

# A New Campaign Against Loneliness Starts With a Potluck

The surgeon general, José Andrés and other luminaries gathered over dinner to start a new effort to get Americans to eat together.



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**By Julia Moskin**

Reporting from Washington, D.C.

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I have never seen a guest show up to a potluck dinner in the service dress of a vice admiral. And until last month, Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy had never worn his uniform to one.

But there he was in a plush Washington neighborhood near Rock Creek Park, attending a potluck in his official capacity as the nation's chief medical officer, to start the next phase of his continuing public campaign against social isolation.

Last year, his office released a much-heralded study that identified loneliness as a growing public health epidemic that increases the risk of premature death almost as much as smoking and obesity. The study identified six “pillars of change” that the government could build to combat the problem, mostly involving outreach to the medical, public policy and tech sectors.

The last of these recommendations — “Build a culture of connection” — has inspired a new private initiative called Project Gather. Its goal is to reintroduce Americans to eating together, in whatever form that takes: a shared scone at

Starbucks, a family visit to a taco truck, a neighborhood cookout, a Friendsgiving dinner.

On Tuesday, Dr. Murthy's office released "Recipes for Connection," a kind of hospitality handbook that presents not recipes but suggestions, scripts and support for would-be hosts.

In that spirit, Dr. Murthy showed up at the potluck dinner with a Pyrex dish of ras malai, a cardamom-scented dessert of milk and sugar topped with pistachios.

Dr. Murthy said the loneliness study resonated with Americans, many of whom said they didn't know how to change the habit of staying home alone that took hold during the pandemic. (The problem was first identified by the political scientist Robert Putnam in his 2000 best seller "Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.")



The chef, farmer and activist Matthew Raiford explained that the word "goober" comes from "nguba," the word for peanut in some Bantu languages of southern Africa. Jason Andrew for The New York Times



Each chef was asked to bring a dish that reminded them of childhood dinners; José Andrés served his mother's vegetable stew and roasted peppers with a fried egg. Jason Andrew for The New York Times

"There's a lot of anxiety and nervousness" about socializing, Dr. Murthy said: the inviting, the organizing and the hosting, not to mention the cooking.

Starting in January, Project Gather will include nationwide events like outdoor neighborhood dinners; communitywide meals hosted by Brigaid, a company that hires professional chefs to work in public schools; and bake sales led by the pastry chef Natasha Pickowicz.

Because it is being organized (on a pro bono basis) by a handful of boutique food marketing firms, not by the Office of the Surgeon General, Project Gather will continue even if Dr. Murthy leaves his post. The doctor became surgeon general in 2014 under President Barack Obama and was dismissed by President Donald J. Trump in 2017. President Biden renominated him in 2021.

Dr. Murthy, 47, traces his interest in sharing food back to his childhood in Miami. He was 3 when his parents immigrated there from Karnataka in southwestern India. “One of my favorite memories is of my parents having friends over for dinner,” but not in a formal, dinner-party way. “My mother made it look easy,” he said.



Mr. Andrés described his mother's painstaking recipe for olive oil-cooked piquillo peppers to Dr. Murthy. Jason Andrew for The New York Times

In theory, potlucks are the easiest kind of dinner party: Come as you are, bring what you like. But this one was at the home of the Washington power hostess (and New York Times contributor) Joan Nathan, and the company included the culinary luminaries Alice Waters and José Andrés and five other influential farmers, chefs and activists. Each was asked to bring a favorite dish from childhood.

A week before the event, I got on the phone with Ms. Nathan to see how the menu was shaping up. As often happens with potlucks, coordinating the contributions turned out to be nearly as time-consuming as cooking the meal.

Dr. Murthy is a vegetarian, so Ms. Nathan was torn between honoring his choice and allowing the other cooks freedom of expression. Ms. Nathan, a historian of Jewish American food, wasn't sure how to handle one chef's offer to bring a whole pork shoulder. And Ms. Waters wanted to circumvent the assignment to contribute a childhood dish, by bringing greens from the local farmers' market. ("Every meal needs a salad," she said during dinner.)

Matthew Raiford, the chef and activist who is also a sixth-generation farmer in Georgia, arrived first, resplendent in a bubble gum-pink three-piece suit and hauling a suitcase full of boiled peanuts. Kevin Tien, the chef and owner of the Washington restaurant Moon Rabbit, carried in foil trays of banh hoi cha gio chay, sheets of rice noodles to be wrapped around vegetables and herbs, and immediately began the potluck arrival ritual: opening and shutting every cabinet in the host's kitchen to find the right serving platter.





Alice Waters, a longtime advocate for healthy food systems, was flanked by chef Kevin Tien, left, and the community activist Tiffany Williams. Jason Andrew for The New York Times

Amy Brandwein, the chef-owner of Centrolina, one of Vice President Kamala Harris's favorite Washington restaurants, quietly set about heating the first course of kabocha squash soup, patiently tasting and seasoning until it reached a perfect ratio of salt to sweet to spice.

Tiffany Williams, the president of Martha's Table, a nonprofit with a 40-year track record of expanding food access to families in the District of Columbia, laughed when she saw the culinary powerhouses in the room. "My mother's wings are good, but I don't know if they're this good," she said.

No matter how carefully planned, every potluck has a chaos agent. This one's was Mr. Andrés, who R.S.V.P.ed at the last minute (having just returned from western North Carolina, where his World Central Kitchen was feeding the survivors of Hurricane Helene) and insisted on wine glasses rather than the water glasses Dr. Murthy's handlers had decided should appear on the table.

Mr. Andrés brought not only a childhood dish (his mother's vegetable stew) but also slabs of bottarga, a huge chunk of blue cheese, eggs, roasted peppers and sea salt, all of which seemed to explode from the pockets of his cargo shorts and fleece vest.

When the group finally sat down to eat, each cook explained how the dish they'd brought represented connection to them. The stories mostly began at their families' kitchen tables, then veered into topics like the price of fish, the definition of family and the legacy of enslaved Africans in American agriculture.



The chef Kevin Tien said gathering at the table is especially important to him; as a child, he and his sister went weeks without seeing their hardworking mother. Jason Andrew for The New York Times

Mr. Tien said his memories of family dinners are complicated. He was raised in Louisiana by his mother, a young immigrant from Vietnam who sometimes worked as many as four jobs at once. She was home for just a few hours each day, and her two children relied on processed and microwavable food in her absence. But whenever she could manage it, she made a batch of Vietnamese staples.

“Sometimes we would go months without seeing her,” he said; at least, it felt that long. “We knew she had been home because of the food she left for us.”

Although the potluck guests included some of the most celebrated cooks in America, it was agreed that ultimately, the food doesn’t matter nearly as much as the social bonds that come from sharing it.

By the end of the night, Mr. Raiford had offered to grow Southeast Asian herbs for Mr. Tien on his Georgia farm. With one hand, Mr. Andrés was patting Ms. Waters’s arm; with the other, he was poking his spoon into Ms. Nathan’s bowl, scooping up the last bits of ras malai.

“Every table is a community,” Dr. Murthy said. “How you gather it is up to you.”

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***A correction was made on Nov. 12, 2024: An earlier version of this article misstated Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy’s role in the potluck dinner last month. He attended the dinner; he did not host it.***

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