

The Right Recipe for a White House State Dinner

By Feifei Sun Wednesday, Jan. 19, 2011



U.S. President Barack Obama speaks at a state dinner hosted by Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, right, in Jakarta, Nov. 9, 2010

Charles Dharapak / AP

Former White House chef Walter Scheib compares pulling off a State Dinner to opening a Broadway show. "There are so many non-culinary components coming into play, from fashion to art to music to glamour," he says. And so, with China's President Hu Jintao in town, it's curtains up for the Obamas. On Wednesday night, President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle will host the Chinese delegation at the White House for a formal State Dinner, just the third such affair of Obama's presidency, and the first to take place entirely in the White House.

Ulysses S. Grant was the first president to throw a State Dinner in 1874, when he hosted King David Kalakaua of the Hawaiian Islands. Since then, the gatherings have served as celebratory events in which state heads reaffirm diplomatic ties while enjoying dinner and entertainment. The formal festivities, which typically last about four hours, follow strict protocol and are the result of months of planning. "It's a tremendous team effort," says Scheib, who served Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush from 1994-2005. "Each part has to come out with equal success for the dinner to happen seamlessly."

Among the components that must be finalized are the evening's location, entertainment act, floral arrangements, guest list, seating chart, and perhaps the most important factor, the menu. White House Social Secretaries work with the State Department's Chief of Protocol to determine dietary restrictions of attending guests, before consulting with the First Lady to finalize a menu traditionally inspired by American cuisine. "The menu is rarely generated by the guest country," says Scheib. "It really is a reflection of what the First Lady wants to do. She will be one who really sets the tone." Medical and religious restrictions are always accommodated, says Amy Zantzinger, who served as President George W. Bush's last social secretary. More personal requests, however, are not. "I would always laugh when people would say they were on a no-salt and no-butter diet, or whatever the diet of the day was," she says. Still, with all the various specifications, Scheib says he would sometimes make between 40-60 alternatives to the original menu. **(See the top 10 memorable state dinner moments.)**

The Obamas served vegetarian fare, including lentil soup and potato and eggplant salad, at their first State Dinner for Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in November 2009, while attendees of Mexican President Felipe Calderon's May 2010 State Dinner dined on Oregon wagyu beef prepared by Chicago chef Rick Bayless. Tonight's gathering will mark the first State Dinner in which the Obamas have not used a guest chef. Cristeta Comerford, the White House executive chef, prepared a menu of poached Maine lobster, ribeye steak, pear salad with goat cheese and apple pie. Scheib predicted that Mrs. Obama would use some ingredients from her organic garden, a hallmark of her efforts to boost healthy nutritional habits for kids. Laura Bush also favored organic ingredients and preferred beef-based dishes for her dinners, says Scheib, while Hillary Clinton had an affinity for "eclectic" flavors and lamb.

After wrapping up the evening's menu, the First Lady and Social Secretary tackle the next biggest challenge: the guest list and seating chart. Beyond the President and First Lady's guest list, recommendations are solicited from White House committees, some Congressional leaders, the State and Defense departments and the Supreme Court. Business executives, Hollywood celebrities and community leaders make up the majority of non-delegation attendees, but Zantzinger says unexpected last-minute additions can add a charming touch, too. For Bush's 2007 State Dinner for England's Queen Elizabeth, Mrs. Bush invited the Calvin Borel, the jockey of the winning horse, Street Sense, at that year's Kentucky Derby after learning the Queen had attended the race one day earlier. "He was the most adorable man and so beside himself," Zantzinger says. "He was just the hit of the dinner, and I think the Queen loved to meet him as well." **(See the entire guest list for Hu's State Dinner.)**

Obama's first two dinners were held in outdoor tents, but tonight's guests will be seated entirely in the White House. Performers Herbie Hancock, Chris Botti, Lang Lang, Dianne Reeves and Dee Dee Bridgewater will entertain guests following the meal, which is Social Secretary Julianna Smoot's second formal State Dinner since assuming her post last March.

Hu's visit has been a minefield of touchy subjects — among them China's human rights record, currency value and relationship with North Korea — but State Dinners can be politically fraught all on their own. Washington socialites Michaele and Tareq Salahi infamously maneuvered their way into the Indian state dinner — they maintain they were invited to this day — starting a media circus that caused the administration embarrassment, landed the event-crashing couple before a House committee, and eventually led to Desiree Rogers's resignation as Social Secretary.

"State Dinners are so important because they're the official way that the President greets representatives, royalty, and political leaders from other countries all over the world," says Michelle Gullion, archives director at the National First Ladies' Library in Canton, Ohio. "You show the best of America in every form of art, be it culinary, musical or floral."