

Christine Carlson



MdWGbRyO

Entry details

Entry Name: Desert After Dark

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Entry Completed By (*name and position*): Christine Carlson, Director Dining & Nutrition

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Introduction:

The University of Arizona held a special catering event to celebrate authors across the country during the annual Festival of Books in March, 2025 held in Tucson. The event begins with an author's reception followed by a plated dinner. The menu theme was "Desert After Dark". Hors d'oeuvres were passed at the Campus Store along with crafted cocktails, mocktails and wine. The plated dinner featured a Tumbleweed Salad with edible succulents, choice of Caballero Steak or Smoked Beet Steak and finished with a Howling at the Moon glow in the dark dessert.

Essay:

Desert After Dark was a large catering special event held for the Festival of Books last year at the University of Arizona. The menu was creative in design featuring desert colors with shadows of a desert landscape to give the illusion of the sun going down. A variety of passed hors d'oeuvres offered made without gluten and vegan options to accommodate guests. Two entrees were featured to ensure vegan and gluten free requests were met. The salad and entrees featured local ingredients including tepary beans, nopales and prickly pear demi. The desert featured white chocolate spheres with an orange creamsicle core and glow in the dark succulents. Various methods of preparation were used including grilled, smoked, roasted, cold, fried and baked. Trends and creativity are represented through the design and plating of the menu. Food safety and ensuring dietary requests are always priority at functions. The University of Arizona requires career staff are ServSafe certified and follow HAACP

practices along with ensuring a Registered Dietitian has reviewed all recipes for accuracy of allergens and dietary requests.

Introduction:

The Desert After Dark is innovative in concept as it allowed our surroundings to be featured including local ingredients. Attention to detail of the Sonoran Desert was used in planning the event and ensuring the décor, ingredients and plating matched the theme. Authors are special guests at the dinner with their books featured at their specific table to coincide with the theme. Wow factors include the cocktails and mocktails served in Block "A" branded glasses and garnished with dried citrus fruit. A glow in the dark dessert amazed guests with a "black light" provided at each table setting.

Essay:

Several months in advance, a theme is selected for the Festival of Books. In 2025, the theme was the Desert After Dark. Guests come from across the nation for the festival and the theme was innovative introducing the desert theme to many but also creating a feeling of home to the campus community and Tucson locals. Once the theme is selected, the Culinary team goes to work creating a menu that will effectively embrace and execute the theme. Located in the Sonoran Desert, the team selected local ingredients and flavors while playing into the theme with naming of dishes. Passed hors d'oeuvres included "Rattle Snake Eggs" which were jalapeno poppers wrapped in bacon garnished with sliced green onions and passed beverages included "Sage Sunset Mocktail" which featured Hibiscus, sage, lime, candy sugar. The plated dinner included edible succulents, tepary beans and prickly pear demi. Dessert "wowed" with glow in the dark succulent decorations. The table-scape and décor match the theme. Centerpieces include desert plants and cactus with floating "bats" as part of the desert theme. A backdrop to the stage features a desert sky as well.

Introduction:

The catering and culinary teams worked to ensure the theme was carried out through décor and decorations. The backdrop of the stage included a desert sky with stars and red mountains. The tablescape featured the plated dinner menu with alternate colors to emulate the desert colors. A small black light is placed at each place setting for guests to experience the glow in the dark dessert. There is a creative use of the space to ensure the after dark feel is achieved.

Essay:

The guest list for this event included authors featured in the festival, local dignitaries, campus community and Tucson as a whole. Special attention is put into ensuring the décor in the setting matches the theme. Tablescapes include place cards featuring authors at the table along with some of their books, a centerpiece featuring desert plants, cactus and flying "bats" (which are common after dark in the desert) along with the menu. Tablecloths and napkins are all black to set the scene of after dark and to allow for the "wow" factor using the black lights when dessert is served. The black décor also allowed for a dramatic stage with a beautiful desert sky including stars and red rocks in the background. The University of Arizona Block "A" logo is on the cocktail napkins and beverage glasses passed during the reception and shown at the podium on stage to represent the campus community and display the efforts of the culinary and catering teams.

Introduction:

The Desert After Dark event was extremely successful. With 900 guests attending, they were wowed by the presentation of the passed hors d'oeuvres and crafted cocktails and mocktails. The salad was beautifully presented with succulent greens playing on the desert theme. Guests applauded when our pastry chef came out during dessert as they were thrilled with the glow in the dark dessert. The Festival of Books is a collaborative event and involves working with campus peers along with the greater Tucson area including the festival committee. Sustainability efforts are also considered with composting and a program for food insecure.

Essay:

Feedback was very positive for the Desert After Dark reception and dinner. Guests were pleased with the attention to detail with passed hors d'oeuvres and enjoyed the names of dishes including the Potato Rollies and Rattlesnake Eggs along with the crafted cocktail and mocktail. At dinner, the salad was beautifully presented with a cucumber ring on the exterior with quinoa, succulent greens and pomegranate dressing. The main entrée featured local ingredients. The "show stopper" was the dessert that glowed in the dark. Guests were extremely excited about this dessert and authors were very impressed. The Festival of Books is a collaborative event and involves working with campus peers including the Campus Store, University Police and Facilities Management along with the greater Tucson area including the festival committee. Sustainability efforts are also considered with composting of scraps and coffee grounds. Our campus program "Boxing Up Hunger" allows for unused food that is held safe to be boxed into individual portions, blast chilled and distributed to food insecure campus community members at our Campus Pantry.

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

