



FM BEST CONCEPTS



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Best Special Event: Tasting the Tree of Life, The College of New Jersey/Sodexo

This special dinner featured nine meals that utilized 149 species/ingredients across the tree of life, from plants and animals to fungi and bacteria.

Mike Buzalka | Jul 20, 2017

On Feb. 28, 2017, the College of New Jersey (TCNJ) Dining Services

and management company Sodexo collaborated with the School of Science Biology Department to present a special event called Tasting the Tree of Life: Exploring Biodiversity through Cuisine to the campus community.

TCNJ Dining created nine meals that utilized 149 species/ingredients across the tree of life. On posters at each station, the branch locations of each of the ingredients in the particular meal served there were highlighted on an “ingredient tree” depicting the branches and ingredients serving during the event so participants could follow how diversity shifted from meal to meal.

Every station also had themed identifiers for each menu item served along with a descriptor and nutritional information.

Guests tasted foods from across the tree of life while learning about the biodiversity that lives within human beings and the evolutionary origins of the food people eat. Each ingredient in the meal connected to a living organism—plants, animals, fungi, bacteria—each with its own evolutionary story, which the tree of life helps visualize.

Menu items at the event included dishes not usually seen in a dining hall setting, such as alligator sausage, vegemite, tripe, turtle soup, frog legs, crickets and larvae.

Sodexo executes a number of unique themed monotony-breaker events for both the student customers and the culinary staff over the course of a school year at TCNJ. A few years ago, a program of special themed meals that picked one certain school on campus each semester with which it would collaborate was initiated. The chosen school is then put in the driver’s seat in directing the theming of the event, and TCNJ Dining chefs and managers then get creative and develop menus and

theming in the dining hall to realize the chosen school's vision.

Tasting the Tree of Life was the eighth such collaborative theme meal. The School of Biology asked Executive Chef Lauren Franchetti to create menus that included items from every branch of the scientific tree of life. Requiring eight months of planning, the event was held in TCNJ's main dining hall, which serves over 9,000 meals a day out of 10 micro restaurants.

The students and faculty from the school of biology and the TCNJ Dining chefs and managers worked together to plan the menu, produce the educational materials, integrate science trivia and hands-on demonstrations into experiences and train actual biology students to serve as "field guides" placed at each meal station.

The event was attended by students and college staff beyond the school of biology, and they interacted with the chefs and school of biology volunteers in an impactful way.

From the culinary point of view, the wow factor was the creative menu that included dishes like spiced starfruit salad, a grain bar served with artichoke and roasted tomato sauces, Italian roasted beef with plum tomatoes, roasted crickets, shrimp fajita, mushroom and asparagus stir-fry and cardamom crème brûlée.

TCNJ Dining Services manages 10 locations at The College of New Jersey, including nine retail locations and one resident dining facility, the Atrium at Eickhoff, itself a past Best Concept Award winner , where the event was held.

The goals of the event were to get students to taste biodiversity and connect their favorite cuisines to lineages of life, to navigate the tree of

life and the relationships among its branches, to learn about evolutionary processes that affect one's diet, to observe how humans have impacted the biodiversity of food and to explore tree of life research ongoing at TCNJ.

It also served as a forum to display the chefs' creativity and expertise in a way that they normally cannot and highlighted the vital role that the school's dining services plays in enhancing the community experience on campus.

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