



## VISIONARY

NACE Philadelphia's Dining in the Dark treated members to a unique culinary experience.

BY MORGAN HALASKA

FOR ITS SEPTEMBER 2019 MEETING, the National Association for Catering and Events (NACE) Philadelphia Chapter—which serves industry professionals in the Greater Philadelphia, South Jersey and Delaware region—thought it would try something different. Instead of focusing on the visual presentation of food, organizers took away the sense of sight entirely, outfitting diners with a blindfold at dinner.

“There was a handful of restaurants and organizations that have hosted similar events, but in an intimate, restaurant-like setting,” says Madison Gentile, director of programs and education, NACE Philadelphia. “We knew we wanted to do a large-scale, banquet-like setting with everyone being

seated and served at the same time.”

While professionals in the events and catering industry tend to be open-minded, that didn't mean there weren't any hesitations at first. “The word of the night was trust—trusting in each other and in their senses to guide them through the evening.”

## Vendors

- Venue/Bar: The Mann Center
- Catering: Constellation Culinary Group
- Prosecco Cart: Get Cozy | Vintage Mobile Bars
- Linens, Specialty Glassware and China: South Jersey Party Rental
- TV Monitors: DFX Sound Vision
- Videography, Roaming Photo Booth, Drone: Philly Photo and Philm
- 5-Piece Student Band: Just Sunday
- Ice Cream Sandwiches and Scoops: Weckerly's Ice Cream
- Dinner Music/Entertainment: Silver Sound Entertainment
- Facilitator: Nick Waller
- Eye Masks: Mildfold
- Chair Cushions: Party Rental LTD

## The Logistics

“When you are dealing with 130 blindfolded people in an open-air venue, you need to make sure everything from seating arrangements to dietary restrictions and the physical dining experience itself are precisely planned out,” says Gentile. Guests were grouped by tables of eight to 10 and were intentionally seated with people they didn't know. A Blind Ambassador was assigned to each table and responsible for guiding groups to their table, getting everyone seated, answering questions and aiding as needed. “We blindfolded guests about 100 yards away from the dining site,” says Gentile. “This was strategically done to disorient them in order to enhance their imagination and stimulate their other four basic senses.” There were about 13 groups, and it took about 15 minutes to get everyone from point A to point B via the human train method.

Because guests couldn't see what was on their plates, attention to dietary restrictions was that much more important. NACE Philadelphia partnered with a new tech platform called Dineable to request guests' dietary restrictions a week prior to the event. The web-based app allowed users to create a food profile, giving the planners a full report

on how many people were planning to eat and what food restrictions need to be accommodated. Dineable provided pre-printed cards with the guests' name, table number and restriction that were distributed at registration. Servers collected the cards when guests were seated, ensuring their restrictions were directly communicated.

### The Food & Facilitator

"We knew we needed to partner with a caterer that was open to creating a menu that engaged the senses—playing up different textures, smells and ingredients," says Gentile. "Chef John Suley (vice president of culinary for Constellation Culinary Group) took our idea and ran with it. Right before the first course was served, he had his staff walk around with a smoking gun to heighten the sense of smell. He used an under-liner plate of toasted spices beneath the entrée to enhance to aromas of the ingredients."

