NACUFS (2026)
Catering Special Event of the Year

Penn State University

EyERzqdM

Entry details

Entry Name:	Harvest Masquerade
Institution Name:	Penn State University
Entry Completed By *(name and position)*:	Jamie Robinson, Associate Director of Guest & Staff Experience

> The Harvest Masquerade dinner event offered a distinctive, seasonal setting for a six-course elevated dining experience. The carefully curated menu highlighted peak seasonal ingredients while incorporating a playful mix of tableside-prepared courses throughout service. Every element, from ambiance to pacing, was intentionally designed to enhance guest engagement. Planning was led by a dedicated committee of front-of-house managers, whose vision was thoughtfully paired with the chefs' menus. Together, these collaborative efforts delivered a refined, immersive dining experience rarely available on campus, blending culinary creativity with exceptional service during a memorable autumn-inspired evening.

Essay:

> The evening's menu featured interpretations of familiar favorites while showcasing elevated technique and seasonal influence. Guests enjoyed creative entrees such as Savory Herb Crepes with Brown Butter Lobster and Duck Beignets accented by Pickled Mustard Seeds and rich Bourbon Duck Jus. Additional courses included Beet and Citrus Salmon Gravlax, Brioche Toast topped with Pulled Chicken and crisp Apple Slaw, and a bold Coffee Cocoa–crusted Lamb Chop. Thoughtfully crafted mocktails, the Spiced-Honey Fizz and Rosie Spritz, complemented the menu and enhanced the overall dining experience. Executive Bakery Chef Heather Minnich provided a memorable finale with a flawlessly brûléed Pumpkin Cheesecake that captured the essence of the harvest season.

> The atmosphere was equally intentional, with harvest displays adorning the entry and seating areas and cascading down the center of the long communal table. Pumpkins and seasonal florals were paired with darker masquerade linens and subtle gold accents to add warmth and sparkle. Each place setting featured a printed menu and a mask place card reinforcing the masquerade theme. Throughout the multi-course experience, a variety of preparation methods were utilized, with select dishes prepared tableside and others plated in the kitchen, creating an engaging and dynamic service flow.

Introduction:

> The Harvest Masquerade ticketed dinner event was designed to offer an upscale, formal dining opportunity rarely available on campus through the traditional dining plan. The event brought together a highly skilled team of chefs, front-of-house managers, and dedicated student employees who collaborated closely to execute every detail. Their combined efforts created a polished, immersive experience that showcased elevated cuisine, refined service, and thoughtful presentation. Held during the height of the campus and community formal season, the dinner provided guests with a distinctive and memorable evening that blended hospitality, teamwork, and culinary excellence.

Essay:

> The success of an upscale Chef Series featuring ticketed dinners with five on-campus chefs laid the foundation for the Harvest Masquerade event. Building on that momentum, this six-course dinner highlighted the collaboration and talent of all six managing chefs from the residential dining areas, alongside the campus executive chef and executive pastry chef. The event provided an invaluable collaboration opportunity for these culinarians to further showcase their skills, elevate menu components, and pair thoughtfully designed dishes with refined décor and an exceptional front-of-house experience.
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> Representatives from each of the five dining commons worked together in committee, planning extensively to bring the Harvest Masquerade to life. Robb Hall in the campus Alumni Center was transformed with dramatic dark linens, warm golden uplighting, and elegant place settings that fully immersed guests in the theme. Creativity and attention to detail were evident throughout the space, reinforcing the masquerade concept.
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> Course preparation featured a variety of cooking techniques and service styles, blending action stations with kitchen-plated courses. The evening's pacing was intentionally designed to highlight each course while encouraging guest interaction and conversation, enhancing the overall dining experience and creating a memorable, engaging atmosphere.

Introduction:

> By design, the Harvest Masquerade was intended to be a truly special experience. The ticketed dinner was promoted through targeted social media and digital signage throughout campus dining areas, emphasizing its rarity as a formal dining opportunity. Menu details and event highlights were shared using coordinated marketing materials that featured elegant masquerade-themed visuals. This cohesive branding spanned print pieces, digital promotions, and interactive social media content, helping to build excitement, engage students, and spark interest in an exclusive dining experience not typically offered on campus.

