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Jena Cantwell

Entry details

Entry Name: Sweater Weather Social

Institution Name: Rider University

Entry Completed By (*name and position*): Jena Cantwell, Director of Community Relations

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Introduction:

Our Sweater Weather Social was created in partnership with our Office of Alumni Relations as the hub of Rider University's Alumni and Family Weekend which welcomed alumni, students, and community for an afternoon of celebration. Held on our Campus Mall and hosted by Rider's new President, John R. Loyack, we transformed the space into a festive fall gathering filled with delicious seasonal flavors. Rider Dining collaborated with local food vendors and regional partners to develop a cozy menu that reflected the feeling of fall in NJ. Our menu featured comfort foods and creative seasonal beverages that incorporated local elements.

Essay:

Nothing is more welcoming than the scent of freshly popped kettle corn drifting through the air on a crisp fall day. And that was the intention of our Sweater Weather Social. Our menu was developed to make guests feel the welcoming atmosphere and warmth of fall. With a mix of savory and sweet foods, as well as special dietary items, we made sure to have a little something for everyone.

Our savory offerings highlighted global and regional comfort foods. NOSH Empanadas, crafted from the owners Argentina-roots, served a variety of handmade, baked (not fried) empanadas filled with trendy flavors, such as Philly Cheesesteak, Carnitas, and Vegan Veggie. Under the Moon, a local restaurant, created a chili bar featuring six varieties of chili including vegetarian, turkey pumpkin, and peach and whiskey chili with assorted toppings.

All Belgium Waffles and Jersey Jacks Kettle Corn provided a treat for those with a sweet tooth.

Fun, seasonal beverages from Rollin' on the Rocks included signature drinks the "Bronc Apple Cider Float" and "The Bronc Brew," a pumpkin spice frozen latte paired with a cake pop. Additional snacks from AJ's Snack Tent included loaded caramel apple cups, "R" pretzels, and a classic hot dog cart.

Introduction:

In coordination with the Office of Alumni Relations, we decided to create a central focal point for our Alumni and Family Day that was a hub for campus celebrations. Together, we envisioned a fun, vibrant outdoor fall festival that would bring guests together in a memorable setting. To help reflect the warmth of the Rider community, the theme reflected seasonal flavors, local partnerships, and interactive experiences. We wanted guests to be stay and be engaged, so by incorporating elements like live pumpkin carving demonstrations and festive food stations, every element was thought through to create a memorable celebration.

Essay:

Starting in July 2025, Rider Dining began working with the Office of Alumni Relations to develop the event concept and organized a lineup of trusted local vendors. Execution of the event required months of careful planning, collaboration, and coordination across many campus departments. We worked with Rider's Facilities and Public Safety teams to manage campus traffic closures, vendor load-in access points, event timing and logistics, and electrical needs for food trucks and other vendors.

Rider Dining served as the operational lead for all food vendors. We managed contracts, payments, permits, and required inspections. We worked with our health department and fire marshal to ensure compliance for all vendors. We set up mobile hand-washing stations to meet safety compliance requirements. We also developed the event layout, creating a diagram that provided smooth foot traffic flow while allowing guests to easily access entertainment and activity areas.

In addition to food, we assisted in securing interactive experiences including cookie decorating with Jersey Girl Cookies and a live pumpkin carving demonstration. We also worked with our campus partners at Liberty Coca Cola to secure a new beverage tasting table, so guests got first access to a new flavor of Chucky Fanta.

Introduction:

We wanted to surprise and delight guests through creative culinary offerings and interactive entertainment. More than 500 attendees joined the celebration, including approximately 350 pre-registered guests and over 200 walk-in participants who were welcomed as the event gained momentum through campus.

To encourage guests to explore our food stations, Rider's Marketing and Communications team created a customized food card coupon that allowed guests to visit each vendor and sample menu items across the event. This helped with communicating what was within the festival space and increased engagement of the guests.

Essay:

One highlight was the River Horse Brewery tasting tent, which offered attendees the opportunity to sample a flight of seasonal craft beers including Maple Mother Bucker Brown Ale, Ear Wiggler IPA, Tripel Horse, and our own Rider Bronc Brew. This tasting complemented the fall, festival vibe and showcased our partnership with a local brewery. We also operated our own signature snack station, which included some special dietary options. Guests enjoyed kosher beef hot dogs served from an old-fashioned hot dog cart, along with vegetarian dogs and gluten-free rolls to ensure all dietary needs were accommodated. The station also featured Rider "R"-shaped pretzels and a fun spin on a traditional caramel apple. We created loaded, portable Caramel Apple Cups made with locally sourced apples. To elevate dessert further, our team prepared a house-made caramel sauce to enhance the overall taste.

Our guests also loved Rollin on the Rocks creative beverages, including the popular "Bronc Apple Cider Float," which paired locally sourced cider from Battlefield Orchard with an apple cider donut.

Combined with live bands, hands-on craft activities, and even a cornhole tournament, these thoughtful details helped create a lively festival atmosphere that celebrated fall traditions and Rider pride.

Introduction:

Every detail of this event was carefully thought through, from the decor to the communal picnic tables, to create a warm and inviting atmosphere for our guests. We made sure the event felt festive, comfortable, and inclusive while maintaining high operational standards for food safety and service. As Senior Brianna Centeno said best "The cider float and waffles were incredible, but honestly the whole atmosphere made it special. It felt like fall on campus in the best possible way."

Essay:

Welcoming wooden picnic tables and hay bales covered in plaid blankets created cozy community seating areas that encouraged guests to relax and connect with new and old faces. Fall linens in copper, terra cotta, and Rider's signature burgundy complemented seasonal décor including mums, pumpkins, and gourds that were scattered throughout the space. Live music added energy to the afternoon while helping to create a festive and inviting backdrop.

Sustainability, which is also an important part of Rider, was also a big consideration. After the event, decorative mums were planted throughout campus landscaping by Facilities and other decorations were repurposed for future campus events. Extra apples used for the caramel apple station were donated to our Campus Food Pantry. Even the carved pumpkins from the live demonstration were returned to nature and placed in campus woods to provide a snack for our furry wildlife friends.

Operationally, our team maintained high standards of quality and compliance for the outdoor setting by bringing in specialized equipment including waffle makers, hot holding boxes, chili and cheese warmers, and portable handwashing stations. In total, more than 4,000 portions of food were served throughout the afternoon, demonstrating the event's scale.

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