stories to be light hearted. In the process, you’ll laugh. However, you’re also likely to find a participant shedding a tear as they share a particular story. You might find a range of emotions surfacing.

As group leader, your goal should be to shape the available time to permit an appropriate number of full stories. Invite willing participants to move to the center of the group and sit comfortably while telling each story. Then, ask other participants to ask questions or to share their own memories that echo as they listen to each story.

The first goal of this activity is to unite the group in shared experiences: Food is a universal concern. This activity demonstrates that any group, no matter how diverse, is united in enjoying at least some foods.

# Want to connect with a specific value?

Depending on the experience of your participants, stories about food traditions could connect with your discussion of at least four of the ten Core Values:

- “Respect for Others” (by appreciating ethnic diversity through sharing food traditions);
- “Freedom” (some foods are associated with holidays and seasons that celebrate freedom, from American 4th of July to the Jewish Passover Seder);
- “Self Reliance & Individualism” (some foods relate to personal and family challenges or struggles to survive and thrive);
- “Pursuit of Happiness” (for obvious reasons).

If you are using this activity at a specific point in a discussion series, you might consider challenging participants to draw connections with one of these values in the stories they choose to share. Those prompts could be:

- Tell us a story about a food that reflects your family’s ethnic heritage.
- Can you think of a food you love that you associate with a celebration of freedom?
- Tell us a story about a food that makes you recall a struggle your family faced.
- Tell us a story about a food that makes you remember happy times with your family or friends.



# UNITED AMERICA

The surprising truth about American values,  
American identity and the 10 beliefs that a large  
majority of Americans hold dear

**WAYNE BAKER**

Preface by **Brian McLaren**

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