Essay:

> Marketing for the Harvest Masquerade embraced a sense of mystery and elegance through a dark color palette with accents of gold. This refined visual identity was consistently carried across social media along with digital and print signage, ensuring strong recognition and presence. Internal communication mirrored these same design elements, increasing visibility and excitement among students while strengthening their connection to the event. As the dinner approached, social media activity increased intentionally, with sneak peeks of the menu and décor accompanied by recognizable instrumental songs that reinforced the fun, upscale tone. Instagram stories captured the event throughout the evening, highlighting the seasonal dishes, detailed place settings, and coordinating décor in real time. Cross-promotion with other Penn State partner accounts expanded reach, while a post-event wrap-up on LinkedIn showcased the dinner's success and will help with marketing future events.

> High guest satisfaction and overwhelmingly positive feedback, shared both through formal guest comments and social media engagement, strongly support the continued development of elevated dining experiences. Guest feedback and photos from each area were also displayed on back-of-house screens, celebrating the collective efforts of the team to recognize the extensive planning and collaboration required to deliver such a successful and memorable event.

Introduction:

> Harvest Masquerade was perfectly timed toward the end of the fall season, taking place during the week of Halloween, when students were amazed by the transformation of the grand hall at the Hintz Family Alumni Center. Months of thoughtful planning resulted in an unforgettable dinner set within a beautifully decorated space that captured the spirit of the season. The event offered a welcome mid-semester escape from midterms and cooling temperatures. Students enthusiastically embraced the rare chance to dress up, socialize, and enjoy an elegant night out on campus.

Essay:

> When the team committed to collaborating on the Harvest Masquerade dinner, the primary goal was to create an experience unlike anything else available on campus. This vision was realized through a thoughtfully curated menu that highlighted peak-season harvest flavors while fully embracing the masquerade theme. Dishes were elevated through complex flavor pairings and innovative preparation, and the experience was further enhanced by showcasing the chef team through multiple action stations located just steps from the dining tables. Attention to detail played a critical role in setting the atmosphere, from ribbon-laced name tags attached to ornate masquerade masks to coordinated efforts with the photo booth, which produced custom logo photo strips allowing guests to commemorate the evening.
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> The event was intentionally designed to complement existing residential dining experiences while expanding the variety offered to students. Formal-attire-suggested events had never been attempted, making participation uncertain. Ultimately, 34 of the 40 available tickets were sold, affirming strong interest in elevated dining opportunities. Guests attended with friends and independently, finding community through a shared, immersive evening. The Harvest Masquerade successfully delivered a distinctive experience that celebrated creativity, collaboration, and the joy of coming together over a memorable meal.

Log in to nacufs.awardsplatform.com to see complete entry attachments.

PumpkinDecor.j... 1.4 MiB

TableScape (2).j... 1.5 MiB

TableScape.jpg 1.6 MiB

MocktailBeauty....1.6 MiB

DreamTeam.jpeg 2.0 MiB

DuckBeignet.jpg 1.5 MiB

FromAbove.jpg 2.4 MiB

GrandReveal.jpg 1.7 MiB

Keepsake.jpg 1.7 MiB

LobsterCrepe.jpg 1.4 MiB

PreDinnerMeeti... 1.5 MiB

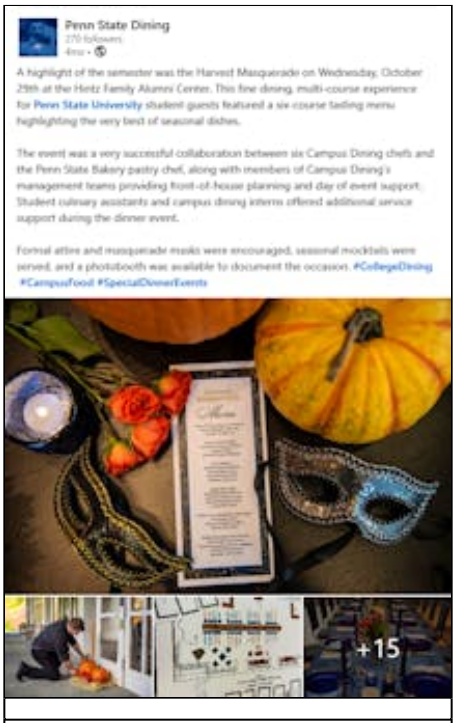
PreSetFirstCour... 1.4 MiB

BriocheToast.jpg 1.3 MiB

LambChops.jpg 1.4 MiB

Menu.jpg 1.4 MiB

StudentFeedba... 118 KiB



LinkedInPost.p... 617 KiB

TablesideDesse... 1.7 MiB

PumpkinChees... 1.2 MiB

Community.jpg 1.6 MiB