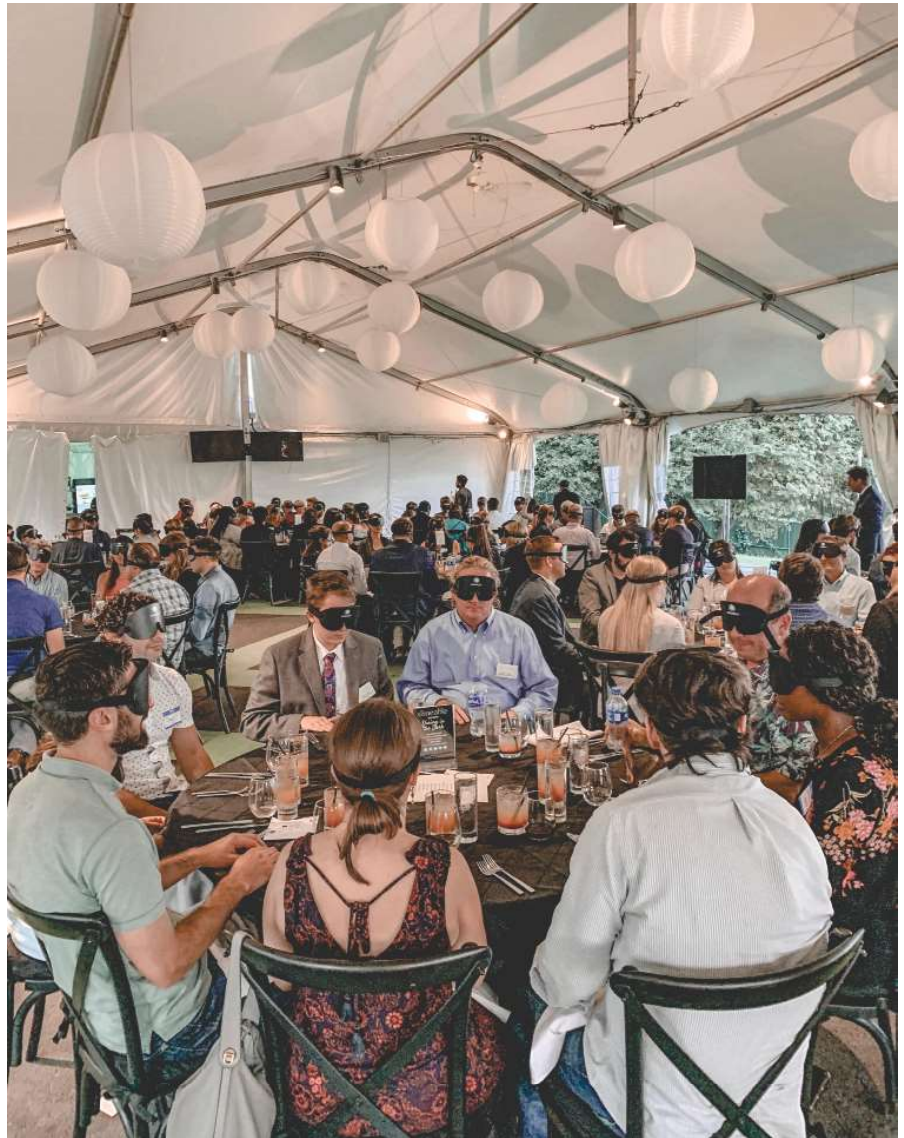
Nick Waller, instructor of Hospitality Business Management & Dining Room Manager at The University of Delaware, acted as the event's facilitator—he was the voice behind Dining in the Dark. "We chose not to tell guests what they were eating until after dinner was over. Nick's job was help guests tap into their senses during each course," says Gentile. "Instead of naming the ingredients, he used descriptive words to help guests visualize the dish without giving it away. He was a critical component of keeping everyone engaged and interactive throughout dinner service."

"It was incredible to see how Dining in the Dark, although a sensory experience, turned out to be a community experience," says Gentile. "Without the gift of sight, Dining in the Dark allowed our guests to meet and connect with each other, as well as their food, on another level." 🍷

### Get Connected

DINEABLE | [dineable.com](http://dineable.com)

NACE PHILADELPHIA | [nacephilly.com](http://nacephilly.com)



*NACE Philadelphia hosted a large-scale, banquet-like setting in which guests were blindfolded for the entire meal (above).*

## On the Menu

### FIRST COURSE

**Warm Mushroom Salad:** shaved Brussels sprouts, toasted hazelnuts, manchego, truffle, shallot vinaigrette

### MAIN COURSE

**Creamy Kabocha Squash Risotto:** toasted pumpkin seeds and spices, pomegranate, sage mascarpone, lardons of smoked pancetta