



# FIESTA FRIDAYS

*Building community, one taco at a time*

Jen Foster

**D**id you know there are only two ambulances in Arapahoe, NC? And did you know if a third young camper sprains an ankle in the span of one single afternoon, they'll send a helicopter to airlift a kid out of Camp Seagull? I didn't either, until a plate of tacos on our back porch loosened up Matt Strickland's storytelling about his many adventures working at Y camps. And have you ever heard Carolyn Dickens tell about what happens behind the scenes at Hanging of the Greens? Her stories are legendary at First Baptist, but her tales become even funnier when Myra Brickell is there to fill in juicy details as they finish each other's sentences.

For our 2018 New Year's resolutions, I wanted to spend more face-to-face time with people I care about. I wanted time to gather and tell stories, opportunities I knew I was missing in an age of social media. Derek's resolution was a little more practical — he resolved to eat more tacos. So each Friday for a year, we opened up our home to friends old and new and found our souls nurtured by time spent together and stories shared over a plate of Mexican food. The weekly gathering was inspired by an article I read online called Friday Night Meatballs, but we Fosters decided to put our own spin on the idea. We chose to do a taco buffet we called Fiesta Friday because it would be easy to accommodate a wide variety of dietary needs, from vegetarians to food allergies to picky children. Plus, we just really like tacos.



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Each week, we'd post an open invitation on Facebook, offering the chance to join us that Friday night. We limited it to eight adults and as many kids as they wanted to bring along. There was no expectation that anyone bring anything, though lots of folks brought something to share. We'd make a weekly grocery run for tomatoes and lettuce, pre-shredded cheese and tortilla chips. Our house was never as clean as I'd like it for company, but the kids would spend an hour before people arrived picking up some of the mess off the floor and wiping down the bathrooms. Amazingly, no one batted an eye at the dirty socks that still managed to appear in the middle of the living room floor.

Most weeks, we stood around the kitchen counter until everyone had arrived, then served ourselves and took our tacos out to the screened porch or to the dining room. Sometimes, everyone already knew each other and conversation around the table flowed freely. Other times, the only thing guests had in common was knowing us (and a shared love of tacos). After some introductions, those conversations usually worked, too.

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me something through these Friday gatherings. Ruth and Carl Bailey taught me that beautiful relationships can come from saying yes. They are my parents' generation. I didn't know them well, barely beyond, "Hey Carl, how are you?" in the fellowship hall on Wednesday nights. But they believed me when I said that anyone was welcome at our taco table,

they asked our address, and they said, "Yes, we'll be there!" Now when we pass in the hallway, our conversations go beyond the weather. We catch up on their grandkids in Idaho or chat about Ruth's latest craft projects. They inspire me to say yes when fear tells me to sit with those I already know.

And I definitely learned that committee meetings are better with tacos. We had an Outreach committee meeting on my back porch, just an hour after our roof began leaking during one of those monster rainstorms Raleigh seems so prone to these days. Again, people showed so much grace. We just moved the taco buffet to a leak-free counter across the kitchen and carried on. We dreamed about how to make the annual FBC block party better and how to connect with our downtown neighbors.

Then, while Valerie Cumbea and I sat on the back porch designing a block party flyer, Sarah David and Janie Carothers loaded my dishwasher and swept the kitchen floor. It was far and away the most fun committee meeting I've been part of — and among the most productive, too.

There was definitely a bit of hesitation as we started the adventure. Would people really want to come? Would our friends think it was a weird idea? (Truth be told, it *was* a bit of a weird idea!) And as an introvert, my husband Derek was a little overwhelmed by the idea of having people over that often, of giving up quiet Friday evenings to decompress after a long week of work. His solution some weeks was to leave work early, coming home to enjoy a moment of quiet while we chopped onions and bell peppers. We worried a bit about the cost of hosting people every week, but we quickly found that cooking at home for a dozen people was less expensive than taking our family of five for fast food. Turns out the barriers we had to welcoming others to our table were all in our heads. It was far easier and more infinitely more rewarding than we could have guessed.

So in the end, I decided that Fiesta Fridays looked an awful lot like real-life relationships. My house was messy, and people chose to come and spend time with us anyway. My feelings were occasionally hurt when no one joined us for tacos, and we kept offering the invitation

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anyway. My youngest child regularly threw temper tantrums when we suggested that tortilla chips alone are not a complete meal, and more seasoned parents reminded us that sometimes real nourishment means more than just good nutrition. Guests showed us grace in our messy parenting, assuring us that these little people in our house will eventually eat a vegetable.

The table was filled with laughter and stories and memories of good times gone by. And, if I'm being honest, it was sometimes filled with awkward silence as we tried to build relationships that go beyond "Hey! Good to see you!" as we pass in the hallway on Sunday mornings. It wasn't perfect, but it was so very good. We spent real time with people that we care about and those relationships nourished our souls far better than salsa and guacamole could ever feed our bodies.

As I swept up chip crumbs from beneath the barstools at our kitchen counter on that last Friday in December, I thought, "This was great. We should keep it up. But maybe not every single week." 🌻

