

# Kirsten A. McKinney



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## Entry details

Entry Name: Ghana Dinner

Institution Name: University of Richmond

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## Introduction:

On November 19, 2025, the University of Richmond's Heilman Dining Center served as the culinary centerpiece of the 10th annual International Education Week with its Ghana Dinner. Under the direction of interim Executive Chef Andy Kerscher, Chef Garrett Eagleton led extensive menu research to ground every dish in authentic Ghanaian culinary tradition. Registered Dietitian Karen Hensley conducted thorough allergen research across the full menu, ensuring the experience was safe and accessible for all guests. The meal featured over twenty dishes across entrees, sides, and desserts, honoring Ghana's culinary heritage while accommodating diverse dietary needs.

## Essay:

The dinner menu was a genuine cultural partnership and a showcase of culinary craftsmanship. Months of research into Ghanaian culinary history, regional techniques, and ingredient sourcing, with input from Ghanaian faculty, ensured that flavors, methods, and ingredients reflected authentic traditions.

Entrées offered a variety of proteins, preparations, and flavor profiles. Chichinga brought bold, aromatic heat in the form of grilled chicken skewers seasoned with Suya spice blend. Shoko delivered deeply braised and shredded beef, while Mafe showcased a simmered chicken dish traditionally finished with peanut butter (adapted with sunflower butter for allergen safety). Akontonshii reimagined a traditional stuffed crab as a crab cake seasoned with Jollof Rice

flavors. Garden Egg Stew offered a vegetarian eggplant braise, and Abenkwan (a traditional palm nut soup with okra and shrimp.)

Sides included a variety of Ghanaian staples: Waakye (rice and beans), Angwa Moo (oil rice), Kelewele (plantains), Kontomire (braised spinach), Red Red (black-eyed peas), Cassava Fries, Bofrot (puff puff), and Banana Fritters, providing diverse colors, textures, and temperatures.

Desserts reflected both creativity and dietary inclusivity, featuring Malva Pudding with Pickled Apricots, Flourless Ghanaian Chocolate Torte, Selim and Orange Shortbread Cookies, a gluten-free Chocolate Brownie with Ghanaian Chocolate Drizzle, and Iloka Ghanaian Milk Candy.

#### Introduction:

The 2025 International Education Week Ghana Dinner was designed as a complete cultural immersion, not just a meal. Upon arrival at the Heilman Dining Center, guests experienced live West African drumming, kente cloth in red, gold, and green, and mannequins in traditional Ghanaian attire. Inside, educational murals, ingredient displays, and updated menu boards continued the theme. Every visual, auditory, and culinary element was coordinated to ensure guests felt genuinely immersed in Ghanaian culture.

#### Essay:

The Heilman Dining Center lobby became a cultural gateway, anchored by the Ghanaian national flag and mannequins in traditional attire, surrounded by tropical ferns, bromeliads, hand-carved wooden pieces, and woven baskets. Two live drummers performed traditional West African percussion at the entrance, welcoming guests and signaling a special experience inside.

The dining rooms were enhanced in both visual design and guest experience. A multi-panel wall installation displayed Ghana's Independence Arch, with educational panels on the country's history, the origin of its name, the significance of Kente cloth, and its cocoa industry. Tables featured white linens, fresh floral arrangements, and informational table tents about Ghanaian ingredients and dishes, encouraging guests to learn more about their meal.

Ingredient display cards throughout the serverly introduced guests to unfamiliar items such as Grains of Selim, a peppery spice with notes of nutmeg, cloves, and lavender. Staff participated in a pre-event walk-through and received the Ghana Dinner A-to-Z glossary to confidently answer guest questions. Volunteers trained as "culinary ambassadors" were placed at specific stations and wore "Ask Me About the Menu" stickers to encourage dialogue and enhance the educational experience.

#### Introduction:

Marketing for the Ghana Dinner was launched weeks in advance and carried across multiple channels under a unified visual identity. Rather than a standalone evening, the dinner was embedded in a full week of Ghanaian-themed culinary programming — a strategy that transformed International Education Week into an extended campus conversation about culture, food, and global connection. A Ghanaian breakfast, specialty beverage pop-up, and West African-inspired café specials built anticipation and familiarity in the days leading up to the dinner, ensuring that by Wednesday evening, the campus community arrived informed, curious, and ready to engage.

#### Essay:

The event's branding was built around an evocative photograph of a woman cooking in Ghana by a study abroad student. The colors and patterns of her dress were carried through every promotional asset — menu posters, digital flyers, social media graphics, and signage — creating a cohesive, visually striking identity. Leading up to the event, the dinner menu was displayed, digital flyers ran on campus CCTVs, and a dining events calendar was distributed to campus residence halls.

The week of programming surrounding the dinner dramatically amplified its reach and impact. On Monday, November 17, a Ghanaian breakfast pop-up featured Hausa Koko (toasted coconut millet porridge), sugar bread

rolls, fried plantain, and Bofrot. On Tuesday, November 18, specialty Ghanaian beverages — Sobolo (hibiscus drink) and Atadwe (tiger nut milk) — were showcased at the lunch service. All week, the campus's Passport Café at the Carole Weinstein International Center offered two West African-inspired specials: Chicken and Vegetables with Peanut Sauce and Eggplant with Peanut Sauce over rice.

