

Andi Pichardo



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Entry details

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Institution Name:	Mississippi State University
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Introduction:

The north side of Mississippi State University's campus is home to Zacharias Village, a cluster of residence halls where a large number of students live. For years, that same area had no dedicated dining option nearby. When Azalea Hall was approved as part of a \$100 million residence hall development, the ask was simple: add dining. What followed was something much more intentional. The team set out to build a food hall-inspired experience that gave north-side students real variety, customization, and late-night access, all within a brand-new residence hall.

Essay:

Planning began in May 2023, two years before opening day, with the foodservice equipment plan developed alongside WBA Architecture so that kitchen layout and equipment selection were built around the menu concepts from the start. The \$4 million kitchen came in on budget and on schedule.

Every concept was driven by student focus groups and campus feedback. State Slice answered a consistent ask for customizable pizza, featuring a brick-fired oven, house-made dough, and cauliflower crust. Mezza addressed demand for healthy, globally inspired options, transitioning to comfort food in the evenings. The Lock Box filled a real gap, enabling late-night contactless pickup through food lockers and the Grubhub app. A Maroon Market self-checkout store rounds out the facility, giving students everything they need without leaving the building. All three concepts accept block meals, and Grubhub kiosks at State Slice and Mezza make on-site ordering fast and easy. Our

chefs developed the menus throughout the construction period. Staff trained at Fresh Food Company and McArthur Dining before the facility was accessible, then completed walkthroughs once equipment was in place.

The team wasn't given access to the building until the day of ribbon cutting. They were still able to open the next day.

Introduction:

The marketing campaign for Azalea Dining started well before the doors opened, built around a simple idea: this was not just a new dining location, it was the first dining location inside a residence hall in MSU history. Each concept was given its own distinct visual identity, designed to feel like a real brand. By opening day, students already knew State Slice, Mezza, and The Lock Box by name.

Essay:

The campaign launched across Instagram and Facebook with sneak peeks of menu items, behind-the-scenes kitchen moments, and construction progress updates. A-frame signage, digital displays across campus, in-person tabling, and email outreach to incoming students and families kept the message visible all summer. Housing and Residence Life made sure Azalea Dining was part of move-in and orientation communications, so students arrived on campus already knowing what was waiting for them.

Each concept's visual identity was distinct and purposeful. State Slice used bold retro design with a red checkerboard aesthetic. Mezza embraced Mediterranean warmth with tile patterns and marble textures. The Lock Box went dark and moody with a street-styled logo designed to grab attention. These graphics ran across digital and physical channels and gave the facility a polished, cohesive presence before a single student had been served.

The ribbon-cutting reception on August 8 gave campus leaders a firsthand taste of all three concepts. Student response was immediate: "The pizza crust at State Slice is amazing, some of the best I have ever had in my life." Azalea Dining exceeded revenue projections by 29% and meal count projections by 46% in its first five months of full operation.

Introduction:

Azalea Dining was built through genuine collaboration across Mississippi State University. Dining Services, Student Affairs, Housing and Residence Life, and the Student Association all played active roles in shaping what the facility became. The result is a dining experience that was built with students rather than just for them.

Essay:

MSU Dining Services led the project, but the concept mix, service style, and operating hours were directly shaped by student focus groups and feedback gathered in partnership with the Student Association. When students asked for customizable, tech-forward dining with late-night access close to where they live, the team built exactly that.

Housing and Residence Life were essential partners, integrating Azalea Dining into move-in communications and orientation programming so students arrived on campus already knowing what was available to them. Student Affairs kept the focus on student experience throughout the planning process.

On the design and construction side, equipment suppliers were engaged alongside architect WBA Architecture from the start, with menu concepts and kitchen layout developed together to ensure the space could execute the food the culinary team envisioned. Technology partners including Grubhub, Apex Order Pickup Solutions, and OptiSigns were selected to support a seamless, mobile-first experience.

The facility's integration within Azalea Hall reflects a shared institutional commitment to placing dining where students live. That idea did not come from one department. It came from all of them working together.

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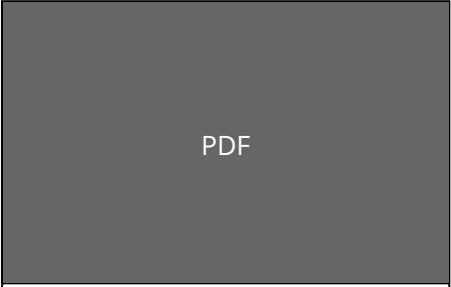
2026 Azalea Din...4.1 MiB



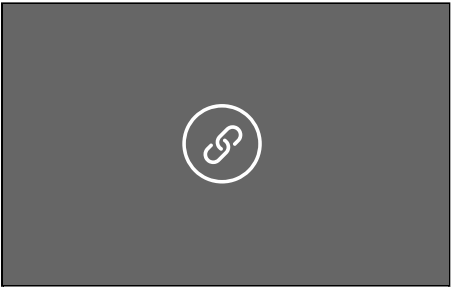
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Azalea Menus_S...2.6 MiB

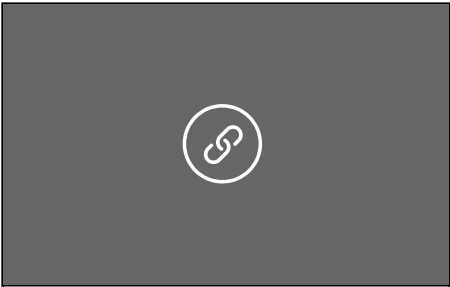


Azalea - Social ... 859 KiB



Attachment name
State Slice Promo Video

<https://www.youtube.co...>



Attachment name
Mezza Promo Video

<https://www.youtube.co...>