

Food of Our Future

George Mason University

Essay:

Mason Dining asks our students, “Do you know that the choices on your plate could help shape the future of our planet?” Imagine biting into a juicy burger—except it’s made entirely from plants. Or watching a student-crafted vegetarian dish take center stage, proving that sustainability and flavor go hand in hand. Food of Our Future – an event designed to bring more sustainability awareness to students. We're not just talking about sustainable food; we’re serving it up in ways that surprise, inspire, and bring our community together.

As climate change and environmental challenges become more urgent, universities have a unique opportunity to lead by example. At George Mason University, Mason Dining, in collaboration with Sustainability initiatives across the university, designed Food of Our Future as an immersive, high-energy event that highlights the power of plant-forward dining. Hosted on April 23rd at The Spot and Wilkins Plaza, this event brought sustainability to life through three core experiences:

A Farmers Market, where students connected with local vendors and explored fresh, sustainable products while enjoying performances—including a local plant-based rapper hyping the crowd.

A tasting event at The Spot, Mason’s plant-forward dining hall, where students sampled vegan substitutes that defied expectations. For lunch, they served a student-crafted vegetarian recipe featuring MorningStar Farms’ vegan chorizo, the winning dish from a student-chef cook-off that was held as a precursor.

A community-driven social hour, where students, faculty, and staff gathered to discuss how to sustain the momentum of sustainable dining. Mason Catering provided seasonal foods and creative dishes featuring foods that used every part of the fruit or vegetable to reduce waste. This closing event fostered meaningful conversations about the future of food at Mason.

With live cooking demonstrations, free food samples, and innovative plant-based menus, Food of Our Future transformed Earth Month celebrations into something truly unforgettable. Whether you're a lifelong vegetarian or someone who never skips steak night, this event proved that sustainable food isn't about limitation but possibility.

One of the goals of Food of Our Future was to increase awareness of The Spot, George Mason's 100% plant-forward dining halls. When The Spot was still a pilot program, it was launched to gauge student interest in sustainable dining and provide more plant-based options on campus. However, offering sustainable food is one thing, but ensuring people enjoy it enough to return again and again is another. This event was designed to showcase The Spot and reinforce how delicious and satisfying plant-based meals can be, making sustainability an easy, repeatable choice.

The event successfully drew 142 guests to The Spot, a 56% increase in traffic from its daily average of about 80. Currently, the daily average is about 120 per day – a significant sustained increase and interest in plant-forward dining.

Student feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Through the Happy or Not market research system, we received a 96% Happy Index score on the event day, compared to an average of 80% at other campus dining locations the same day. Anonymous testimonials captured the enthusiasm:

"So awesome to have this beautiful setting to eat for a vegan! Thank you."

"Fun day.", and quantitative scores of:

5/5 for taste of food

5/5 for staff friendliness

Beyond just numbers, these responses highlight how the event not only drove engagement but also shifted perceptions around plant-based food, with growth lasting past the event. Understanding and connecting with students, Food of Our Future helped lay the foundation for The Spot to become a go-to dining option – providing Mason Dining a 4th permanent residential dining hall for all students to choose.

Sustainable dining habits create long-term impacts. Food of Our Future was designed not only to introduce students to delicious plant-forward meals but create a positive relationship with sustainable foods. Food samples and menu items were created using Future 50 Foods, a list of nutrient-dense, low environmental impact ingredients identified by ground-breaking research conducted by Knorr Professional Foodservice (a Unilever company) and World Wildlife Fund UK. Additionally, plant-based meat alternatives and creative student-crafted vegetarian recipes were incorporated into the event, emphasizing how shifting personal food choices can directly reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

The event showcased both recognizable brands, such as Impossible Foods and MorningStar Farms, and less familiar plant-based ingredients that challenged attendees' expectations. For instance, vegan meatballs that literally shocked people with their taste and texture. Impossible Beef, for example, produces approximately 91% fewer greenhouse gas emissions compared to beef from cows, demonstrating the tangible impact of choosing plant-based alternatives. By allowing students to taste for themselves, the initiative helped bridge the gap between sustainability and accessibility, showing that plant-based food can be both enjoyable and environmentally responsible. We also had a live cooking demonstration by Rob Morosco, Sodexo's VP of Campus Innovation, who sampled and taught students the ease of making Szechuan Eggplant.

Beyond just what was served, sustainability was woven into every aspect of the event. Mason Dining ensured that all single-use materials used were fully compostable, and additional compost bins with clear signage encouraged proper disposal, transforming an often-overlooked habit into a teachable food waste moment. The social hour menu, curated by Mason Dining's own Chef David Rabin, featured seasonal, locally-sourced ingredients and utilized all parts of fruits and vegetables to reduce waste.

Sustainability was also celebrated through vendor participation at the farmer's market, which included the Recycled Bag Lady, who crochets bags from discarded plastic bags. We also had upcycled bookstores and homemade jewelers showcasing how repurposed materials can take on new life. Patriot Pack Out, the on-campus free store, was also present, redistributing donated items that would have otherwise been discarded.

By integrating thoughtful sourcing, waste reduction, and hands-on education, Food of Our Future reinforced that sustainability isn't just a concept. It is a tangible, delicious, and achievable everyday choice.