As guests left the dinner, they were invited to complete a brief feedback survey, incentivized by a gift basket of Ghanaian treats, yielding 218 responses and providing a rich dataset for evaluating and improving future events.

#### Introduction:

The Ghana Dinner's success resonated beyond the dining hall walls. Approximately 1,450 guests attended the November 19 dinner, and a 218-response exit survey yielded overwhelmingly positive feedback. University of Richmond President Kevin Hallock sent a personal email to the dining team — a meaningful recognition of the event's institutional impact. An unexpected highlight was the attendance of Richmond-area residents with personal ties to Ghana and other West African nations, who found a rare and meaningful connection to home in the dining hall. Most endearing was the feedback from West African students, who said the week made them feel at home.

#### Essay:

Post-event survey results clearly quantified the dinner's impact. Of 218 respondents, approximately 66% selected "Extremely Satisfied." Open-ended responses captured the breadth of the experience: one guest wrote that the event "helped me connect more with my culture." The energy in open responses reflected genuine community enthusiasm, with numerous guests requesting that the format be repeated.

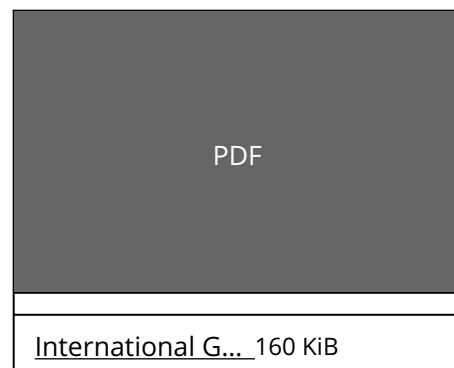
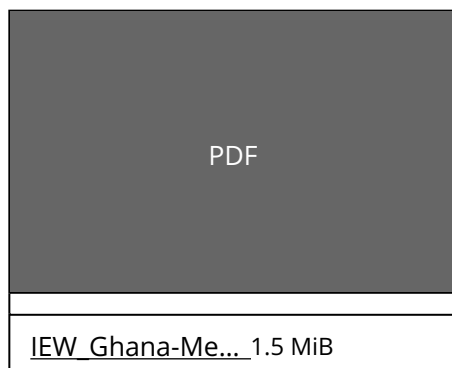
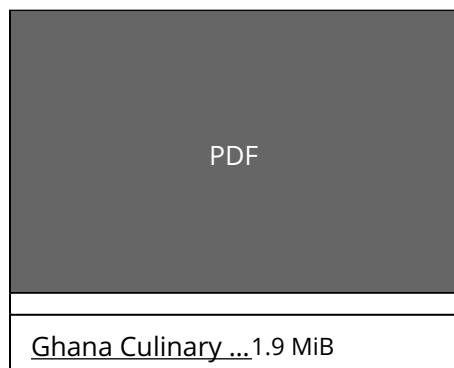
Barbara Brancoli, a Richmond-area OSHER student who has traveled and eaten her way through many parts of Africa, wrote to Dining Services after the event, calling the food "OUTSTANDING" and noting her party was still talking about it days later. In a postscript, she specifically thanked the team for accommodating her shellfish and egg allergies — a testament to the staff's attentiveness to dietary needs.

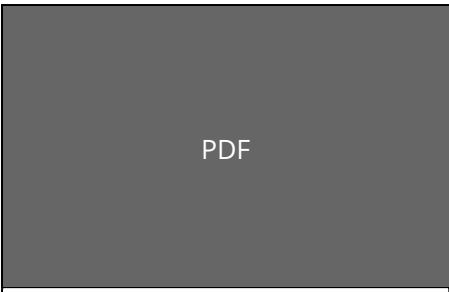
Sustainability was woven into the dinner's execution. The culinary and procurement teams deliberately partnered with local vendors, such as successfully sourcing beef from a Virginia farm. To source more specialized Ghanaian ingredients, chefs personally visited local African markets in the Richmond area, ensuring authenticity and supporting local businesses.

The dinner's success was built on collaboration: months of culinary research and development, meticulous allergen work, and the entire team's warmth and preparation created an event that honored Ghana with integrity.

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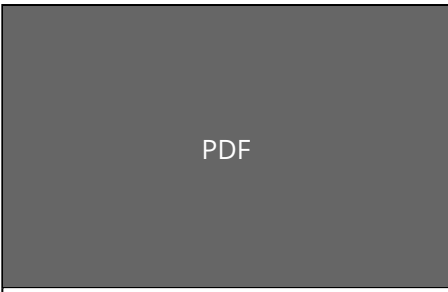
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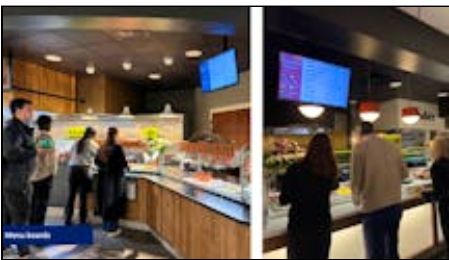
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