

Inauguration Picnic - What We Owe Each Other

Notre Dame Dining

Introduction:

The Inauguration Picnic menu was developed by Notre Dame Dining chefs to reflect our diverse community and commitment to hospitality. The menu featured global cuisine alongside familiar comfort foods, ensuring accessibility for all attendees. Options included Jamaican jerk chicken wings, Indian tandoori bowls, Mexican tacos, and Asian fried rice, with plant-based and allergen-free options available. Dishes were prepared on-site and served by culinary staff who shared ingredient details and preparation methods. With more than 38,000 portions served, the menu played a central role in creating a welcoming, inclusive, and efficient large-scale dining experience.

Essay:

The Global Table menu embodied the Inauguration theme of bridge-building by offering a thoughtfully curated selection of dishes that spanned cultures and comfort zones alike. Developed by a deeply diverse culinary team, the menu highlighted authentic global flavors such as Jamaican jerk chicken wings, Indian tandoori bowls, Mexican street tacos, and Asian-inspired fried rice—all inspired by the chefs’ personal backgrounds and passion. Alongside these were familiar favorites like burgers, fries, and cookies, ensuring there was something for every preference.

Each dish was an invitation to explore, learn, and connect. Culinary staff didn’t just prepare and serve, they shared the stories behind their creations, sparking conversations and unique moments. This approach made dining an act of engagement, reflecting the value of honoring individual stories within a unified community.

Inclusivity was baked into every detail, with accommodations for vegan, gluten-free, dairy-free, and allergen-conscious needs. Paired with sustainable food practices, composting, and food rescue efforts, the menu wasn't just nourishing, it was intentional, impactful, and mission-driven. With over 38,000 portions served to more than 14,000 attendees, the menu was both a logistical triumph and heartfelt representation of Notre Dame's spirit of hospitality, unity, and shared responsibility.

Introduction:

The theme "What Do We Owe Each Other?" guided every aspect of the Inauguration Picnic, from site layout to service style. The open-air quad location encouraged movement and interaction, eliminating barriers between guests. Food stations reflected cultural diversity and personal stories from the culinary team, while live music created a shared emotional atmosphere. Staff uniforms were intentionally varied to represent individuality within a united team. These design choices transformed a traditional campus event into a cohesive, mission-aligned experience focused on connection, mutual respect, and community-building—key values at the heart of the University's new leadership and vision.

Essay:

The Inauguration Picnic was built around the University's chosen theme: "What Do We Owe Each Other?" This theme informed all event decisions, from location to menu to service format. Hosting the event in the campus quad symbolized openness and accessibility, allowing guests to freely move between food stations, music stages, and gathering areas. This eliminated traditional event barriers and encouraged spontaneous interactions among students, faculty, and staff.

Culinary staff wore their own chef jackets while staff and volunteers wore department t-shirts rather than uniforms, reflecting individuality while working together as a team. Food stations were inspired by the cultural backgrounds of the chefs and reinforced the theme through stories, flavors, and shared experiences. Each dish served was a representation of hospitality, care, and inclusion.

Live music further supported the theme by blending Irish heritage with modern, multicultural influences. The mix of performances created a common soundtrack that brought people together and fostered a celebratory atmosphere. These elements worked in harmony to embody the University's commitment to mutual respect and shared responsibility. The picnic was not only a meal, but a carefully executed event that transformed a central idea into a fully lived experience for over 14,000 guests.

Introduction:

This event was built to make every guest feel welcomed, seen, and part of something meaningful. From the start, the open layout encouraged guests to explore at their own pace, with no formal seating or set flow. The menu offered something for everyone, familiar favorites and globally inspired options, with dietary accommodations clearly available. Culinary staff engaged directly with attendees, creating personal connections through food. Live music and thoughtful details, like shaded areas, water stations, and clear signage—ensured the experience was smooth and enjoyable. The result was a large-scale event that still felt personal, inclusive, and worth remembering.

Essay:

Creating a positive experience for over 14,000 guests required more than logistics, it required intention. The Inauguration Picnic was designed to make everyone feel part of the moment, regardless of their background or connection to the University. The outdoor quad layout created a sense of openness and discovery, where guests could move freely between food, music, and gathering spaces.

The food stations were designed to be approachable and engaging. Guests had the chance to enjoy both comfort foods and international dishes, with clear signage and helpful staff guiding those with dietary needs. Notre Dame Dining chefs didn't just serve—they shared stories and answered questions, making the food experience interactive and meaningful.

Live music played throughout the evening, creating a welcoming energy that encouraged people to stay, relax, and connect. Infrastructure like handwashing stations, compost bins, water access, and accessible pathways were planned to ensure comfort and ease.

Rather than focusing only on spectacle, the team prioritized hospitality and inclusivity. Whether someone came for the food, the community, or the occasion itself, they left having felt taken care of. The event proved that even a crowd of thousands can feel like a connected community with the right planning and intention.

Introduction:

Behind the scenes, this event required extensive coordination to ensure safety, sustainability, education, and smooth execution. With an outdoor location, the team brought in specialized equipment including grills, hot boxes, smokers, and handwashing stations for quality and compliance. Sustainability efforts included reducing non-consumable food waste during menu preparation, composting at the picnic, and diversion of leftovers to our food rescue partner. A team of 56 staff and 8 student volunteers supported these efforts, reinforcing University values through action. These operational choices weren't visible to attendees, but they were essential to delivering an event that was both responsible and memorable.

Essay:

Executing an event of this scale went far beyond food and entertainment. Logistical, safety, and sustainability planning played a critical role in making the Inauguration Picnic a success. Held in an outdoor space far from kitchen facilities, the event required mobile infrastructure—grills, smokers, hot boxes, ice pallets, and handwashing stations—to maintain food safety and service efficiency. Certified inspectors were on-site throughout to monitor temperatures and food handling protocols in real time.

Sustainability was embedded in every step. Notre Dame Dining used Grind2Energy systems to divert food scraps for renewable energy and agricultural reuse. Cultivate Food Rescue helped safely recover 1,969 pounds of surplus food, transforming it into 3,400 meals for the South Bend community. Composting efforts diverted over 2,200 pounds of waste, supported by 56 staff and 8 student volunteers who educated attendees, supported them at sorting stations and maintained waste streams.

These considerations reflect Notre Dame's commitment to not just hosting a large-scale event, but doing so with care and accountability. The event balanced hospitality and heart with operational excellence, ensuring that every choice, from staffing to sustainability, aligned with the University's broader values and elevated the overall experience for all involved.

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