Evidence that the initiative was socially responsible. By collaborating with student organizations, faculty, and sustainability advocates, the event created a space for dialogue that engaged the entire campus community.

In an effort to be socially responsible and align with Mason's goals of inclusivity, we ensured students had access to resources that promote both environmental and social equity. This event emphasized intersectional sustainability by fostering collaborations between university departments and local nonprofits.

Mason Dining partnered with local minority-owned vendors, strengthening both the local economy and our commitment to supporting diverse, underrepresented entrepreneurs. NuVegan, a Black-owned vegan chain with deep roots in the Virginia and DC area, has its first college presence at Mason Dining. Additionally, nonprofits like FARM were present, raising awareness of sustainable food practices and food security.

This initiative also supported George Mason University's sustainability goals, contributing to the university's AASHE STARS Gold rating and fostering education around sustainability practices. To maintain momentum, we hosted an after-event happy hour, where students, staff, and faculty could connect and brainstorm future sustainability initiatives, ensuring this event's impact extended beyond a single day.

Food of Our Future brought sustainability to life with a dynamic mix of culinary artistry, live performances, and fun. The highlight was Javier Starks, a local plant-based rapper and electric skateboard ambassador, who rapped about the power of plant-based eating, blending entertainment with eco-conscious messaging and just plain fun!

We also had a Szechuan Eggplant cooking demo to show how tasty and easy plant-based meals can be. Adding more energy to the mix, student performers raised awareness for Patriot Pack Out, a donation drive helping redistribute unwanted items.

To keep things lively, we had a raffle where attendees who talked to vendors got a ticket, and those who visited The Spot could enter for a chance to win AirPods.

Student volunteers got creative, making chalk art to promote the event around campus, while the University's PIRG (Public Interest Research Group) and the environmental fraternity AKX also tabled to share resources with attendees. Thanks to our partnership with DC Veg Week, a local nonprofit focused on increasing vegan options in the greater DC metro area, we secured a \$10,000 grant that supported the event. The immersive, high-energy vibe proved that sustainability can be both exciting and educational.

Food of Our Future demonstrated a strong intrinsic return on investment (ROI) while keeping costs to Mason Dining very low. Thanks to a grant secured from DC Veg Week, we were able to cover stage rental, swag, paid ads, and raffle prizes - crucial to boosting attendance and engagement. With Mason Dining staff designing and implementing all event facets, including managing the vendors, farmers, and creative culinarians, the additional event costs for Mason Dining were minimal as they provided their own materials and products for sampling. The success of this event led to Planet Virginia - the largest vegan festival in the state - to choose George Mason as the site for their next festival. Positioning Mason Dining as a recognized leader in sustainability initiatives.

In terms of project risk, we carefully reviewed and minimized potential risks throughout the planning and execution stages. One key risk management strategy was ensuring that all vendors were properly contracted. To ensure that all parties complied with university policies, reducing potential food safety and insurance issues.

The Food of Our Future model is highly replicable here and at other universities, inspiring similar initiatives in diverse operations. The partnerships throughout create a flexible framework that can be adapted to different campuses and dining environments. The alignment of this initiative with broader sustainability goals ensures that it can be sustained beyond a single event, promoting continuous engagement and positive impact. At George Mason, the intention is to offer this immersive and innovative experience multiple times a year, reaching a broader student audience.

Effectiveness of Measurement

Our event-related posts reached more than posts made the weeks prior.
(Channel, Pre-event reach, Event reach, Impact)

Facebook, 252, 381, 51.2%
Instagram, 943, 1.2K, 27.3%
Reels, 1.2K, 2K, 66.7%

The Food of Our Future program utilized a multifaceted outreach strategy to maximize visibility and engagement. A robust digital marketing campaign was executed across Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn, featuring countdowns, behind-the-scenes content, and live-streamed segments to create excitement and anticipation. Additionally, DC Veg Week collaborated on Instagram posts, reaching a broader audience, including community members not already engaged with Mason Dining.

The event was also featured in Around Mason for full-campus reach. Digital screens in dining halls, text blasts, marquee signage visible from the road, yard signs, and chalk drawings along walkways provided tangible, high-visibility reminders across campus.


George Mason University is a research institution committed to innovation, and this event exemplified that spirit. By bringing in industry professionals and brand representatives knowledgeable about the environmental impact of plant-based products, we provided students with a unique opportunity to engage directly with experts. In addition to product education, students were able to learn about the sustainability resources available on campus. By having both on-campus resources and local community connections highlighted at the event, we made sustainability tangible for students, giving them the tools to take action in their daily lives, and supported George Mason's commitment to research and education, reinforcing the university's role as a leader in sustainability education.

Student organizations played a central role in the event's success. Sustainability-focused groups, such as Mason's PIRG, Environmental Fraternity AKX, and student-run sustainability clubs, helped amplify outreach by mobilizing their networks and spreading the word across campus.

The Food of Our Future event exemplifies how universities can leverage food as a tool for sustainability education and community engagement. By combining culinary innovation with environmental responsibility, the initiative fosters a culture of conscious consumption. Moving forward, George Mason University aims to expand this program, integrating sustainable food options into everyday campus dining while continuing to educate and empower students. With a growing commitment to sustainability, Food of Our Future is not just an event—it's a movement toward a more resilient and responsible food system

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