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NEW YORK CITY

A Report From NYC's Dîner En Blanc, With 5,000 Guests All Dressed In White

Todd English cooked dinner for the well-dressed crew



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“Isn’t this just *fabulous?*” a tall, slender middle-aged woman dressed head-to-toe in white asks another woman of similar stature and dress before they *faire la bise*.

Couples and friends alike admire the Statue of Liberty from afar with glasses of wine or champagne while nibbling on charcuterie and cheese. Some attendees are expertly crafting photographs and selfies before the orange and yellow sky goes dark. Down below, a sea of people are busy arranging seats and tables and unpacking picnic baskets. On September 15, like an impeccably well-coordinated field trip, 5,000 people, all dressed in white, lugging tables, chairs, plates and silverware, filed into John Wagner Jr. Park in Battery Park City in lower Manhattan. It was the sixth edition of NYC’s Dîner en Blanc, which boasted a 45,000-person waiting list. Besides the initial picnic setups, balloons, lanterns, swan hats and other adornments slowly filled the space.

While it may seem like a hoity-toity party one might throw on a yacht for the upper crust, the party actually began as one man's quest to kick-start his social life after having spent time abroad from France.

"My father wanted to reconnect with his friends, so he decided to organize a picnic in a garden," says Aymeric Pasquier, cofounder of Dîner en Blanc International Inc. "It was very simple: Bring a friend and a meal to share. There were so many people that wanted to go to the event, so they went to a park and dressed in white so they could recognize each other."

Since then, the picnics have gone international and have grown into larger, more fantastical parties with lavish costumes, some that include glittery birdcages, strings of LED lights and Marie Antoinette wigs, and prestigious chefs preparing elaborate picnic baskets. Pasquier, dressed in a military captain's jacket, chooses the costume not only because he's the captain of this party ship, but because Dîner en Blanc has an almost military-like organization to it.

"Everyone has a precise place to put the tables and chairs. There are a lot of regulations," Pasquier says.

Conveniently trailing New York Fashion Week, this year's dinner, in Battery Park City, was attended by plenty of fashion-forward folks. But the creativity doesn't stop at the wardrobe.

"The city I really prefer [when it comes to Dîner en Blanc] is New York because people are so committed," Pasquier says. "When they do something, New Yorkers, they don't do it halfway. They really dress up elegantly, very chic. They do amazing decoration and bring lights. Maybe it's because they know there are 45,000 people on the waiting list, so they really get into the concept."



Chef Todd English

This year's New York dinner featured chef Todd English for the third year. He incorporated Southern and New York themes in his menu: brisket, watermelon salad, peach cobbler, New York strip steak, and potato salad for picnic baskets that guests can preorder ahead of time if they wish not to pack their own. A Chinatown-inspired spread that included Hunan chicken, dan dan noodles and a miso-roasted

salmon topped with avocado puree and crème fraîche was put together for the VIP section.

English admits that he's not the most graceful eater, and keeping his clothes white, especially his chef's whites, can be tricky, especially when slurping those peanut-sauce-drenched dan dan noodles.

"I'm not very good at [keeping my clothes clean while eating]," he says, laughing. "You just have to keep it out there and lean over."

At the dinner table, conversations about the pronunciation of Dîner En Blanc, past years' events, and, strangely enough, existentialism could be heard while guests dined on umami-packed salmon. When the night grew chilly, an early sign of fall, the dance party commenced. Onlookers who didn't think to bring a stylish poncho or long fur tailcoat bashfully shivered.

The "happy chaos" of a party, as Pasquier describes it, is situated in a secret location every year, kept secret until guests are guided there. Once the guests are settled in at their tables, the dinner begins with a sea of white napkin waving against a setting sun. From then, the devouring of food ensues, the dusk turns into night, and soon after a DJ is on the stage for a massive dance party. Once the festivities come to a close, everyone is asked to pack up their things and say farewell until next year's blowout.

English says the parties get better every year, and Battery Park City is "as good as it'll get." Dîner en Blanc 2017 has some big (white) shoes to fill.